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THE RISKS OF RHETORICITY: ACCOUNTING FOR INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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ABSTRACT

I am troubled by the notion that what specialists in my field call "rhetoricity"—the quality of being able to assess an audience and effectively influence their thinking—is what separates humans ("rhetors") from non-humans. This binary is problematic when we account for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD), whose rhetorical prowess diverges from our accepted models. Recent trends in rhetorical studies, however, have widened how rhetoric defines itself, including expanding not only what rhetoric is and does, but also what entities (ex. animals, objects, sounds) are able to exercise agency. Yet, little scholarship has taken up people with I/DD as sites of rhetorical possibility. My project explores this possibility by examining the intersection of rhetorical theory and profound cognitive impairment. I analyze the generative potential of the past and future of intellectual disability in order to understand not only how rhetoric has influenced the understanding of and treatment of disabled people, but how disability collides with the study of rhetoric. Each chapter of my project excavates how rhetoric shapes the material reality of disability and the ways in which the bodies and minds of people with intellectual disabilities transform our understanding of rhetoric. My findings suggest that embracing profound disability deepens the scope of rhetorical studies and challenges our understanding of rhetoric's origins, functions, and boundaries. In doing so, I offer a richer, more diverse view of what it means not only to be rhetorical, but to be an active, valued participant in the world.

Chapter 1

Disability, Rhetoric, and Disability Rhetoric

"Rhetoric is no stranger to disability; and disability is intimate, albeit anxiously, with rhetoric."

Brenda Brueggemann and James A. Fredal, "Studying Disability Rhetorically"

Metanoia

This project is one born of pain. My Uncle David had Down syndrome and lived most of his life at Southern Oklahoma Resource Center (SORC) in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. Though places like these are often depicted in the media as sites of horror, David lived into his late fifties because of the excellent care he received. SORC was shut down in 2015 despite years of my mother writing angry letters and marching at the Oklahoma capitol, yelling her most polite profanities at Governor Mary Fallin. David was moved into community housing with ill-equipped caregivers. The move proved fatal. Shortly before his death, when his injuries were fresh and my indignation was at its highest, I wrote a scathing email to the highest official I could find who managed the network of community-care homes. My legal threats were thinly veiled. To my surprise, I received a response from the CEO asking to meet with me to discuss David's case. He was scared. *And I was the one who scared him.*

Shortly after his death, while working on my Master's in Composition and Rhetoric with little idea of what to do with such a degree, I found myself in a Young Adult Literature course. We were assigned the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio and

accompanying articles that engaged disability studies scholars. I had never heard of disability studies. People cared about disability? They found it *important*? And even *interesting*?? In this moment, I was not only grieving the recent, traumatic death of my uncle, but I was also processing the stigma and shame that I had spent a lifetime repressing. I always knew that I loved David, but I struggled to understand him. David's very existence defied everything I understood about how humanity is supposed to function. I snapped at people who used the word "retard," but I struggled to explain to them why I was so offended by the slur. My mom was much better at communicating with David and interpreting his needs, desires, and overall moods. I found the translation frustrating. I was embarrassed when we would go out to eat in public spaces and he would laugh loudly, squeal when our food came, and want to hug the server. Everyone else found him delightful, but I just wanted to go home. A lifetime of unprocessed emotions came to the surface when my professor explained to the class that there are people in academia who think disability is something we should—at the very least—see represented in children's books. What ensued in the months following was a perfect storm of remorse, righteous anger, and grief. Writing seemed to be the only way through.

Six years later, I am still working through these emotions in my writing; however, I now have a bigger vocabulary and a better idea of how to use my research skills for social justice. I have been slowly chipping away at what I think disability means (including what it has meant in the past and what I hope it can signify in the future) and the role of rhetoric in creating those meanings. This dissertation project is a culmination of my down-the-rabbit-hole explorations of the thorny relationship between disability and

rhetoric. In every chapter, I am inspired by the Greek goddess *Metanoia,* whom Kelly A. Meyers describes as "a shadow figure" who trails behind *Kairos;* she "resides in the wake of Opportunity, sowing regret and inspiring repentance in the missed moment" (1). The goddess is a personification of the rhetorical concept *metanoia*: an active emotional state or experience that requires reflection, revelation, and transformation. It is painful to reflect on my own feelings of regret and grief, but in experiencing *metanoia,* "a rhetor becomes better prepared for the next moment of opportunity" (11). My hope is that each chapter of this dissertation will serve as a small act of justice for people with intellectual disabilities, who are so often neglected, forgotten, or rejected. Because this project is a rhetorical study, I hope to work toward transforming not only how we think and talk about some of the most vulnerable among us, but also our understanding of what rhetoric could be when we foreground cognitive difference.

Disability, Rhetoric, and Disability Rhetoric

The compounding crises catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic have brought into sharper relief the inequalities embedded in our bureaucratic systems, as well as the vulnerability of all bodies to illness. Disability is often perceived by nondisabled people as "over there," but as we have all increasingly seen over these long years, it is everywhere and, perhaps, imminent—anyone can become diseased or disabled at any time. Analyses of how we think about, talk about, and interact with disability are more urgent than ever. However, it is important to note that disability studies does not imagine a future that has eradicated disability; rather, it imagines one with "new social structures

and relations, made possible by new rhetorics" (*Disability Rhetoric* 2). My project offers one avenue for moving toward this future.

The advent of disability studies as an area of academic research reflects a cultural awakening—one that is long overdue, yet still far from completely shifting the paradigm of cultural thought. The term disability as a linguistic marker of physical or cognitive difference is not a newly formed designation, and its cultural and social implications have shifted across both time and space. That is to say, disability as a symbol of identity signifies different meanings in different cultures at different moments in history. According to Lennard Davis, "For centuries, people with disabilities have been an oppressed and repressed group… [who have been] isolated, incarcerated, observed, written about, operated on, instructed, implanted, regulated, treated, institutionalized, and controlled to a degree probably unequal to that experienced by any other minority group" (xv). Despite this history of harm, bodily values have always remained in flux. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson traces some of these shifts and found that, "Aristotle, Cicero, Pliny, Augustine, Bacon, and Montaigne account for such disruptions of the seemingly natural order in their interpretive schema… for these fathers of Western thought, the differently formed body is most often evidence of God's design, divine wrath, or nature's abundance, but it is always an interpretive occasion" ("From Wonder" 1). Garland-Thomson further exemplifies later instances of changing bodily values, such as sixteenth century European royalty keeping people with differently formed bodies as pets and Renaissance English stage performances employing actors with cleft palates and missing fingers to function as metaphors of lewd talk and idleness (2). Scientific inquiry then

began to dissect and display anatomical anomalies, paving the way for the commodification and pseudo-celebration of differently formed bodies at P.T. Barnum's infamous American Museum and circus. At any given cultural moment, whether the disabled body is celebrated or shamed, it is always regarded as exceptional or separate. As Garland-Thomson concludes, "Even though the discourses of the anomalous body comprise a series of successive reframings within a variety of registers over time, the uneasy human impulse to textualize, to contain, to explain our most unexpected corporeal manifestations to ourselves has remained constant" (2). Jay Dolmage argues that technology has expedited the need to reconsider bodily values. From one perspective, advances in artificial intelligence and machinery have redefined the limits of the human body by creating devices and treatments that can mimic its many functions without altering one's daily life. In this light, perfection of the body is achievable. From another perspective, however, "so many of the technologies that suggest to us that we are perfectible, that intensify our dedication to norms, have been invented specifically because we are not normal" (2). Disability, then, is not new. Technological advancements, however, have reintroduced the limits and the norms of the human body and how we determine their meanings.

Before disability studies gained footing in academic circles, people with disabilities began to unite first as a physical minority community, which has been linked to the political victory of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. This act, though a step towards equality that guarantees civil rights for people with disabilities, did not necessarily alter the cultural landscape. As Davis reports, the unemployment rate for

disabled people remains high if not higher than before the act, as it "has no enforcement mechanism or agency, so it relies on individuals bringing lawsuits on their own—a method that for most people with disabilities is not a practical remedy" (xvii). Despite these deficiencies, the ADA did function as the catalyst for directing attention to the legal and civil inequities for this minority community, which has slowly manifested in academic discussions and socio-political activism. Beyond the ADA, the visibility of the disability social movement has led to widespread change, "including the deinstitutionalization of thousands of people incarcerated in nursing homes and hospitals world-wide… the retrofitting of government offices and public facilities to make them more physically accessible; the redesign of urban landscapes; closed captioning on late-model televisions; and the growing recognition that disabled people constitute a marginalized and disenfranchised constituency" ("Foucault, Governmentality" 2).

As every human inhabits a body, every human can benefit from the study of the body. Though disability studies focuses on the experiences of people with disabilities, all people may benefit from the exploration of the human condition. Even further, Ladelle McWhorter argues that "the various labels used to mark out individuals as 'abnormal' or 'handicapped' are ones that not only could be applied to you tomorrow, maybe following a cardiovascular accident or train wreck; in fact one or more of them almost certainly will be applied to you at some point in your life if you live very long, and they probably will also be applied to someone you care deeply about" (xv). Disability certainly encompasses genetic conditions, but is unique in its fluidity. Any person may become disabled at any time, which renders the study of this phenomenon urgent and necessary, especially in the

wake of a worldwide pandemic with suspected lifelong symptoms. As Simi Linton argues, the exigency of recognizing disabled people as an oppressed group warrants a broad-based intellectual inquiry that traces and analyzes the innumerable manifestations of disability in language and culture (539). While disability studies has congregated as a concerted effort of academic research, scholars have largely approached disability from cultural and sociological perspectives, and often focus on physical rather than cognitive disabilities. The field of rhetoric may offer vital perspectives for better understanding disability, as well as make interventions in the exclusionary ways that disabled people are treated.

To understand the complexities of the social institution of disability and its implications for the field of rhetoric, it is necessary first to understand the lexical roots of the term *disability* in the concept of normalcy. Lennard Davis contends that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (“Constructing Normalcy” 3). Constructing and enforcing normalcy, according to Davis, is learned and passed down through positive representations of normal characters and negative representations of non-normal characters in media. The term *normal*, however, meaning to conform or to remain standard or regular, did not enter European languages until 1855 and stems from the social constructions surrounding industrialization and material production (3). Applying the norm to human bodies resulted from French statistician Adolph Quetelet's application of astronomy's "law of error" to the measuring of human dimensions, which spiraled into an image of the “average” man and enabled a hierarchy of physical and

moral attributes (4). What is most disturbing about the etymology of *normalcy* and its inscription in our language is its ties to eugenics. Imagining a normal or average human body subsequently labels any non-conforming body as a deviance, which eugenicists would argue is undesirable and should be prevented, cured, or disposed of. Though we tend to think of eugenics as a horror of the past, twentieth-century iterations are still evident in current discussions surrounding prenatal testing and abortion. Davis's primary contention is that culture's responsibility is not necessarily to solve the problems of disability, but to reconfigure what is considered “normal” and what is deviant, and to understand how our labeling of these categories is flawed.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson agrees that we must reconfigure the meaning of and our perceptions of bodies and identity and that we must start by "reframing 'disability' as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality" (“Disability, Identity” 5). Much like these other sites of oppression, disability as a cultural construct is formed and perpetuated by social forces that designate certain bodies as deviant. Even further, Garland-Thomson argues that the fluidity of disability, meaning anyone can become disabled at any time, is "[more] threatening to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities" (14). Garland-Thomson’s coined term “normate” is the social positioning in which bodies that are generally accepted as standard—free from any stigmatized identity markers—can exercise power and authority over deviant minority groups. However, Garland-Thomson finds that "if one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away all the marked

traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people" (8).
Essentially, the normate is a fantasy image of perfect health, beauty, and functioning, and is impossible to achieve.

The intersectionality of disability as an identity marker with other sites of oppression has led to much scholarship focused on this specific overlap. One particular lens is that of Crip theory, pioneered by Robert McRuer, which reclaims the term *cripple* and aims to incorporate disability as a fluid element of identity that can intersect with other diverse groups rather than an isolated label. In "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," McRuer draws parallels specifically between marginalized sexuality and disability, arguing that "able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" (1). J. Logan Smilges's recent work *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Silence* has reignited this important conversation regarding disability and queerness. Crip theory as a focused academic study of overlapping marginalized identities draws important parallels between ability and sexuality, but, according to Chris Bell, the intersectionality of disability and other stigmatized identities is still largely underrepresented. In "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," Bell criticizes many of the influential works published by disability studies scholars, including Lennard Davis and Simi Linton, and argues that in the current moment, disability studies prioritizes the white experience. Though many sites of oppression intersect with the disability experience, Bell argues that "disability studies claims to examine the experiences of a vast number of disabled people,

yet the form that representation takes is, far too often, a white one" (278). Since Bell's critique of the field in 2006, Black Disability Studies has emerged, with notable contributions from Sami Schalk, Therí Pickens, and Michelle Jrman, to name just a few. Even more nuanced is the black feminist disability framework, which emphasizes the intersectionality of oppression. Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley explain that the framework helps to "acknowledge the need to consider disability in Black Studies and race in Disability Studies, and to forward an intersectional framework that considers race, gender, and disability to address the gaps in both Black Studies and Disability Studies" (19). As any scholar interested in social justice would agree, oppression overlaps, and disability studies is still exploring how disability factors in.

Despite the internal debates within the field, disability studies has rooted itself within the academic community. Simi Linton, an early activist of the movement, aggregates the linguistic conventions of disability within language in "Reassigning Meaning" and ultimately argues that the term *disability* reveals an oppressive network of social, political, and cultural structures rather than a denotative marker of physical or mental impairment. This network surfaces in the naming of and description of people with disabilities. Most notable are the ways in which various terminology is used by disabled people and nondisabled people. Phrases such as *physically challenged* and "handicapable," according to Linton, represent the intention to speak politely of people with disabilities. However, such polite words effectively infantilize them and imply that a disabled person's value is contingent on validation from a nondisabled person. Other terms treat disability with less feigned politeness, such as describing a person as *afflicted*

with, *suffering from*, or *victim of*. Like the latter phrases of *physically challenged* or "handicapable," these descriptors are not necessarily malicious or intentionally condescending. Even so, Linton claims that these linguistic structures "[attribute] life, power, and intention to the condition and [disempower] the person with the disability, rendering him or her helpless and passive" (169). In both groupings, it is revealed that these common discursive tropes neither blatantly condemn people with disabilities, nor label them as sinful or immoral as past civilizations have. Nevertheless, these descriptors do construct a hierarchy, which keeps disabled people linguistically dependent on a hegemonic class of nondisabled people in order to define themselves. Other terms, such as *cripple*, *gimp*, or *freak*, are currently undergoing a form of reclamation as people with disabilities have begun to use them with ownership in order to transgress the terms' negative connotations. Even further, the linguistic structure of *disability* can only exist in opposition to *ability*, which Linton extends to the absolute categories of normal and abnormal, as each of which depends on the other for meaning and stability (168). The importance of terminology and the ways in which disability is linguistically articulated will be explored more fully in Chapter 2. It is not enough, however, to deconstruct the morphology of disability and point out the connotation of the prefix "dis-" as meaning separate and deviant; instead of choosing a new name for disability, it is necessary to reassign its meaning. For Linton, this process requires the promotion of disability studies as a legitimate field of academic inquiry with the goal of defining disability as a culturally bound institution rather than a descriptor of impairment or biological difference. To honor the varied preferences in the disability community, I will

interchangeably use both “disabled people” and “people with disabilities” throughout this project.

Furthermore, Linton asserts in “What is Disability Studies?” that disability studies must be regarded differently than disability services. Disability studies, as a focused inquiry of the social structures and linguistic conventions of disability, “is studying the social, cultural, political phenomenon of disability as a construct, not the implementation of services for people with disabilities” (526). While individual interventions and access to accommodations certainly influence and are influenced by the study of the phenomenon of disability, disability studies as a liberal-arts based inquiry must direct its energy toward “[weaving] disabled people back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory,” by means of examining primarily the social conventions that have thus far rendered them separate and deviant.

One of the current debates regarding exactly how to approach Linton’s proposed task circulates around the various conceptual models—or perspectives—of disability, which include the medical, moral, charity, economic, and social models. The social model assigns responsibility to society to provide accommodations and to remove the burdens that have historically excluded people with disabilities. It has also been the most controversial. Originating in the United Kingdom, it has been praised for countering the medical model of disability, which hinges on the need to cure physical impairments rather than cultural barriers. The medical model philosophy of curing and/or eradicating is evident in the subject of my analysis in Chapter 2. The social model makes the distinction between disability—the structural and public social exclusion—and

impairment—the individual and private physical limitation (Shakespeare 198). However, many disability studies scholars have equally criticized the social model for its oversimplification and generalization of the disabled experience. Tom Shakespeare, sociologist, disability studies scholar, and person with a disability, argues in "The Social Model of Disability" that though the social model is a practical tool for absolving people with disabilities of many of the burdens of the disabled experience, it is simultaneously an exclusionary system. Besides noting the problematic oversimplification of the social barriers of disability, Shakespeare argues that the authors of the social model make up a small group of white heterosexual men, most of whom had physical impairments. In effect, the social model assumes a narrow view of disability and does not account for intellectual disabilities or the intersectionality of the disabled experience (200). Despite this debate, the social model has done much for reconfiguring the ways in which we understand and discuss disability in the public sphere.

While these important voices in the disability studies movement have solidified the burgeoning field within academia, these studies have been conducted largely through sociological lenses and cultural perspectives. Disability studies, as a distinct field, has defined the parameters of the oppressive social forces of the institution of disability and decidedly stated that we can no longer accept them. Disability studies can benefit, however, from the field of rhetoric and writing studies in meaningful and important ways. Fortunately, this work is well under way as scholars in RWS have taken up the torch and brought discussions of disability to our own disciplinary canon, primarily within first-year composition. The 2001 article, “Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability,” published

in the flagship journal of writing studies—*College Composition and Communication*—marks the moment in which writing studies acknowledged disability as "generative potential." Brenda Jo Brueggemann et al. argued that in paying attention to disability in the writing classroom, instructors will become more attuned to the differing learning abilities, which are often seen as disruptive or burdensome. "These differences," they argue, "call into question the very notion of composition itself" (392). This pioneering work brought disabled students and faculty alike to the forefront, inspiring dozens of articles and books that center people with disabilities as well as the concept of disability itself in our academic discussions and our physical and virtual spaces. We can thank this body of scholarship for helping us rethink many of our commonplace assumptions about composition theory and pedagogy, largely surrounding the notion of access. Access, as defined by Tanya Titchkovsky, "is not really a substance and it is more than a process. As perception, as talk and conduct, as a form of consciousness, access leads us to ask how access can be an interpretative move that puts people into different kinds of relations with their surroundings" (13). Compositionists have explored access from many angles within writing pedagogy, such as the connections between learning disabilities and basic writing (Vidali), normative conceptions of time and writing production (Wood, Barritt and Hubrig, Gaeta), presence, absence, and engagement (Price), accommodations and invisible disabilities (Cecil-Lemkin, Anglesey) composition pedagogy and embodiment (Cedillo, Selznik, Kershbaum), accessible syllabus/course/conference design (Womack, Konrad, Osorio), to name a few. Writing studies dominates disability-related scholarship

within English, but rhetorical theory is gaining traction as an avenue for exploring disabled ways of knowing and being.

In "The Roles of Rhetoric in Constructions and Reconstructions of Disability," Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia Dunn argue that as rhetoricians, "we know better than to be satisfied with the naming of categories, that is, philosophical statements of 'being' … we must move from acknowledgement of social constructions to action that informs a meaningful, public reconstruction of what counts as 'normal'" (169). Rhetoricians have important tasks as scholars, teachers, and public intellectuals not only to produce rhetorical analyses of disability-related issues but also to include such scholarship in course curricula and, ultimately, to engage in public discourse. Jay Dolmage's *Disability Rhetoric* offers the most comprehensive overview of the relationship between disability and rhetoric, arguing for an expanded definition of rhetoric as "the circulation of discourse through the body" (5). In this text, he situates the ancient field of rhetoric within the framework of disability studies in order to reconfigure the role of the human body in discourse. For Dolmage, "Rhetoric needs disability studies as a reminder to pay critical and careful attention to the body [and] disability studies needs rhetoric to better understand and negotiate the ways that discourse represents and impacts the experience of disability" (3). Until this moment in the field of rhetoric, the body has largely been regarded as either a distraction to discourse or as an aide in conveying meaning, not a legitimate form of communication in and of itself. Dolmage regards the body as the vehicle through which all communication is generated, filtered, and delivered; in other words, rhetoric is always embodied. Specifically, Dolmage works to locate the body

within rhetorical history, beginning with Periclean Athens after the Ten Years' War and the Greek god Hephaestus whose feet were deformed. While soldiers returned from war with wounded bodies and the city lay in ruins, festivals were held to celebrate disabled Hephaestus as a symbol of both wartime service and creative industrialization to rebuild the city. Bodily values have since undergone several cultural shifts. Dolmage looks ahead to the future of the body as an impetus for pushing the boundaries of rhetoric, which in more recent history has ignored the body due to "a fear of imperfection, a fear about the boundaries around our own bodies, and a fear of the strange bodies of Others" (5). The importance of the body for the study of rhetoric is refined by Tobin Siebers's theory of complex embodiment, as laid out in *Disability Theory.*

Sieber's intervention in the large arena of theory, specifically regarding the structuralist view of language as representation, helps to unite rhetoric and disability studies by magnifying the bodily experience, not just the social institution of disability. According to Siebers, "Because linguistic structuralism tends to view language as the agent and never the object of representation, the body, whether abled or disabled, figures as a language effect rather than as a causal agent, excluding embodiment from the representational process almost entirely" (2). Many of the theorists who have contributed to disability studies have hyper-focused on the social institutions and forms of oppression that comprise disability and, consequently, have deemed the reality of the disabled bodily experience as immaterial. The theory of complex embodiment bridges the gap between the bodily experience of being disabled and the social ideologies of disability. For Siebers, this theory "understands disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation

to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal" (27). Acknowledging the realities of the disabled body and studying its potential function as a rhetorical vehicle, as Jay Dolmage does, while also situating the body within the cultural framework of disability, as Tobin Siebers does, allows for a more precise and representative rhetorical analysis of disability.

The field of rhetoric has illuminated gaps in disability studies perspectives by serving as a framework for studying the body as a vehicle for discourse. While the body certainly should be rhetorically analyzed, the current conversation has further separated physical disability from mental or cognitive disability. As rhetoric opens up new avenues of thought for disability studies, it has simultaneously problematized its own field by drawing attention to the normed, non-inclusive construction of the rhetor. In another influential work, *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson question the rhetorical canons as they assume a non-disabled audience and author and build on normed constructions of delivery, invention, gesture, movement, and being (Yergeau). *Embodied Rhetorics* functions as a canonical reference work in the field of disability studies, especially regarding its intersection with rhetoric, but also reveals one of its major shortcomings. In Julie Vedder's review of the book, she remarks:

> None of the essays, for instance, address mental disability. This lacuna marks the ways in which Disability Studies, and disability activist work more generally, too often grounds itself in a shared sense of intelligence as

> a strategy for undermining stereotypes about disability. If, despite a disability, I'm smart and articulate, then discrimination against me economically, politically, or socially is irresponsible and reprehensible. By effectively reproducing the mind/body split, disability activism and theory undermine the possibility of fighting for those with mental disabilities. (145)

As Jay Dolmage argues, disability studies needs rhetoric. However, rhetoric as a discipline reaches an impasse when faced with the reality of intellectual disabilities. If meaning is produced and interpreted through language, then rhetoric has excluded a portion of the human population from participating in the exchange of meaning, which precludes people with intellectual disabilities. In the effort to unite rhetoric and disability studies, scholarship has further marginalized people with intellectual disabilities.

In the same vein, recent interrogations of what rhetoric could be through the lens of disability can be found in Shannon Walters's *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics* and M. Remi Yergeau's *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness.* Writing studies dominates disability-related scholarship within English, especially as it pertains to accessible pedagogy, but rhetorical theory is gaining traction as an avenue for exploring disabled ways of knowing and being. However, very few studies account for profound or severe intellectual disabilities, such as Down syndrome. I know of two texts that take up profound disability as a site of rhetorical possibility. The first is Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson's 2003 *Rhetoric Review* article "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities," in which she poses these questions:

"Would a revised understanding of rhetoricity improve the lives of the disabled? How does thinking through mental disabilities affect our thinking of rhetoric?" (157). Dolmage, Walters, and Yergeau respond tangentially to these questions as they relate to the disabled body and/or the neurodivergent brain, but they do not engage the particular kinds of disability I am most interested in. In the eighteen years since Liewiecki-Wilson invited the field to consider "[extending] rhetoricity to the severely mentally disabled" (157), the only other study to account for profound intellectual disability is Zosha Stuckey's *A Rhetoric of Remnants: Idiots, Half-Wits, and Other State-Sponsored Inventions.*

Stuckey's analysis focuses on special education and "rehabilitation" at the 19th century New York State Asylum for Idiots, asking provocative questions about how rhetoricians classify civic and rhetorical engagement. She argues that "participation in civic endeavors does not always have to be verbal, nor does it have to be political" (3). Stuckey's work is critical for my own research but is focused on the education system and definitions of civic engagement, rather than the theoretical explanations for what constitutes "rhetoricity." Overall, profound intellectual disability is undertheorized in disability rhetoric and disability studies at large. There are a few explanations for why this is. For one, many (though certainly not all) scholars in disability studies are themselves disabled, and their research tends to focus on their own experiences, which are very different from those with severe or profound intellectual disabilities. A person with Down syndrome, for example, is less likely to conduct academic research. Similarly, researchers are often concerned with accessible pedagogy in order to revolutionize their

own classrooms and workplaces—but, a person with Down syndrome is also unlikely to be enrolled in a first-year writing course or graduate seminar, making this stratification of disability appear less relevant to a discipline concerned with written communication and persuasion. As I will discuss in the concluding chapter, however, the presence of intellectual disability in post-secondary education classrooms is becoming more common. Furthermore, the Institutional Review Board gives special consideration to protect the welfare of vulnerable groups, including people with intellectual disabilities. Federal law considers this group vulnerable to abuse in human research because they may not be able to make informed decisions for themselves, might be easily manipulated, etc., making such studies difficult to conduct. Despite these obstacles, I argue that rhetoricians should attend to this dearth in scholarship. We have a long and rich history of challenging the canon of rhetorical studies. By looking at the generative potential of intellectual disability, we have the opportunity not only to expand our understanding of *who* can be rhetorical, but we can also rethink *what it means* to be rhetorical.

Methodology

Margaret Price and Stephanie Kershbaum pointedly argue that "methodology is a key mechanism of disabled peoples' oppression, and that taking back our methodologies is a means of fighting back" (23). To be more concise, "disability crips methodology." Disability research has largely been guided by the framework developed in the 1990s by disability studies researchers in the UK called the "emancipatory research paradigm." This paradigm necessitates that disabled people set the agenda—or at least have an active role—in the research process in order to ensure practical benefit to disabled people and

ensure that the researcher is held accountable to the disability community, among other goals (Stone and Priestley). It is a practical application of the disability rights mantra, "nothing about us without us." Disability researchers in Rhetoric and Writing Studies have demonstrated how these goals may be carried out in our discipline, while also drawing attention to potential obstacles. In "Still-Life: Representations and Silences in the Participant-Observer Role," for example, Brenda Brueggemann, argues, "I do not think it entirely ethical that we unequivocally assume that [participants] *want* to be involved, to collaborate, to respond, to co-construct representations with us" (33). In other words, asking participants to share the burden of constructing meaning might place undue labor on the populations that researchers are intending to help liberate. Furthermore, it is less clear how this paradigm applies to PWID, who might not be able to participate in such processes. My project is rich with these ethical quandaries. Much of my research has left me with more questions than answers regarding methodology. What I do know at this juncture is that disability research is less about studying the people who inhabit disabled bodyminds, and more about "studying broken systems, broken attitudes, broken gazes" (Price and Kershbaum 23). Therefore, my research focus is not necessarily on disabled people, but rather on the discursive practices (ex. the 20th century "war on mental retardation") and theoretical paradigms (ex. the normed view of the rhetor) that have shaped disabled people's social and material environments.

In a review of Debra Hawhee's monograph *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw: Animals, Language, Sensation* (a book with tremendous influence on my project), Alex C. Parrish argues that rhetoric has historically been a "microscope" discipline—one that is

concerned with dividing texts into tiny parts in order to understand the whole. However, we have also had many telescopic thinkers—the Walter Ongs, the George Kennedies, the Kenneth Burkes—who established their scholarly reputations by doing the microscopic thinking first—the "bench science" —before "making the big connections that inspired new ways of seeing rhetoric's place in the world" (280). The "animal turn" in rhetorical studies, argues Parrish, has helped spark a synergy between microscopic thinkers and telescopic thinkers, whose micro and macro approaches together help us better understand the place of nonhuman animals in rhetorical theory. I imagine my own project as similarly both microscopic and telescopic. I will first conduct a "microscopic" analysis of how intellectual disability has historically been articulated and "dealt with" in Chapter 2. I will then sketch out a "telescopic" overview of rhetoric's place in the world when we explore the rhetoricity of intellectual disability in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I will wrestle with more precise questions pertaining to how intellectual disability collides with the rhetorical situation and rhetorical research. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will offer a way forward for rhetoricians to become involved in inclusive postsecondary education programs that matriculate students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Though this project is about disability, it is equally about rhetoric. Recent trends in rhetorical studies demonstrate a continued effort to widen how rhetoric defines itself, including expanding not only what rhetoric is and does, but also what entities are able to exercise rhetorical agency. I seek to continue this conversation as it pertains to intellectual disability, which will prompt a rethinking of our fundamental assumptions about rhetoric—including its origins, function, and boundaries. By bringing to the

forefront a population that is so often overlooked, I hope to extend the reach of rhetorical studies to consider new epistemologies and ontologies.

Throughout these chapters, I will frequently draw on my own experiences with and knowledge of disability as starting points for analysis and/or commentary. It is impossible for me to separate my memories and emotions from my scholarship, so I am choosing to weave my personal and family history into my writing. My hope is that these moments of reflection and confession help move my readers to consider how my arguments do not pertain solely to the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies, but also to how we vote in local elections, how we engage with disabled people in our everyday interactions, and how we teach the next generation about difference.

Chapter 2

Looking Back: A Rhetorical Historiography of Intellectual Disability in the 20th Century

Introduction

In his argument for a critical alliance between rhetoric and disability studies, Jay Dolmage describes rhetoricians as agents who "recognize the ways that rhetoric shapes not just utterances or inscriptions, but also beliefs, values, institutions, and even bodies" (*Disability Rhetoric* 2). The focus of this chapter, which looks to the historical context of intellectual disability in the 20th century, is to analyze the ways rhetoric has shaped disabled people's material reality as well as the values, beliefs, and worldview of nondisabled people who wielded power over those realities. Integral to the unification of rhetoric and disability studies is the amplification of disabled rhetoricians, which I intentionally foreground throughout this dissertation project. This chapter, however, draws from a longer history of rhetorical criticism that is unfortunately lacking in disabled theorists. As Brenda Jo Brueggemann and James A. Fredal argue, "Throughout its 2500 history, rhetoric has never been particularly friendly to the disabled, the deformed, the deaf or mute, the less-than-perfect in voice, expression or stance" ("Studying Disability Rhetorically" 251). Nevertheless, scholarship from the past two decades has made strides in reversing rhetoric's inhospitality. Disability rhetoric as a subfield has worked to not only highlight the presence of disability in the history of rhetoric, but also to rewire the inner workings of rhetorical theory, beginning with how rhetoric defines itself. In this chapter, I employ traditional methods of rhetorical criticism to analyze discourses that have deeply impacted the lives of the disabled community.

Brueggemann and Fredal argue that "rhetoric as a theory, a practice and a tool for analysis is well aligned with the current direction of disability studies," particularly because of the gradual shift away from "the great speaker, great speech" model of rhetorical criticism to deeper analyses of social movements, cultural trends, and ideological power relations (256). Despite the homogeneity of theorists who developed the methods used in this chapter (ex. Kenneth Burke's pentadic criticism and Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory), disability studies still stands to gain from the findings produced via these methods.

A Brief Primer on Mental Health Philosophy in the 20th Century

The most significant feature of the history of intellectual disability in 20th century America is deinstitutionalization: shutting down residential psychiatric hospitals and moving their residents into community-based programs—or, ideally, back into their family homes with access to support services. Institutions, also referred to as psychiatric hospitals or asylums, housed people with a wide variety of diseases and/or disabilities, ranging from temporary ailments (such as alcoholism) to profound developmental disabilities. Often, facilities were understaffed, unhygienic, and overall unsuitable for a healthy or meaningful quality of life. In the US, change began to take root after John F. Kennedy's "Special Message on Mental Illness and Mental Retardation," which resulted in the signing of the Community Mental Health Act of 1963 (CMHA). Though this legislation sparked the governmental actions that will be the subject of this chapter's analysis, changes to mental healthcare and the events and ideologies that spurred such change began much earlier. Institutions, like most other public facilities, were impacted

by the destitution of the Great Depression in the 1930s, including a reduction in staff-patient ratios, the halt of new construction, and deferment of regular facilities maintenance (Grob 8). As World War II soon began, hospitals were not able to recover, especially as medical officials joined the armed forces in droves. Staff shortages significantly affected already struggling institutions, as the "restraint of patients became more common; hygienic conditions became deteriorated; individualized attention, medical and occupational therapy, and supervised recreation all suffered" (9). WWII not only spurred changes to mental health policy by affecting the availability of personnel and funds for hospitals, but also by impacting the general philosophy of mental health at large. Psychiatrists who served in the war concluded that environmental stressors, such as combat, were a primary factor in the onset of soldiers' mental illness, and that early intervention outside of an institutional setting was ideal (5). These new beliefs about mental illness—that it is a direct result of environmental factors, drawn from the phenomenon of soldiers experiencing emotional breakdowns from war though never having exhibited signs of mental illness in the past, and that mental illness can be treated or, ideally, prevented by earlier community-based intervention—dramatically impacted medical discourse and policy in the following years (18).

Psychiatric wartime experiences shifted the philosophy of mental illness from treatment-based to prevention-based. WWII psychiatrists did believe, however, that any treatment should occur in a communal setting, ideally near family. As historian Gerald Grob finds, wartime psychiatrists believed that if the stressors of war could be contained or modified, so could civilians' stressors. "If such innovations as rest periods, rotation

policies, and measures directed toward the maintenance of group cohesion and social relationships had reduced psychoneurotic changes in the civilian military," Grob writes, "might not corresponding social and environmental changes in the civilian sector optimize mental as well as physical health?" (19). This type of thinking, one of control and modification, was successful for illness brought on by wartime stress and trauma; as Grob argues, though, the analogy of prevention might not have been as suitable for civilian society. Metaphors of war infiltrated medical discourse, which situated mental illness and disability as an enemy in need of annihilation. Proponents for deinstitutionalization and changes to mental health policy were further convinced by the development of psychotropic drugs in the late 1940s, which would allow severely mentally ill patients, such as those with schizophrenia or forms of mania, to be treated at home and live outside of state-run institutions. The ramifications of post-war America and the subsequent reorganization of American psychiatry, however, remain the most powerful force in moving forward with major changes to the treatment of patients with mental illnesses and disabilities, which surfaces in JFK's rhetoric in his to appeal to Congress.

In 2003, forty years after JFK signed the Community Mental Health Act, Saul Feldman, then-Chairman and CEO of the National Institute of Mental Health, published a reflection on the act and its primary objective: deinstitutionalization. Now largely deemed a governmental failure and a major cause of homelessness by the general public, Feldman argued that "given the broad, varied and often ambiguous objectives of the CMHA program, conclusive evidence or even general agreement about its tangible

accomplishments are as unclear today as they have always been and may well remain so for a long time" (667). The longstanding effects of deinstitutionalization are still questioned well into the twenty-first century. Despite the lack of consensus about mental healthcare policy among governmental and medical authorities, local facility closures in such states as Oklahoma suggest that now more than fifty years later, the impact of deinstitutionalization continues to wreak havoc on the nation's most vulnerable citizens. Yet, the overarching results of JFK's original appeal to Congress and the resulting legislation remain contested. While Saul Feldman argues that the tangible accomplishments of the CMHA program are unclear, he simultaneously acknowledges that "its intangible accomplishments … [are] more clear, that is, the ideas, values and philosophy that brought the program about and sustained it, many of which we take for granted today. Mental health historians writing in the year 2500 may well consider those to be the program's finest legacy" (667). Eunice Kennedy Shriver's work with the Special Olympics is one the Kennedy family's greatest legacies, primarily for helping undo the stigma associated with intellectual and developmental disabilities. However, I conclude that the rhetorical frameworks implemented in the 20th century, primarily Kennedy's philosophy of warfare and, as I will discuss later, Ronald Reagan's philosophy of liberty, were unsuccessful.

The Kennedy Legacy

In the field of rhetoric, President John F. Kennedy is most often referenced for the 1961 inaugural address in which he famously pronounced, "My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" (7). On the

heels of World War II, JFK envisioned a New Frontier in which citizens might work together to preserve the freedom of mankind, to bear the burden of the "struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself." Kennedy's dream of a united nation, not far removed from the horrors of World War II, is reflected in the lesser-known 1963 "Special Message on Mental Illness and Mental Retardation." In this appeal to Congress, Kennedy calls for a strategic federal plan to fund mental health research, construct community mental healthcare centers, and ultimately restore and/or close state mental health institutions. Like the inaugural address, this speech envisions an ideal society built on community—specifically a society that is free of the social ill of having a diseased or dysfunctional mind. Kennedy's speech successfully moved Congress to action. The Community Mental Health Act was signed into law on October 31st of the same year, setting into motion a series of legislative actions that drastically overhauled states' handling of their mental health patients and shifted control to the federal government. Kennedy was assassinated twenty-two days after his bill was signed, before any policies were realized, thus martyring him and freezing his role as the hero who brought the mentally ill and mentally disabled out of the shadows. To criticize the legislation was an assault to JFK's memory. Though Kennedy did not see his policies enacted, President Carter and later President Reagan moved them forward with mixed results. At this time, no critic has analyzed the rhetoric of JFK's initial appeal to Congress that first set forth these policies. Thus, an analysis of the motives and overall rhetorical function that informs JFK's appeal to Congress is necessary to better understand the ideology that gave rise to this legislation and the larger implications of

purpose-driven rhetoric. If rhetoricians are to work toward a better future for and with the disability community, we must first understand our past.

The Kennedy family's personal involvement with mental retardation began long before they entered the political scene, catalyzed by the birth of Rosemary Kennedy: John F. Kennedy's younger sister. Rosemary suffered oxygen deprivation during her birth on September 13, 1918 and was considered mildly mentally retarded, though she was not officially diagnosed until much later. As Rosemary came of age, certain behaviors and characteristics concerned her father Joe Kennedy, which led to his unpopular decision to lobotomize Rosemary without her or her mother's consent. The lobotomy only worsened her condition and the family chose to institutionalize Rosemary in the 1940s, hiding the truth of her condition and location until after JFK's election. JFK's other sister, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who later became a public advocate for the Special Olympics, announced the truth of Rosemary's status and institutionalization in 1962, thus dispelling the past myths that covered up Rosemary's public absence (Shorter 33). The decision to announce this truth signifies the "bold new approach" to "attacking" the problems of mental illness and mental retardation that President Kennedy calls for in his special message to Congress, this time on the front of social stigma.

Though JFK delivered the Special Message to Congress, Joe Kennedy and Eunice Kennedy Shriver arguably had a stronger influence on the legislation that was eventually passed as a result of the speech. Despite Joe Kennedy's controversial handling of Rosemary's condition, he held a strong presence in philanthropic organizations involved with mental retardation. Before his death in 1961, Joe suggested a national commission

which eventually became the President's Panel on Mental Retardation (Shorter 87). The panel consisted of twenty-seven scientists and professors and was eventually split into six tax forces that reported their findings to President Kennedy, which formed the basis of his 1963 message to Congress. Eunice Kennedy was not pleased with the original draft of JFK's speech, however, and worked with members of the President's Panel to incorporate a more specific plan for institutional clinical units and university-associated hospitals specifically for patients with mental retardation. These revisions to the presidential address were not well-received by bureaucrats, primarily because these additions to the proposed policy were not originally approved by the Bureau of the Budget. Even so, the presidential address moved forward with a patched-together plan for constructing healthcare centers and creating community-based health and social services. Arguably, this helter-skelter assemblage of the speech and ultimately the policy's poor planning led to negative outcomes of Kennedy's legislation, which psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey describes as "fatally flawed." According to Torrey,

> It encouraged the closing of state mental hospitals without any realistic plan regarding what would happen to the discharged patients, especially those who refused to take medication they needed to remain well. It included no plan for the future funding of the mental health centers. It focused resources on prevention when nobody understood enough about mental illnesses to know how to prevent them. And by bypassing the states, it guaranteed that future services would not be coordinated. "The

> seeds of the future" had indeed been sown, but they would not bear good fruit. (59)

As historian Edward Shorter documents, in the 1950s, "the mentally retarded were among the most scorned, isolated, and neglected groups in American society" and that "historically, people with mental retardation were seen as useless, marginalized at the rim of society and deemed to be nothing more than burdens" (1). The greatest legacy of the Kennedy family's intervention is the gradual undoing of this public perception. However, the long-standing effects of the Community Mental Health Act itself have arguably not been as successful. In addition to increasing research and education on the causes and treatments of mental illness and mental retardation with the hopes of eventually preventing them altogether, the primary objective and most extreme action of Kennedy's Community Mental Health Act is deinstitutionalization—the process of moving patients with varying disabilities and mental illnesses out of state-funded institutions into smaller community-based living quarters or therapeutic centers. Kennedy first proposed the policy of deinstitutionalization as a more humane alternative to the practice of committing patients to state mental health hospitals, which he described as having been "shamefully understaffed, overcrowded, unpleasant institutions from which death too often provided the only firm hope of release" ("Special Message" 3). The costs and benefits of this long-standing practice have been debated by scholars, medical officials, and governmental authorities for decades. Meanwhile, deinstitutionalization has largely been regarded as the cause of increased rates of homelessness.

In 1981, the year that Ronald Reagan took office, the ninety-seventh Congress conducted a series of hearings to deliberate the policy of deinstitutionalization first suggested by JFK. In an opening statement, spokesperson Ronald C. Willis announces, "We are here today to discuss a national policy which has had a profound effect on the lives of thousands of American citizens, a policy which was intended to bring hope and a chance for a new beginning to people who were living within the confines of State mental health institutions" (2). At this moment, nearly twenty years after Kennedy's appeal to Congress and his assassination soon-after, the original intent of the CMHA still hovered in the nation's conscience. Willis goes on to say, "Upon examination of the current status of community care facilities and programs nationwide it is evident that implementation of our original deinstitutionalization goals has been a failure at best" (2). Willis calls on psychiatrists, professors of psychology, representatives of the National Institute of Mental Health, and similar medical and governmental authorities to weigh in on the effectiveness of continuing the policies that Kennedy proposed, and President Carter later implemented. As a result of this congressional hearing, then-President Reagan passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) that defied President Carter's 1978 Commission on Mental Health report that recommended more federal spending, thus undermining an already struggling policy. Until the 1980s, most patients who had been discharged from state-run institutions had largely become "out of sight and out of mind." Upon the passage of Reagan's legislation and the uptick in violent crimes committed by people with untreated mental illness, as I will later explicate, media and public discourse

has largely pointed to the Reagan administration as the cause of untreated mental illnesses and subsequently mass incarceration and homelessness.

The origin story of deinstitutionalization, which begins with Kennedy's speech, has been lost over time. While the Kennedy family is known for their involvement with the Special Olympics and—very recently—the revelation of Rosemary Kennedy's private life, the events and family circumstances that led to JFK's appeal to Congress have largely been divorced from the negative perception of deinstitutionalization. Scholars have worked to understand both the legacy of the Kennedy family's influence on mental illness and mental retardation as well as the implications and debates regarding deinstitutionalization, but these studies do not explain how Kennedy's speech that began the upheaval of the nation's handling of the mental health crisis functioned rhetorically. They have informed our knowledge of political and personal motivators for the Kennedy's involvement with the cause as well as the long-term effects of this legislation, but not the rhetorical function of JFK's call for major changes to the nation's status quo. It is my purpose in the forthcoming analysis to provide a more complete picture of Kennedy's motives for deinstitutionalization and its larger mental health policies as demonstrated in the rhetorical features of his 1963 speech on mental illness and mental retardation.

Pentadic Criticism

Presidential speeches are generally not written by the presidents who deliver them. However, as presidential address scholar David Zarefsky argues, a president is "the chief inventor and broker of the symbols of American politics" (*President Johnson's War*

8). Thus, in order to better understand both JFK's motives for enacting new policies and the power of the purpose-driven speech, it is necessary to interrogate the persuasive resources used in this text that moved Congress to take action. Zarefsky also argues that analysis of presidential rhetoric should not be limited to any one traditional perspective of rhetorical analysis; rather, it is a complex mixture of overlapping relationships among message and audience, rhetor and text, text and rhetorical critic. "Rhetoric," he writes, "is not only an alleged cause of shifts in audience attitudes. It is also a reflection of a president's values and world view. And it is also a work of practical art, often richly layered and multivocal, that calls for interpretation" ("Presidential Rhetoric" 609-10). Though the writing of Kennedy's speech was a group effort, it nonetheless demonstrates his worldview as a president and his motives as a rhetor.

In this analysis, my objective is to uncover Kennedy's motives for calling for an extreme overhaul of how the federal government handles cognitive impairment in its many manifestations. Uncovering Kennedy's motives may help us understand not only his own reasons for acting, but how presidents in general construct purpose-driven speeches to attract support, which can directly shape disabled people's material reality. By analyzing a rhetor's discourse, rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke argues:

> We or [s]he may disclose by objective citation the structure of motivation operating here. There is no need to "supply" motives. The interrelationships themselves are his motives. For they are his situation; and situation is but another word for motives. The motivation out of which

> he writes is synonymous with the structural ways in which he puts events and values together when he writes… (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 20)

In order to do this described work, Burke offers the dramatistic pentad as a tool for understanding motives in symbolic action; this tool allows rhetorical critics to reduce statements to fundamental motives according to five terms: "act," "agent," "agency," "scene," and "purpose." The pentad is ideal for analyzing presidential discourse because of its usefulness for understanding motives, which are of utmost importance for political leaders charged with reflecting on the past, navigating the present, and leading the future. Specifically, Burke's pentad helps to delineate critical junctures in Kennedy's description of the nation's mental health crisis, which reveal a warring within the nation's conscience—conflicting feelings of wanting to care for its most vulnerable citizens and return them to the fold, while simultaneously calling for bureaucratic warfare on their diseases and disabilities. The discursive practices that construct Kennedy's philosophy emerge from an embedded ideology that situates cognitive impairment—whether caused by disease or disability—as a form of threatening deviance that must be cured. This speech articulates that curing or, ideally, *eradicating* such deviance not only would rescue the people who have been locked away in destitute state institutions, but would also benefit taxpayers and the federal budget. In other words, Kennedy's plan to eliminate the enemy of human dysfunction would save us all.

Rhetorical critics have extended the pentad to include the external elements of a rhetorical act, thus naming the speech itself the act and the rhetor the agent, et cetera. In this analysis, however, I use the pentad internally in that I identify the pentadic elements

as they are used within Kennedy's speech. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke tells us, "In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose" (xv). In this analysis, I first identify what Kennedy names as the scene (state institutions) and the act (federal government assume responsibility for eradicating mental disability); then, I move to agent (the federal government) and agency (warfare). This leads me to my discussion of purpose (restore the ideal) as dominant term, which Burke pairs with the philosophy of mysticism. Finally, I return to the broader implications of purpose-driven presidential rhetoric.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, a hallmark of disability-related scholarship is a foregrounding of disabled voices. Analyzing a US president's speech *about* disabled people, via a method developed by a nondisabled rhetorical critic, does not seem to meet that criterion. I am also cognizant of the criticisms of Burke as a major force in rhetorical theory; M. Remi Yergeau's commentary that Burke's theories render autistic people such as themselves as "nonsymbolic," whose "speech acts and gestures [are] lacking in meaning, purpose, or social value" is particularly convicting (*Authoring* 15). However, I maintain that attending to the way nondisabled people in power (such as John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan) interpret the phenomenon of disability and propose actions that shape their realities is more than worthwhile. Pentadic criticism is an especially useful method for disability studies, as explained by researchers Kris Rutten et

al., particularly when applied to fictional disability narratives (such as their analysis of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*). For their purposes in training social workers, dramatistic analysis (aka pentadic criticism) draws students' attention to the ways in which language reflects certain realities and deflects others. Their analysis illuminated the disease-centric terminology rampant in disability-related content, which "focuses on the primacy of a pathological understanding of the individual and neglects other dimensions of disabled people's personhood and subjectivity" (635-636). Knowledge of Burke's theory of dramatism helped Rutten's students "orient and re-orient both their interpretation of particular situations and their prospective practice [in real life] when disability is at stake" (643). Though the subject of my analysis is nonfiction rather than fiction, and I am a rhetorician and not a social worker, the point here is that Burke's pentadic criticism is a useful tool in delineating the worlds created through language use and potentially altering those worlds when analysis reveals that our terministic screens are inherently oppressive to our disabled peers.

Criticism: Special Message to Congress

Scene

Burke defines the scene as "the background of the act" and "the situation in which it occurred" (xv). Kennedy centers his argument on the phenomena of mental illness and disability at large as it has permeated the nation. However, Kennedy also strategically brings his audience—Congress—to the steps of the state institution. The research that had been conducted by the President's Panel provided Kennedy with enough reasoning to name the institution itself as no longer necessary for all patients. He argues that this

research has “rendered obsolete the traditional methods of treatment which imposed upon the mentally ill a social quarantine, a prolonged or permanent confinement in huge, unhappy mental hospitals where they were out of sight and forgotten” (“Special Message” 3). These institutions, Kennedy posits, were “crowded” and “understaffed” (2). The scene is of both excess and scarcity—too many patients and not enough staff or resources. Every year, 1,500,000 people would receive treatment in these facilities and “most of them are confined and compressed within an antiquated, vastly overcrowded, chain of custodial state institutions” (1). By carefully situating the speech within the scene of the state institution, which were usually located far away from urban centers, Kennedy metaphorically brings the problem out of the shadows and to the forefront of the nation’s conscience.

Act

Burke defines the act as the entity that “names what took place, in thought or deed” (xv). For Kennedy, the action is what *should* take place. Within the designated scene as the state institution, Kennedy sees the action as the move “to stimulate improvements in the level of care given the mentally disabled in our State and private institutions, and to reorient those programs to a community-centered approach” (13). From a wider perspective, the action that Kennedy proposes is to remove power from the states and for the federal government to co-opt the handling of public mental health. “The Federal Government,” Kennedy says, “despite the nation-wide impact of the problem, has largely left the solution up to the states [and] the time has come for a bold new approach” (2). Generally, the act is to move responsibility to the federal government; specifically,

the act is to empty state institutions in favor of new approaches to treatment or, ideally, prevention. For Kennedy, states' handling of "the problem" has not only been inefficient, but neglectful. To solve the problem, he calls for "this tradition of neglect [to] be replaced by forceful and far-reaching programs carried out at all levels of government, by private individuals and by State and local agencies in every part of the Union" (13). Though Kennedy stirs all levels of government to solve this crisis, the federal government has been summoned as the primary agent that will carry out this act.

Agent

Burke tells us that in the scene-agent ratio, there is a "synecdochic relation between person and place" (Burke 7). The scene of the destitute state institution (place) symbolizes the nation's neglect of its most vulnerable citizens. The action of redeeming these institutions requires an agent to perform the action (person); for Kennedy, that agent is the federal government. The agent, which describes "what person or kind of person performed the act," in this case, is the entity who should enter these institutions and rescue the patients who have been locked up, abused and/or neglected, and forgotten (Burke xv). Kennedy argues this by calling on the past. He reminds Congress that "from the earliest days of the Public Health Service to the latest research of the National Institutes of Health, the Federal Government has recognized its responsibilities to assist, stimulate and channel public energies in attacking health problems" (1). Here, Kennedy situates the federal government as the agent who has acted in the past and therefore should act again in the future. State health institutions—the scene in this pentad—are

reinforced as a symbol of the federal government's failure to uphold its duty to protect its people.

Furthermore, Kennedy reminds Congress that "infectious diseases are now largely under control. Most of the major diseases of the body are beginning to give ground in man's increasing struggle to find their cause and cure. But the public understanding, treatment and prevention of mental disabilities have not made comparable progress since the earliest days of modern history" (1). The failure on the front of mental disabilities is emphasized by calling attention to the government's successes regarding bodily diseases. Kennedy names the government as agent and, more specifically, the protagonist in the drama. Thus, mental health patients function as the victims of the antagonist, which is the phenomena of mental illness and mental disability. He is also careful to articulate that though the federal government is the primary agent in combating this crisis, the effort is a shared one. Kennedy reminds Congress that "the American people, acting through their government where necessary, have an obligation to prevent mental retardation, whenever possible, and to ameliorate it when it is present" (8). Summoning the public to share in the burden of preventing, ameliorating, and ideally curing mental disability alludes to the agency by which Kennedy calls for his policy to be carried out. In times of war, it is not only the soldiers who sacrifice for their nation, but also citizens on the home front.

Agency

Agency is the "means or instruments" used to perform an act (Burke xv). As this speech functions as a special message in order to move Congress to pass legislation, the agency is of particular importance and is one that functions from the embedded ideology

that disease and disability warrant eradication; war is the only solution. This plan is threefold: 1) "seek out the causes of mental illness and of mental retardation and eradicate them"; 2) "strengthen the underlying resources of knowledge and, above all, the skilled manpower which are necessary to mount and sustain our attack on mental disability for many years to come"; 3) "strengthen and improve the programs and facilities serving the mentally ill and the mentally retarded… [so that] the mentally afflicted can be cured or their functions restored to the extent possible." (2-3). Under Kennedy's plan, the underlying goal of this health policy is to eradicate difference in order to restore order—in other words, regulate it. This ideology is fitting for the time in which a fragile post-World War II America was now entrenched in Cold War paranoia. For Kennedy, difference is cured through normalization and helping individuals accept their rightful places as productive, working citizens. To do this, the government must wrangle its resources to most effectively combat the diseases themselves and ultimately govern the bodies who house them so that they may best serve the common good. The way to accomplish these goals, for Kennedy, is for the federal government (as agent) to mount "a concerted national attack on mental disorders" (4). Through the vehicles of academic reconnaissance and medical intervention, Kennedy names the agency of this pentad as all-out warfare. The summoning of a unified "attack" on the threat of mental illness and mental disability echoes the call to action that Kennedy proposed in his inaugural address: "Now the trumpet summons us again… [to] struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself" (2). This time, Kennedy proposes eradicating the enemy of disease *through* war itself.

Pointing to warfare as the agency by which disease and disability may be conquered reveals important insights for Kennedy's motives. Following Burke's notion of the terministic screen, Kennedy's use of warfare as agency alludes to his worldview and constituted reality. Summarizing Burke, Foss, Foss, and Trapp describe a terministic screen as "the development of a particular perspective on life [that] results in a framework for seeing… the terms or vocabulary we use as a result of our occupations constitute a kind of screen that directs our attention to particular aspects of reality rather than others" (192). The president's occupations, however, are many: Chief of State, Chief Executive, Commander in Chief, Chief Diplomat, Chief Legislator, and Superpolitician. In this speech, the focus on warfare emphasizes the role of Commander in Chief—the ultimate authority of armed forces. Agency as warfare is not uncommon in presidential address and propaganda. Lyndon B. John's "War on Poverty," Richard Nixon's "War on Drugs," and George W. Bush's "War on Terrorism" all reduce domestic and foreign issues alike to a metaphor of violence. Though the campaign for the war on mental disabilities did not gain traction like its subsequent campaigns did, the long-term effects of its rhetoric support this claim: "When we declare war on phenomena like crime, drugs, or terror, instantly militarizing such problems, we severely limit our means for understanding and dealing with them" (Gordon). Kennedy's calling for warfare to eradicate the alien enemy of mental disability illuminates his role as a Commander in Chief whose role is to destroy any threat to the social order, but it also covers up the humanity of the bodies that housed the diseases Kennedy wished to eliminate. Having

established the federal government as agent, Kennedy leads to the appropriate agency by which the agent may carry out its duty: war.

In theorizing presidential motives for war, speech critic Robert Ivies argues that "war is recommended by the President only after demonstrating that peaceful methods—such as remonstrances, expostulations, negotiation, and embargo—have failed to restore the ideal or to prevent the disharmony" (344). For Kennedy, the "peaceful" methods that have heretofore been used to address mental disability—namely sending those who have been diagnosed to live out their days in faraway institutions—have failed to restore America to its ideal. The federal government as agent has pursued this method for too long, according to Kennedy, which has left us with war and eradication of disease as the only option. Even further, Ivies argues that "war is considered an essentially negative agency that assumes positive characteristics only in the presence of severely threatened ideals; it is portrayed as but a step toward more permanent resolutions such as 'a concert of free peoples' or 'a world where all are fed and charged with hope'" (344). In this light, it becomes clear that warfare is not necessarily the *preferable* agency for Kennedy, but the *only* agency.

The New Frontier: The Dominance of Purpose

The dominant term of a dramatistic pentad is discoverable through the application of ratios. The ratios, according to Burke, "describe the relationships among the elements of the pentad… [which] suggest a relationship of propriety, suitability, or requirement among the elements" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 186). In this pentad, purpose emerges as the dominant term over scene, act, agency, and agent by suggesting that the purpose at

hand—restoring America to its ideal—requires these elements to operate in a specific way. The purpose-act ratio suggests that living up to American ideals requires a shifting of responsibilities regarding public health to the agents who oversee the country. Similarly, the purpose-act ratio requires that for America to function as it should, the agent must accept responsibility for this act based on the federal government's past responsibilities to rise to action when the nation is threatened by foreign invaders and internal invaders alike. The purpose-agency ratio suggests that protecting America's status as a democratic nation who cares for its citizens will defend any threat with warfare—in this case, the crisis of mental disability has wreaked havoc on the nation and if America is to embody the New Frontier, it must come together to wage war on its enemies. Ivies argues that the purpose of restoring America to its ideal is common for presidential address. In many presidential contexts, "America is portrayed as especially virtuous and particularly obligated to combat evil because of her close association with an ideal purpose-agency ratio" (344-45).

In these ratios, purpose exerts control over the second term, which suggests the corresponding philosophy of mysticism. According to Burke, "in mysticism, the element of unity is emphasized to the point that individuality disappears [and] identification often becomes so strong that the individual is unified with some cosmic or universal purpose" (Foss 377). The philosophy of mysticism permeates this speech in that Kennedy calls for major changes to the handling of mental health and mental disability not only for the individuals who are living in institutions, but for the good of the nation as a whole—for the New Frontier. He envisions a society in which institutionalized patients are "returned

to a useful place in society" and become members of the unified working force, all for the good of the nation (6). Achieving this purpose does not stop with curing the bodies and minds that Kennedy is concerned with in this speech; rather, it fulfills a much larger goal. Calling on the nation's shared duty, Kennedy proclaims, "We as a nation have neglected the mentally ill and the mentally retarded. This neglect must end, if our nation is to live up to its own standards of compassion and dignity and achieve the maximum use of its manpower" (13). Addressing the crisis of mental illness and mental retardation not only serves the current problem, but fulfills the cosmic purpose of a utopian America.

The dominance of purpose aligns with how presidential studies critic Michael E. Meagher describes JFK's worldview. Meagher writes that young JFK matured during a contentious "time of political and military struggle between democracy and fascism" (476). As a result, Kennedy often used language of crisis to invoke support for his policies—a hallmark of Kennedy's worldview and one "that was entirely compatible with the requirements of the [twentieth century] rhetorical presidency" (476). Rhetorical critic John Murphy furthers this notion in his lengthy analysis of what he calls Kennedy's "liberal persuasion." Calling back to JFK's now-famous inaugural address, Murphy discusses the fury it aroused in its historical moment. "If his contemporaries heard a bid for peace," he writes, "later critics discerned a call to war" (40). For dissenters, "its menace flowed from the 'universal mission' offered by JFK, particularly in what became the most controversial lines in the speech, the 'pay any price, bear any burden' section" (40). What we now know about the results of treating national health policy as warfare,

the mentally ill and mentally disabled have been the ones to pay the price.

Implications

In 1955, not long after Burke wrote *A Grammar of Motives*, speech critic Virginia Holland aptly described the usefulness of Burke's pentad:

> The question of what a speaker's strategies are is inherent in Burke's dramatistic approach to criticism, and it may provide us with one means of obtaining a rhetorical criticism that more nearly approaches the ideal. It may be a means of developing a rhetorical critic who is a more expert judge as a social critic, and who, as a consequence, is himself better qualified to make valid social judgments of his own, and better qualified as an acting rhetorician to popularize them through the language strategies of his own rhetoric. (358)

In conducting a pentadic analysis of President John F. Kennedy's 1963 Special Message on Mental Illness and Mental Retardation, I believe I have achieved what Holland describes, particularly in discovering Kennedy's use of purpose as dominant term. With the function of purpose as dominant term and the corresponding philosophy of mysticism, Kennedy's speech constructs a closed discourse. A closed universe of discourse, rhetorician Sonja Foss writes, "is one in which certain perspectives are validated, while others are excluded" (378). In this discourse, disability and/or illness is not named as a condition that may be adapted to or better understood. It is only named as an object in need of annihilation through the agency of warfare, enacted by the agent of the federal government, to serve the purpose of upholding American ideals. What is

missing from this ideology is a belief that mental illness and mental retardation might already be "natural" iterations of the human condition; it does not offer the alternative interpretation of cognitive difference as *not* needing to be cured or resolved. In other possible universes of discourse, the "problem" of mental illness and disability might be named alternatively as a variation of humanity, which would necessitate an agency other than warfare. Beginning with a shift in agency, the philosophy might also move away from mysticism to a philosophy that is less stringent and monolithic. Though an alternative philosophy is not inherently superior than Kennedy's, imagining other possible discourses offers various perspectives on the phenomena of mental illness and mental retardation themselves, which might function as a better American ideal.

At this same time, this analysis has led me to a more complex understanding of John F. Kennedy as a presidential rhetor. By analyzing JFK's speech from a dramatistic perspective, I have identified the elements involved in the described act and the relationships among them. Foss, Foss, and Trapp explain that as a result of a pentadic analysis, "an interpretation of the motivation of the rhetor whose act is the object of study can be formulated. This information can then be used to understand the rhetor's particular orientation and the kinds of interpretations she is likely to apply to her current and future actions" (187). With the help of John Murphy and Michael E. Meager, I have found that JFK was motivated by Cold War tensions, the threat of fascism, and the compulsion to "pay any price, bear any burden," which informs his philosophy of mental disability. While the act of shifting the responsibility of caring for the nation's most vulnerable citizens by transferring power to the federal government and mounting a bureaucratic war

serves the purpose of upholding American ideals, the underlying motive functions to support the philosophy of mysticism and its unwavering pursuit of unity, regardless of the cost. Uncovering this motive not only illuminates Kennedy's philosophy, but also the function of the rhetorical presidency in the twentieth-century and the understanding of mental disability as a threat to the social order.

Pentadic criticism allows critics to "become better analysts of the social scene, more cognizant of what the problems are thought to be, and more critical of the solutions to those problems by the social critics operating as speakers and writers" (Holland 358). As a rhetorical critic, my objective in this analysis has been to understand how mental disability has been viewed as a social problem and how Kennedy's motives in this presidential address proposed solutions to this problem. It is my hope that in uncovering Kennedy's motive and contextualizing the effects of his proposed solution may illuminate the dangers of this closed universe of discourse for current and future presidencies. Public discourse largely disapproves of deinstitutionalization and generally points to this policy as a major cause of homelessness, but its roots grew from the belief that mounting bureaucratic warfare on the problem of mental diseases would best serve the common good However, it is my hope that this analysis may help us better understand that beliefs that turn into sweeping judgments about the human experience, especially those that enact public policy, should be exercised with caution.

The Reagan Legacy

After Kennedy passed the CMHA in 1963, the process of deinstitutionalizing mentally ill and mentally disabled patients officially began in the 1970s. It was not until

the 1980s that the rhetorical vision of deinstitutionalization as a major failure began to chain out—first through governmental proceedings, then via the media, and eventually in public discourse. In 1981, the same year that President Ronald Reagan took office, the ninety-seventh Congress conducted a series of hearings to deliberate the policy of deinstitutionalization first suggested by JFK. As mentioned earlier, speaker Ronald C. Willis acknowledged the good-willed intention of the changes to national health policy, "which was intended to bring hope and a chance for a new beginning to people who were living within the confines of State mental health institutions" (2). Such a statement points out that the story being told originates from a policy meant to benefit the country's most vulnerable citizens. However, the proceedings concluded that "the implementation of our original deinstitutionalization goals [have] been a failure at best" (2). As a result of these proceedings, President Reagan passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) that repealed Carter's previous legislation to continue federal funding for mental health programs. Reagan presented OBRA to the public as a policy that would grant agency to patients and the freedom to choose their own treatment and administer their own medication (Carmen Guerra). Kennedy's approach was one of warfare; in contrast, Reagan offered liberty. Reagan's impact on mental health is the one that public discourse has held on to, whereas the origin story of deinstitutionalization and its ties to the Kennedy legacy has been lost. It is Reagan's actions that set into motion the rhetorical vision of deinstitutionalization's catastrophic failure, as the subsequent fantasy themes spiral from the belief that deinstitutionalization was motivated purely by the potential for economic and political gain.

In my own family experience, I grew up as a member of this rhetorical community. I recall a specific conversation I had with my mother when I asked why my uncle was being displaced and his lifelong home—the Southern Oklahoma Resource Center—was being shut down. She simply answered: "It's all about money. And Reagan." Before I began this research, my own family had no knowledge of the Kennedy family's involvement with deinstitutionalization, apart from Eunice Kennedy Shriver's founding of the Special Olympics. Unearthing the lost origin story of Kennedy's involvement led me to wonder why we had inherited the belief that Reagan was the cause of our situation, when in reality the roots ran much deeper. Ernest G. Bormann's symbolic convergence theory, also known as fantasy-theme criticism, offers one way for understanding how groups coalesce around shared worldviews, specifically regarding the symbols that group members use to constitute a specific reality. Key to this method of criticism is noting the ways in which group members *share* these symbols and their subsequent meaning with others (also known as "chaining out") to perpetuate the understanding of reality—hence, symbolic *convergence.* My own relationship to Reagan's role in deinstitutionalization and the interpretation of Reagan as the villain is a testament to the power of symbolic convergence. Thus, I have chosen to engage this method of rhetorical criticism to better understand the complexity of how intellectual disability was understood and contextualized in the 20th century, as its impact is still palpable in the new millennium.

Though I am in no hurry to come to Reagan's defense, I must acknowledge that the finger-pointing to Reagan as the sole instigator of homelessness, and its associated

social problems, fails to account for the origin story of deinstitutionalization that I have explicated via pentadic criticism. Part of JFK's "New Frontier" included state-of-the-art community health care centers; twenty years later, very few of these centers had been constructed and in their place were men and women suffering alone on dirty city streets. To use the language of fantasy-theme criticism, a particular "rhetorical vision" has been constructed that assigns meaning to the rise of (and, arguably, the maintaining of) homelessness in U.S. cities. The rhetorical vision—which is a "unified putting together of the various shared fantasies"—illustrates a specific interpretation of reality that is shared among members of a rhetorical community. For members of the rhetorical community who share in the vision of Reagan's responsibility for the catastrophe of deinstitutionalization, the 1980s homelessness crisis emerges from Reagan cutting funding and already waning support to state-sponsored healthcare centers in favor of pumping money into the war on drugs and filling up prisons, all the while leaving those who fell through the cracks to fend for themselves. In line with Reagan's liberty approach, the administration let things "sort themselves out" while cracking down on more threatening affronts to the U.S.. By 1981, there remained little to no oversight of the treatment of mental illnesses and mental disabilities. "Authority that had been previously vested in the state legislatures, departments of mental health, and governors had become so diffused that it seemed to evaporate altogether," according to E. Fuller Torrey (89). For many, Reagan is at fault for abandoning the mentally ill and mentally disabled. Though my intention is not to absolve the Reagan administration, it is important to

understand how this reality has been constructed and perpetuated, as this interpretation neglects another reality of failed bureaucratic warfare.

Fantasy-Theme Criticism

Similar to Burke's pentadic criticism, Bormann's fantasy-theme method offers critics a vocabulary for identifying what motivates groups to constitute realities. While it is fairly straightforward to identify the the first two parts symbolic convergence theory, 1) identifying the evidence of a shared group consciousness, and 2) describing the effects of the group consciousness, Bormann admits that the last part of the theory is much more difficult to develop: 3) explaining *why* people share these fantasies ("Symbolic Convergence Theory" 129-130). According to Bormann, a "'fantasy' refers to the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need" (130). Furthermore, Bormann explains that these fantasies may occasionally be fancified or somewhat imaginary, "but they often deal with things that have actually happened to members of the group or that are reported in authenticated works of history, in the news media, or in the oral history and folklore of other groups and communities" (130). In the evidence I have found from members of the rhetorical community who blame Reagan, these fantasies have been chained out in official news media (ex. *Life* Magazine) in the moment the reality was being constructed in the 1980s, as well as in reports and commentaries from the 21st century that point to current tragedies caused by untreated mental illness as an enduring consequence of Reagan's abandonment. In my mother's words, the rhetorical vision of this group can be summed up in "Money and Reagan." Though it is more difficult to articulate *why* groups share the

fantasies they do, when they do, I believe this need stems from the desire to place blame on a single villain for widespread failure amid long-term social and political instability. State and federal governments alike, coupled with families who were ill-equipped to care for disabled loved ones, failed to develop support systems for vulnerable U.S. citizens. Reagan's liberty approach translated to abandonment, which is a much simpler explanation for our collective failure. Through fantasy-theme criticism, I will articulate in this analysis how over time the story of deinstitutionalization and its long-term effects has been chained out to construct a narrative that points to President Ronald Reagan as the instigator of the crisis of untreated mental illness and the subsequent rise in homelessness in the U.S.. Specifically, I have coded public discourse regarding Reagan's role through the fantasy themes of action ("Cutting the budget"), characters ("Reagan Doesn't Care about the Mentally Ill"), and setting ("The Mentally Ill Suffering on the Streets"). From these fantasy themes, I will then draw conclusions regarding the worldview of the community who shares in the controlling rhetorical vision of "Money and Reagan."

Criticism: Money and Reagan

Action: "Cutting the Budget"

In one of the most comprehensive accounts of the catastrophe, Dr. E. Fuller Torrey offers a scathing indictment of our nation's failure to care for mentally ill and mentally disabled citizens in *American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment System.* Torrey's work is one of the only commentaries that accounts for the early changes to mental health treatment, including

the Kennedy administration's legislation. Despite the acknowledgement of the original policy's well-intentioned efforts, Torrey spreads the blame for our collective failure across all state and federal governmental players. Like the rhetorical community at the heart of this analysis, however, Torrey pays special attention to Ronald Reagan's "shameful legacy," particularly regarding the connection between untreated mental illness as a result of Reagan's budget cuts and repeal of previous efforts to boost treatment and prevention, and the subsequent rise in violent crimes, incarceration, and homelessness. Though Torrey is knowledgeable on the early roots of American mental health policy, he still points to Reagan as the clear villain (to use the language of fantasy-theme criticism), whose primary sin was severing federal spending.

While President Reagan is characterized as the villain who bears responsibility, the action of slashing the budget functions as the ultimate evildoing. The narrative as it has been chained out selects certain actions that are framed as the most heinous and most significant—specifically, Regan's choice to repeal President Carter's Mental Health Systems Act by passing OBRA and thus defunding nearly all mental health programs. The decision aligned with the tenets of Reaganomics, namely the reduction of government spending and government regulation. Homicides committed by individuals with untreated mental illnesses then increased exponentially in the 1970s; to the public, these crimes are a direct result of Reagan's "economy move." A foreman of a jury that convicted one such individual, who murdered 13 people, publicly stated:

> I hold the state executive and state legislative offices as responsible for these ten lives as I do the defendant himself–none of this need ever have

> happened….In recent years, mental hospitals all over this state have been closed down in an economy move by the Reagan administration. Where do you think these…patients went after their release?...The closing of our mental hospitals is, in my opinion, insanity itself. (qtd. in Torrey 99)

Similarly, well into the twenty-first century, blogger Elaine Carmen Guerra characterizes the action as an unethical choice, one that was "driven by the desire to cut the budget" and that ultimately caused more harm than good for the mentally ill. Further chaining out the rhetorical vision of deinstitutionalization as a failure, Carmen Guerra argues that the consequences of Reagan's action "can be measured by the fact that today one-third of the homeless population are suffering from severe mental illnesses which puts burdens on police departments, hospitals and the penal system which lack the training and resources to deal with psychiatric emergencies." Carmen Guerra demonizes the action of cutting funding and characterizes the mentally ill as victims. In the discourse surrounding deinstitutionalization, both then and now, the greatest crime is not only deinstitutionalization itself, but the fact that it was economically motivated, according to this rhetorical community.

Characters: "Reagan Doesn't Care about the Mentally Ill"

The onset of changes to mental health policy situated President John F. Kennedy as the hero who set out to rescue patients isolated and abandoned in destitute institutions. After Kennedy's assassination and a decade of poorly enacted policy, the rhetorical vision ceased to have a hero—only a villain. In Dr. E. Fuller Torrey's words, "Reagan never understood mental illness," despite having been personally exposed to it (88).

Reagan's personal tax advisor had two sons with untreated schizophrenia who both committed violent crimes, and Reagan was famously shot by a young man, John Hinckley, who also had untreated schizophrenia. Despite this close contact, the president did not seem to display any interest in investing time or money into the problem. Torrey claims that like Richard Nixon, Reagan associated psychiatry with Communism; therefore, individuals were better off making their own decisions when it came to treatment rather than surrender their autonomy to a medical authority with potential mind-control power. In fact, Reagan's 1972 Lanterman-Petris-Short Act made it illegal for family members or civil courts to impose mandatory institutionalizations in order to curb vindictive relatives or judges from locking up patients who needn't be. Reagan's seeming disinterest in the issue of mental illness and mental disability, combined with the administration's severance of resources, bolstered public perception that Reagan lacked any concern for the country's most vulnerable citizens (Coleman). The general public, however, was not wholly aware of the unfolding crisis throughout the 1970s. Compounding tragedies, such as homicides, eventually brought the issue to the forefront and linked deinstitutionalization to homelessness. In a 1984 *New York Times* editorial entitled "How Release of Mental Patients Began," Reporter Richard Lyons writes, "The policy that led to the release of most of the nation's mentally ill patients from the hospital to the community is now widely regarded as a major failure. Sweeping critiques of the policy, notably the recent report of the American Psychiatric Association, have spread the blame everywhere, faulting politicians, civil libertarian lawyers and psychiatrists." This article represents the media's chaining out of the rhetorical vision of

deinstitutionalization and the move toward blaming medical authorities and "faulting politicians." While the villain of the story remained in flux in 1984, the victims continued to be the mental patients who did not receive adequate treatment and, as often argued, were left without families to care for them or homes to shelter them. Now, more than thirty years later, the rhetorical vision has ingrained itself in the rhetorical community's consciousness and is called upon when any evidence of an untreated mental illness surfaces in the media.

In 2013, a 34-year-old woman drove her car into the barricades of the White House with her child riding in the back seat. The woman was shot by police who assumed it was an act of terror, but the investigation revealed that the woman was struggling with a mental illness. In response to this event, blogger and CEO of "People Assisting The Homeless" Joel John Roberts penned an essay that questioned why "it is getting crazy out there" and connected the incident to the public crisis of homelessness. In search of an answer, Roberts writes,

> The one political figure that typically comes up is former President Ronald Reagan. It's like an urban legend in our field. People say the reason so many people with mental illnesses are homeless or in jail—one-third of all homeless individuals and half of all people are behind bars—is because of President Reagan. Really? What did he do? Let all of the mentally ill patients loose? Well, yes, that's exactly what they say he did.

Several decades removed from the origin of the narrative, Roberts's commentary on a current event illustrates how the chaining out of the story has transformed the rhetorical

community's perception of reality, even individuals who did not witness the story as it unfolded in the 1980s. Roberts toes the line between an insider and an outsider in that he characterizes members of the rhetorical community who believe that Reagan is the villain of the story as "people" and "they," but implies that he shares in the rhetorical vision. Roberts claims that "there certainly seems to be a correlation between the deinstitutionalization of mental health patients in the 1970s and early 1980s and the significant number of homelessness agencies created in the mid-to-late 1980s." Though Roberts resists fully participating in the rhetorical community, his sharing of the rhetorical vision that has been chained out and passed down demonstrates its force.

Setting: "The Mentally Ill Suffering on the Streets"

While other economic factors were and are under discussion that may be additional causes for the uptick in homelessness, the rhetorical community who shares the rhetorical vision of "Money and Reagan" illustrates the failure of deinstitutionalization against the image of people with mental illnesses suffering on sidewalks. It is this dramatized setting that frequently frames discourse surrounding mental health care and governmental failure. In 1981, *Life* magazine published a story entitled "Emptying the Madhouse: The Mentally Ill Have Become Our Cities' Lost Souls," which sets the backdrop for the unfolding crisis. Beyond the media, mental health professionals and researchers began to seriously assess the link between deinstitutionalization and homelessness. In 1984, psychiatrist and head of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Richard K. Farr published "The Los Angeles Skid Row Mental Health Project," which offered the most detailed discussion of

the causal relationship. Farr explains that the infamous Skid Row had been previously occupied mainly by older men with substance abuse issues; by 1984, however, the population had grown exponentially to include chronically mentally ill people who would have received close medical supervision prior to the deinstitutionalization movement. In one of the first projects to collect firm data on the crisis, Farr's study on Skid Row confirmed that the "increase in the number of homeless mentally ill…is directly proportional to the decrease in the number of residents in state mental health hospitals, and is a result of deinstitutionalization policies implemented over the last 10-15 years" (2). In a reflection on the study at a conference, Farr pointedly proclaimed, "The streets are the mental asylum of the '80s" (qtd. in Guillermo).

By the late 1980s, the imagery of the mentally ill suffering on the streets had been intrinsically linked to deinstitutionalization. Psychiatrist Richard Lamb pointedly argued in 1988 that "probably nothing more graphically illustrates the problems of deinstitutionalization than the shameful and incredible phenomenon of the homeless mentally ill" (941). In 1989, a television station in San Francisco advertising a special on homelessness put up posters that read "You are now walking through America's newest mental institution" (Torrey 102). Both then and now, the story of deinstitutionalization's failure is passed to members of the rhetorical community via the illustration of homelessness as the most dramatic and impactful component of the narrative.

Implications

Though the word "deinstitutionalization" may function as an insider cue that triggers thoughts of failed Reaganomics and the epidemic of homelessness in the United

States, not all Americans share this rhetorical vision. Many admire the Kennedy legacy for increasing positive social awareness and creating influential organizations and programs, such as Special Olympics. However, the link between John F. Kennedy and deinstitutionalization's negative outcomes is weak. Furthermore, not all people who are somewhat knowledgeable on deinstitutionalization believe Reagan is at fault. In a 2019 opinion editorial in a local California newspaper, resident Chris Coleman criticized another resident's opinion editorial on the continued homeless epidemic, particularly regarding their indictment of Reagan. Coleman writes, "While Mr. Khan may ask residents to stop demonizing homeless people, I would in turn ask him to stop demonizing Ronald Reagan." Coleman takes issue with Kahn's statement that "the Reagan administration closed all mental institutions," countering with the fact that Jimmy Carter passed the 1980 Mental Health Systems Act that provided grants for community health centers, only for the act to be repealed shortly after. Reagan was tasked with signing the repeal, but according to Coleman, "didn't directly oversee, direct or cause any hospital closures." In fact, Reagan's signing of the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act in 1972, which prevented individuals from institutionalizationing their family members against their will, was "humanitarian legislation." However, the story that has been chained out most predominantly operates within the rhetorical vision of President Ronald Reagan as a villain who not only harmed his victims by choosing economic gain over the well-being of the mentally ill but also spurred the long-lasting crisis of homelessness. The rhetorical vision of "Money and Reagan" easily recruited members to the rhetorical community, both in the 20th and 21st century, largely due to the convenience of blaming entities

whose actions can be summed up as economically motivated. However, it is important to understand the complexity of the deinstitutionalization movement and its impact on both mentally ill and mentally disabled individuals. Reagan's philosophy of liberty clearly was ineffective, but Kennedy's philosophy of warfare was not much better. In both cases, individuals were regarded as either in need of regulation, or self-sufficient enough to fend for themselves. In the next section, I will compare these two competing ideologies and draw conclusions about what we should learn from them as we embark on a better future.

Making Sense of Our Failures

As I have shown via fantasy-theme criticism, President Ronald Reagan generally receives the blame for emptying state hospitals and effectively funneling mentally ill patients onto the city streets, though the origin of deinstitutionalization began with President John F. Kennedy. While the blameworthy originator of what is perceived as a catastrophic federal failure is still under debate, it is equally important to investigate the *what* of deinstitutionalization's discursive practices, in addition to *who* has uttered them. In this final section of analysis, I will analyze the discursive practices of deinstitutionalization in order to uncover the embedded ideology of the federal policy, which is an ideology that situates cognitive disability and/or cognitive illness as unspeakable deviance that must be cured, one way or another.

Defining Difference: The Problem of Deviance

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault delineates the "rules of formation," which are the conditions by which objects become knowledge. The first of

these rules is what Foucault calls the surfaces of emergence—the historical, material, and ideological conditions by which a "status" may be designated and analyzed. Foucault argues that from these surfaces, where "initial differentiation" and "discontinuities" appear, "discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object—and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable" (1437). For this analysis, the surface from which mental illness and mental retardation emerge is that of mental ability or capacity. Cognitive deficiencies only exist in opposition to a full-functioning, "normal" mental state. Though medical authorities had already defined mental illness and mental retardation, John F. Kennedy brought these discursive practices into the public by addressing them not only as medical conditions, but as social problems. In the Special Message to Congress, Kennedy articulates these conditions as "our most critical health problems" that are "deserving of a wholly new national approach and a separate message to the Congress." By defining cognitive difference, Kennedy solidified this difference as deviance.

Before Kennedy brought national attention to the "problems" of mental illness and mental retardation, parents who bore children with either forms of disability were oppressed by shame and the unknown. It was not uncommon for parents to institutionalize their child once the disability had been medically recognized, and then publish obituaries announcing the child's death instead of confronting the public stigma of giving birth to a problem child. Cognitive difference was unspeakable in the public sphere. President John F. Kennedy, personally invested by way of his sister Rosemary Kennedy's diagnosis, initiated public awareness of not only the plight of families affected

by these phenomena, but of the destitution of state mental health hospitals. Kennedy's speech draws upon a year of committee research on the medical phenomena and mental hospitals alike, upon which he bases his call for Congress to pass legislation that would drastically change how the federal government funded and managed the prevention and treatment of diseases and disabilities. The discursive practices of this speech, which successfully moved Congress to pass the proposed legislation, reveals the understanding of cognitive difference as deviance and the embedded ideology which functions from the belief that difference is bad and normalcy is good.

Curing Difference: War and Liberty

The embedded ideology of Kennedy's speech not only calls normalcy good and difference bad, but it clearly articulates that difference warrants annihilation through a "concerted national attack." Kennedy's plan functioned with the ultimate goal of eradicating, or at least closely controlling, any deviation from the ideal bodymind. Difference may be resolved through prevention and/or treatment, but the approach must be aggressive. The Reagan administration, however, proposed an alternative approach for resolving difference that trickled down from Reaganomics and its focus on reduced government regulation. Kennedy proposed to *regulate* the problem of cognitive difference in order to rehabilitate humans back to normalcy; contrarily, Reagan approached the problem of cognitive difference by *not regulating it*. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act in 1981 cut the federal government's funding to mental health hospitals and left most patients with full autonomy to seek their own course of treatment. Though the public's perceived "real ideology" of this action is that federal dollars are

valued more than the wellbeing of the nation's most vulnerable citizens, the "surface ideology" of this legislation suggests that the cure to solving difference was to grant autonomy to mental health patients so that they may restore themselves to normalcy. Where Kennedy prioritized war, Reagan prioritized liberty. Regardless of the stance and specific ideology that informed these two presidents' approaches to deinstitutionalization, the embedded ideology that unites both administrations prevails: difference must be dealt with.

Though Kennedy and Reagan hold different philosophies to curing difference, their role as governing figures constitute a second "rule of formation," which Foucault calls the "authorities of delimitation." These authorities vary, but generally are any "institution possessing its own rules," such as the law, the government, or the medical profession. Foucault provides the example of how "madness" became a discursive object. The medical profession, he writes, "became the major authority in society that delimited, designated, named, and established madness as an object" (1437). For deinstitutionalization, Kennedy and Reagan represent the government as the authority who has not only *defined* cognitive difference for the public, but has governed its existence. Though influenced by the medical profession, the government becomes the main authority that determines how cognitively different people might live and behave, either through regulation or through deregulation. In either case, the governmental authority exercises power over its subjects. However, it is important to note that the embedded ideology of deinstitutionalization does not come from the political figures who enacted legislation or from the definition of the phenomena as social problems. Rather, as

Foucault argues, it is through the *interaction* of these rules of formation that coalesce to rhetorically form the cognitively different individual as embodied deviance. The phenomenon of cognitive difference existed before medical authorities and later governmental authorities recognized it; however, the discursive practices of defining and governing cognitive difference constructed its rhetorical referent—its *idea*.

Deinstitutionalization, like many other social and legal policies, functions from the ideology of difference as bad, normalcy as good. As evidenced in the discursive practices of both the Kennedy administration and the Reagan administration, the social order benefits from the rehabilitation of (or prevention of) cognitive difference. The ideology of deinstitutionalization asks its audience to perceive the emptying of state mental hospitals as part of the reintegration of dysfunctional humans into the normal, productive workforce of ideal American civilization. What is missing from this ideology is the possibility that disabilities and illnesses may be welcomed, with appropriate access, opportunities, and resources, as a variation of humanity. It does not offer the alternative ideology of cognitive difference as *not* needing to be cured or resolved.

Conclusion

In year three of a global pandemic, it is easy to question the need for analyses of events and discourses of a movement that is seemingly over and done with. I have provided evidence of individuals in the twenty-first century who have held onto the narrative of Reagan's involvement in the catastrophe of deinstitutionalization and connected homelessness, but for most, this topic is largely out of sight and out of mind. I am only conscious of deinstitutionalization because of my family's personal experience; I

have never heard the subject brought up outside of my lived experiences and academic research. However, there are still very real consequences of this legislation and its associated philosophies even now. In 2015, the year that my uncle's institutional home was permanently closed, *The Oklahoman* ran a short story on the impact of the closure, noting the distinct reactions from the Department of Human Services and from the families of loved ones who lived at the facility. For DHS, the closure was positive–a "monumental thing for Oklahoma" that would allow the former residents to "have lives just like you and I have" (qtd. in Ellis). Many members of the institution's parent-guardian association, including my family, however, protested the closure, citing statistics that a large percentage of people who had been moved out faced disastrous, often fatal consequences. Interestingly, providers of community-based services, an iteration of the community health care centers that Kennedy envisioned in 1963, also expressed concern about the closure due to DHS cutting back on the provider reimbursement rate. Cheryl Carroll, a CEO of one community-based home network, decried the closure:

> This is a true crisis and I'm not sure anybody has thought this through. These are vulnerable adults, vulnerable children. The majority of them are going to be living under the state's care the rest of their lives. We're going to be putting some of them onto the street or into the shelters. As far as the children go, child welfare is going to have to pick them up and figure out what to do with them… This is going to be very, very bad for the state. It's going to be very bad for these vulnerable adults. There's no institutions

> anymore to put them in. They closed those and expected the providers to take care of them, but now they're taking our money away. We won't be able to take care of them. (qtd. in Ellis)

As my family would later learn, Carroll was right. My uncle died due to medical neglect shortly after being moved into a community home. It is tempting to blame the providers and supervisors who were directly responsible for his suffering, but the rhetorician in me wants to look to the larger networks of beliefs, values, and worldviews that have constituted the material reality of disabled people. If we have any hope of fostering a better future for people with mental disabilities and illnesses, we must first learn from the failures of our past. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the key to imagining a better future is a return to the value of interdependence–to listen to and care for each other, including our peers with cognitive impairments. Declaring war on their conditions does not work, but neither does abandoning them to find help on their own. In both failed approaches, the impulse was to get disabled people to become independent, autonomous, and normal–one way or another. Clearly, this does not work, and as I will later argue, independence and autonomy is likewise a futile direction for rhetorical theory. In the next chapter, I will analyze key narratives in the intellectual/developmental disability community that have emerged in the twenty-first century that demonstrate progress toward striking this balance of true communal living. Though our past is bleak, there is hope.

Chapter 3

Looking Ahead: The Rhetoricity of Intellectual Disability

> "Rhetorical studies' primary project has long been interrogating what the fuck rhetoric even is. Arguably, to be a rhetorician is to have no clue what rhetoric is, for rhetoric is ever shifting, historically contingent, powerfully shaped, impelled by predictions about nebulous futures, and seemingly always related to (no, *defined by*) context and situation. Rhetoric lies. And lies. And lies."
>
> M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*

Introduction

I recall one Christmas afternoon, after the gifts had been opened, loading up the car to visit my Uncle David at the Southern Oklahoma Resource Center in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. It was an hour-long drive, so I had time to stew in the back seat and resent the fact that I was being forced to spend my favorite day of the year with David. At this age, I was still quite self-absorbed and wanted to stay home and play with my toys–I did not want to be around David. I found him exhausting. It took a lot of energy to understand what he wanted from me, and I generally felt uncomfortable around him. I could never voice these feelings for fear of upsetting my mother. David had always been a priority, but her responsibilities increased after my grandmother passed and she became his legal guardian. David came to spend weekends with us more often and we spent more and more holidays visiting him at the institution. I was uneasy in his presence. He was very sociable and wanted to give lots of hugs and high-fives. He had a limited vocabulary and would shout his favorite words over and over, which stressed me out. Apart from his few words (one of which was "Cowboys"—he was a major Oklahoma State fan), he did not communicate verbally. My mother and older sister were skilled at interpreting his

mumbles and gestures and were usually able to decipher his requests or demands. I was not as skilled and found my interactions with him to be frustrating. At the time, I thought I had an aversion to David. I know now that my frustrations were because of my aversion to not understanding.

Long before I became a rhetorician, I was simply a voracious reader who desperately needed to understand how the world worked. My mother and sisters were artistic, creative, and intuitively understood emotions. I take after my father. We perceive things very literally and need to have all the pieces to the puzzle. My mom loves to tell the story of when she asked me to melt a stick of butter in the microwave for a Thanksgiving dish. She did not instruct me to put the stick in a bowl first, leading to melted butter spilling out of the microwave. All this to say–logic, clarity, and cohesion are very important to me. It was not always possible to interact with David in logical ways. One needed incredible patience to engage him and a familiarity with his moods and habits. I found this incredibly frustrating. My affinity for language culminated in dual Bachelor's degrees in English and French and a Master's degree in Composition and Rhetoric. It was early in my Master's program that the tide changed in my relationship with my uncle and, by extension, my relationship with disability at large. As briefly discussed in chapter two, in 2015 David's lifelong home was shut down, despite years of protest, and he was moved into a community-based care center that ultimately led to his death. The event was traumatic for my family. However, as we tried to heal and pursued legal action, I was simultaneously searching for a topic to sink my teeth into for my Master's thesis. I once heard a scholar say that often our best work doesn't come from

topics that interest us, but rather those that enrage us. This has been true for me. At the time that I was mourning David's death, meeting with lawyers to seek justice, and processing my own internalized feelings of shame around how I had related to David as a child, my personal life collided with my work in a way that has guided my research for many years.

The first spark that began my years-long inquiry originated in a Young Adult Literature course that I wasn't supposed to be in. The course I was originally enrolled in dissolved, so I was left enrolling in this elective because it fit my schedule. I had convinced myself I was not a literature person, and therefore did not have much use for the course. Despite my pompousness, I found myself deeply affected by one particular novel: *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. The story is about a young boy with a facial deformity who begins mainstream school, and the people he encounters who struggle to adapt to his differences. Alongside the novel, my professor assigned several articles that engaged this thing called "disability studies." I was stunned. In my own experience, disability was not studied outside of clinical settings. Reading scholarship that looked at disability in fiction, media, classrooms, etc. was a whole new world, and I had first-hand knowledge of the phenomena these articles were discussing. As a student in this course, I first decided to write my final paper on children's novels that included characters with Down syndrome. I quickly learned that not many existed. I also learned that even in the world of disability studies, there was little scholarship that focused on people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome. I now had an entry point. It

suddenly became clear that the intersection of rhetoric and intellectual disability had not been explored, and this was a space where I had much to offer.

The first question I had was one that I am still wrestling with: What is rhetoric for the disabled mind? At the time, I had been subscribing to a traditionalist view of rhetoric as "the art of persuasion" in which a skilled rhetor asserts power over an audience in order to move them to action. This view of rhetoric was pleasing to my black-and-white brain, but the wheels came off when I thought of David. Though David could use only a few words, he was communicative. In fact, he was *very* communicative, but he did so through dramatic sighs, pacing the room, leaning on your shoulder, patting your leg, clapping his hands, firing his "pistols" (also known as finger guns). David was highly expressive; however, the field of rhetoric as I understood it up until this point did not think highly of these modes of communication. Such bodily language is merely ornamental; it is not the message. Without words, David was non-rhetorical, which essentially rendered him non-human. I found this deeply unsettling. I did not want to call myself a rhetorician if it meant denying my uncle a sense of agency, which I knew he had, just under his own terms. I made it through my Master's thesis with a clear understanding of where disability and rhetoric met, but I still did not hold the answers to what constituted rhetoric for someone like David. What does rhetoric "do" without an audience to persuade or a party to deliberate with? It was not until I came across George Kennedy's "A Hoot in the Dark" during my doctoral program, which I will discuss later in this chapter, that I finally saw a path toward a future of rhetoric that would include people like David. Though Kennedy's scholarship was not well received by his

contemporaries, the new millennium has brought with it radical theories of rhetoric that have been more readily accepted–many of which I will use in this chapter to gesture toward a more inclusive theory of rhetoric.

Now that I have traced the roots of intellectual disability in public and governmental discourse in the 20th century, I will turn my attention to the future. The previous chapter relied on traditional methods of rhetorical criticism to develop conclusions about how rhetoric has shaped the material realities of cognitively disabled people. The next two chapters will be working to advance rhetorical theory and account for the epistemology and ontology of intellectual disability in the rhetorical tradition. Beginning with a brief overview of rhetoric's many twists and turns, leading to a synthesis of the theoretical tenets of posthumanism and new materialism, I will broach the question, "What is rhetoric for the disabled mind?" I will argue for a definition of rhetoric that is energetic, ecological, and relational by drawing on major movements in rhetorical studies (ex. invitational rhetoric, animal rhetoric, etc.) and proposing extensions and/or modifications that consider disabled ways of being, knowing, and communicating. Finally, I will look at the controversy of facilitated communication in order to explore how these theoretical concepts may be applied to a real-world issue in the disability community.

Reviving Rhetoric

In order to arrive at a response to "What is rhetoric for the disabled mind?" I believe it is necessary to first lay a foundation of where rhetoric has been. As any experienced teacher of rhetoric and composition knows, convincing students that the

study of rhetoric goes well beyond empty verbiage—"mere rhetoric"—can be an uphill battle. Rhetoricians look to the "villains" of rhetoric from the late Renaissance period as the culprits of demoting rhetoric to the realm of style and occasionally delivery, thus assigning invention, arrangement, and memory to logic and reason (dialectic). This philosophy argues that rhetoric should be taught as a tool for dressing up knowledge rather than creating knowledge, and was adopted by most thinkers of the time. Scholars have linked this philosophy (primarily as it was championed by Peter Ramus) to the subsequent rise of modern science and capitalist rationality. One of the most notable consequences to come after the collapse of rhetoric is René Descartes's publication *Discourse on Method*, which is considered the departure from Renaissance rhetoric and the starting point of modern science (Bizzell and Herzberg 574). In simple terms, Cartesian science maintains that humans should derive meaning only from the purest forms of reason, untainted by cultural, religious, or historical factors—all factors which are entangled with rhetoric. Furthermore, Descartes argued that the function of the mind is completely non-physical, also known as mind-body dualism. Since my uncle largely communicated with his body, I take issue with such separation. It would take centuries of scholarship to restore rhetoric and to reunite the body with the mind.

Though "empty verbiage" still pervades twenty-first century media as the province of rhetoric—usually associated with political campaigns and deceptive advertising—contemporary rhetorical theory has for the most part reclaimed the epistemic power of rhetoric. Rhetoricians have long wrestled with the instability of language, dragging it through theories of psychology and faculties of the mind during the

Enlightenment and into the narrowed focus of rhetoric in written composition during the nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche began to bring dialectic back into the purview of rhetoric by disputing the very existence of pure, objective Truth and suggesting that all language is always rhetorical and is always contingent on the truths of a given context. Nietzsche's controversial arguments set the stage for modernist rhetoric, which is marked by a dedication to restoring order and reasoning through interpretation of symbols, and later postmodern rhetoric, which further problematizes how symbols are produced and how their meanings are interpreted. This long history, in which rhetoricians and philosophers have disputed the province and function(s) of rhetoric, brings us to the revival of rhetoric as an independent, though often interdisciplinary, field of study.

The revival of rhetoric is a rocky one. Roxanne Mountford, for example, describes the separation between rhetoric and speech communication (the department that housed rhetoric during much of the twentieth century) as a "divorce" between oral and written English. Mountford, a rhetorician, calls for a reconciliation between rhetoric and communication by learning about "the histories, theories, and practices of our neighbors so that we may more fully—and respectfully—collaborate with them" (419). The sense of collaboration and scholarly kinship that Mountford called for in 2008 demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric as a field, as also seen in rhetoric's legacy of critical thinkers who didn't identify as rhetoricians. I have explained this very truncated overview of the history of rhetorical theory to center us in the contemporary moment. Recent trends in rhetorical scholarship, which I will explain in the next section,

demonstrate a continued effort to repair the damage that rhetorical theory has suffered due to Ramistic rhetoric and Cartesian mind/body dualism.

The Turn to Posthumanism in Rhetorical Studies

The concept of posthumanism trailed behind postmodern theory as a counter to humanism and anthropocentrism, which are sets of beliefs that situate human beings as always central and always superior. Philosopher Francesca Ferrando assigns seven different definitions and corresponding subcategories of the concept, including complicating notions of antihumanism, transhumanism, etc. For my purposes, however, I find it helpful to conceptualize posthumanism against the more familiar concept (at least to rhetoricians) of humanism. According to Ferrando, "Both the notion of the 'human' and the historical occurrence of 'humanism,' have been sustained by reiterative formulations of symbolic 'others,' which have functioned as markers of the shifting borders of who and what would be considered 'human': non-Europeans, non-whites, women, queers, freaks, animals, and automata, among others, have historically represented such oppositional terms" (24). Posthumanism, among other objectives, constitutes the subjectivities of the many stratifications within "otherness" that humanism has historically neglected if not actively tried to erase; it manifests through the embodied differences that have been relegated to the margins of the traditional humanist subject.

Though perhaps not in these same terms, scholarship in rhetorical studies from the past several decades has likewise investigated the margins of the humanist subject, resulting in many "challenges" to the rhetorical tradition (ex. feminist rhetoric, afrocentric rhetoric, etc). Foss, Foss, and Trapp argue that these challenges achieve two

goals: 1) develop rhetorical theories that account for diverse perspectives, and 2) unsettle common assumptions about the function of rhetoric (273). More recent trends, which are primarily offshoots of new materialism, continue this work of blurring rhetoric's borders and boundaries by engaging in interdisciplinary philosophies of posthumanism. After all, as Casey Boyle reminds us, "Rhetoric has, since its inception, frustrated and intervened in humanist frameworks of bodies stretching back into antiquity" (6). In doing so, contemporary scholarship demonstrates a renewed interest in embodiment and communal meaning-making, principles from classical rhetoric that were lost in the severance of rhetoric and dialectic and Cartesian mind-body dualism. Another interdisciplinary field has likewise posed challenges to the rhetorical tradition while engaging in posthumanism philosophies: disability studies.

The fight for disability justice gained traction in the late eighties as a civil rights movement, culminating in the victory of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Since this historic legislation, disability studies has made waves in various academic circles, including the field of rhetoric and composition. As I have traced in this introduction to this dissertation project, disability rhetoric has followed a similar trajectory as other challenges to the rhetorical tradition as described by Foss, Foss, and Trapp, which often develops through a two-step process. First, scholars focus on the "inclusion stage" and "seek to gain legitimacy" for the rhetoric of a marginalized group, followed by a "revisionist stage" which calls for "reconceptualization of rhetorical constructs themselves using the knowledge gained from the study of alternate rhetorics" (274). Much work has been done both to legitimize disability rhetorics and to adapt

theories of rhetoric to account for alternative ways of knowing and being. However, much of this work has been focused more on the disabled body and less on the disabled mind—further underscoring Cartesian mind-body dualism that disability studies and other offshoots of posthumanism have fought so hard to repair. It is my goal in this chapter to gesture towards a theory of rhetoric that accounts for intellectual disability in the rhetorical tradition.

Locating a Rhetorical Ontology of Intellectual Disability

Disability rhetoric has become a well-defined area of study in rhetoric and composition. Scholars have even carved out spaces for various manifestations of disability as they relate to rhetoric and composition—rhetoric and mental illness (Margaret Price), disability in the writing classroom (Tara Wood, Stephanie Kershbaum, Patricia Dunn, Amy Vidali), rhetoric and deafness (Brenda Brueggemann, Tracy Ann Morse), rhetoric and the disabled body (James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson)—to name just a few. Recent scholarship on neurodivergent rhetorics (M. Remi Yergeau, Jordynn Jack, Gregory Appelbaum, Shannon Walters) has been highly influential on my own research, especially Yergeau's notion of "demi-rhetoricity" and their explanation of the compulsion of able-bodied people ("neurotypicals") to "craft neuroqueer subjects as rhetorically residual subjects, as rhetors who are not quite rhetors, as demi-rhetors" (*Authoring Autism* 50). What has not yet been studied nearly as frequently or as critically is the intersection of rhetoric and intellectual/developmental disability (I/DD). Apart from Zosha Stuckey's *A Rhetoric of Remnants* that offers a rhetorical study of disabled people's civic engagement within and in spite of "asylum-

schools" in nineteenth century New York, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson's influential article "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities" that suggests a revised understanding of "rhetoricity," little work has been done that critically examines what rhetoric is and/or what it could be for the person with intellectual/developmental disability.

In arguing that disability studies—specifically disability rhetoric—has not given enough attention to the ontology of cognitive impairment, I run the risk of over-categorizing the fluidity of disability. Codifying disability has a complicated history tied to medical experiments, eugenics, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization, etc. By designating who belongs to what criterion, nondisabled people in power have historically assigned meaning to disabled bodies and minds that signifies deviance and inferiority–as I have exemplified in chapter 2. At the same time, however, scholars argue that naming disability can become a moment of claiming disability, thus creating spaces in which communities can coalesce and thrive (Brewer et al. 11). Disability pride and a sense of community is important, but the act of claiming disability and fostering community is more complicated for people with I/DD whose cognitive impairments may prohibit them from this intellectual process. Furthermore, it makes my job very difficult to enact the "nothing about us without us" mantra, as individuals with Down syndrome who may be nonverbal do not represent themselves in ways that other disabled self-advocates do. In terms of agency and representation, the conversation often comes around to questioning the role that parents, caregivers, and loved ones play in how people with I/DD make meaning. The question of the possibility and validity of co-constructed meaning is one

that I argue rhetoricians are now positioned to begin answering, which I will attempt to do in the last section of this chapter via analyzing the controversy of facilitated communication.

According to Wayne Booth, “Rhetoric has no specific territory or subject matter of its own, since it is found everywhere” (3). This claim becomes evident in the work of rhetorical new materialism, which spans from the study of salmon and vultures to the rhetorical analysis of stethoscopes, books, photographs, etc. (object-oriented ontology). Rhetorical new materialism, also known as material rhetorics, stems from cultural studies’ new materialism. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost identity three themes of new materialism: 1) a posthumanist reorientation with natural science that conceives of matter as lively and agentic, 2) a biopolitical and bioethical concern with the status of life and of the human, and 3) a reengagement with political economy (6-7). At its core, new materialism is an interdisciplinary endeavor that brings together the social sciences and humanities in order to address bioethical, biopolitical, and a host of other “bio-” challenges in the twenty-first century. Most relevant for developing a rhetorical theory for I/DD is Coole and Frost’s commentary on how meaning is made manifest from a new materialist perspective. They argue that “it is evident from new materialist writing that forces, energies, and intensities (rather than substances) and complex, even random, processes (rather than simple, predictable states) have become the new currency” (13). Force, energy, and intensity is the first mode through which I argue we may begin to draw new borders around rhetorical capacity.

The notion of energy as currency was also suggested by well-respected rhetorician George Kennedy in the 1992 article "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric," around the same time that new materialism was just beginning to gain traction. In this controversial text, Kennedy reflects on his career as a teacher of rhetoric and concludes that "rhetoric is not a 'substance' in the logical sense, though … there is something found in nature that either resembles rhetoric or possibly constitutes the starting point from which it has culturally evolved" (1). Kennedy applies the concept of rhetorical energy to theses regarding the rhetoricity of animals and the natural environment. Unfortunately, Kennedy's proposal of the notion "rhetorical energy" and his claim that rhetoric may exist outside of and before language was not immediately accepted by the field. It has, however, inspired further thinking in the new century, with notable commentary and suggested revisions from Debbie Hawhee and Diane Davis. Though Kennedy's argument was not well-received by the field at the time of its publication, Hawhee argues that it is now timelier than ever thanks in large part to the acceptance of rhetorical new materialism. These challenges have been applied to an interesting subfield of animal rhetoric, but I argue that these same principles could be extended to people with I/DD.

Though the field has struggled in the past to accept such radical views of rhetoric (which, I argue, aligns with the field's long history of wrestling with what rhetoric is and who is allowed to "do" rhetoric), the acceptance of new materialism's "force, energies, and intensities" as rhetorical vehicles for dispersing meaning speaks to the current state of rhetorical theory. I argue that this kairotic moment—in which rhetorical theory has

embraced the tenets of new materialism and begun producing posthuman scholarship—positions us to extend this scholarship to the study of intellectual disability. The timeline that has allowed rhetorical new materialism to manifest conveniently aligns with the simultaneous rise of disability rhetoric from earlier iterations of disability studies as broad academic inquiry. By turning to the tenets of new materialism and the rhetoric-specific philosophies therein—beginning with a view of rhetoric constituted by "force, energies, and intensities"—we may begin to piece together a theory of rhetoric that welcomes people with I/DD as rhetors. One way to conceive of this mode for rhetoric is by *de-prioritizing speaking* and *emphasizing listening.* To get at the core of what new materialism might bring to the practice of "listening" to disability, however, we must first trace its feminist roots.

Listening to Disability

Benefiting from the impact of second-wave feminism and its attention to equal legal and social rights, disability studies is a natural friend to feminist research. De-prioritizing speaking and emphasizing listening descends from feminist scholarship, which I will briefly discuss here. Feminism and disability studies share similar goals of decentering normalcy by writing in diverse bodies and minds in our past, present, and future landscape. In 2002, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson called for the "integration" of feminist theory and disability studies, and Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson have since argued that "feminism and disability studies ought to be powerful allies" (23). The critical alliance between the two enterprises is well underway. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, for example, was one of the

first texts to articulate gender as a context-specific performance and was highly influential in the understanding disability as a socially and culturally constructed aspect of identity (Yergeau et al. 124). Likewise, feminist social justice advocate Nancy Mairs has published both fictional and autobiographical poems and essays on womanhood, motherhood, and multiple sclerosis that helped bring women's experiences—especially disabled experiences—to the public's attention. The rhetorical tradition that has long viewed women's bodies as unfit for civic debate, useful moreso as objects of inquiry than as active subjects, and generally deficient. Feminist scholarship has tirelessly worked to disrupt these significations. Likewise, disability studies scholarship has investigated the meanings assigned to disabled bodies, which have also been objectified by the medical gaze and deemed inadequate.

Disability studies and feminism have much to offer to one another, especially within the field of rhetoric. A persistent tension in feminist rhetorical research centers on the risk of essentializing and/or normativizing the category of woman, which played out in a debate between Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Barbara Biesecker. Eileen Schell summarizes this conversation as a tension between Campbell's argument for women rhetors "to be considered on their own terms, rather than always in relation to a male dominated rhetorical tradition" and Biesecker's concern of the risk of recovering individual women rhetors—who were likely wealthy, educated, or otherwise elevated in society—while neglecting the collective efforts of women to turn the tide (12-13). I side with Biesecker who largely was arguing for a postmodern approach by interrogating the internal and external conditions that allowed discourse to emerge, as opposed to

individual contributions. Michelle Baliff has echoed this skepticism of recovery efforts, arguing that "to provide Woman with a history is to increase her value by making her legitimate, by giving her a proper name, by locating her within a proper family, by situating her in a proper narrative" (91-92). For Baliff, recovery efforts are problematic because they seek "to make proper"—thus reinforcing the patriarchal system that excluded women in the first place. Instead of simply adding women into our history, Baliff proposes something different: "But perhaps Woman can (un)speak in the unthought, not-yet-thought, non-spaces produced by alternative paradigms, by new idioms, by paralogical and paratactical and, thus, illegitimate discourses" (96). Baliff does not delineate clear steps for conducting this kind of research, but does pose provocative questions for researchers:

> What unrecognized possibilities could we explore if our narratives had no syllogistic, metonymic, linear or triangular structure? If we broke the sequence (and the sentence)? If the subject wasn't coherent, unified, and whole? If there was no hero? If there was no developmental model? If there were no binaries, no either/or alternatives? If there was no cure? If there was no developmental model? If there were no binaries, no either/or alternatives? What if there were no conditions of a narrative, no universal criteria for judging the Truth or legitimacy of a narrative? (96)

Though this passionate discussion on what directions feminist historical research should take occurred nearly thirty years ago, I believe this tension is one that feminist rhetoricians still wrestle with. I also argue that disability studies is poised to provide

insight on how researchers might dwell on the meaning in "illegitimate discourses," such as those used by my Uncle David to communicate with those around him.

Disability studies specializes in illegitimate discourses and has helped advance critical discourse analysis as a way to understand them. In an early collection, *Disability Discourse*, editors Mairian Corker and Sally French interrogate the social model of disability, which draws a distinction between disability (a socially created concept) and impairment (a physical attribute). The social model has served as a counter to the long-held medical model of disability which positions disability as a flaw in need of treating, curing, or eradicating. Though the social model has made positive contributions by dispersing the responsibility of accessibility and inclusivity to the social and cultural environment, it has also enforced a troubling dichotomy that values disability and marginalizes impairment (2). While the social model wants to separate disability from impairment, Corker and French argue that they are clearly discursively related: "In practice it is very difficult to 'talk' about disability without referring to impairment, and because the 'impaired body' is both a site of discourse production and a site onto which cultural discourses are projected" (4). Drawing such distinctions between disability and impairment, they argue, devalues the role of discourse in producing and challenging oppression. The narratives in *Disability Discourse* thus offer ways to knit together the discursive relations between disability and impairment, such as by asking a question like this one: "how do the practical consequences of hearing impairment, such as the inability to understand voice announcements at a railway station, affect the identity and social relationships of hearing-impaired people? Conversely, how do beliefs about the material

aspects of hearing impairment influence the activities and opportunities of hearing-impaired people?" (7). I offer this overview of *Disability Discourse* as an example of the kinds of questions being posed in disability studies research that feminist research could learn from, especially the kind of research Michelle Baliff has called us to do in which there are no binaries, no either/or alternatives. My focus, however, is *listening* to disability; in order to piece together the rhetoricity of intellectual disability, it is important to see how feminist rhetoricians have impacted the paradigm of listening.

Brenda Jo Brueggemann defines rhetoric as "not just the art of 'see[ing] all the available means of persuasion in each case' but, moreover, the use of those available means to construct the boundaries between cultures, communities, and disciplines and thereby between selves" (2). Brueggemann applies this definition to argue for the rhetoricity of deaf people who have long been denied rhetorical ability due to their natural silence. Most pertinent to my purposes is how Brueggemann studies deafness and the "problems" that deafness poses "for a cultural imperative to speak and speak well" (11). Brueggemann interrogates rhetoric's "will to speech" and instead offers rhetoric as a "will to listen," a concept that moves rhetoric away from the speaker and to the listener. Krista Ratcliffe echoes this sentiment and expands what she coins "rhetorical listening" to signify "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural conduct" which serves as a productive pathway for rhetorical invention (1). Cheryl Glenn narrowed in on the weight of silence in listening, calling upon rhetoricians working to enrich the rhetorical tradition to "locate, discover, stumble over, and then open up silences" (151). Glenn qualifies that "we live inside the act of discourse, to be sure, but

we cannot assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind take place—regardless of the measure of inward or outward persuasion" (153). In all three of these projects, Brueggemann, Ratcliffe, and Glenn problematize the historical focus on the intention of the speaker by elevating the intellectual process of the listener in order to imagine a more welcoming futuristic rhetoric. Listening—especially to silences and non-verbal modes of communication—is but one tenet of a revised rhetorical tradition that may account for I/DD. Listening to disability means acknowledging silences and "illegitimate" discourses as moments of rhetorical possibility.

Feeling Disability

When David lived at the institution, he had a job working at a nearby thrift store hanging clothes. He loved the social aspect of walking to and from the store and, of course, being around other people. The repetition helped him structure his day and establish a routine; he also loved feeling the fabrics as he put them on the hanger. When my mother would bring David to our home for the weekend, she would do her best to make the environment feel more familiar to him, which sometimes included packing some clothes with him to carry throughout the day. Having the fabrics to feel helped him feel grounded. We also would often bring him to church on Sunday mornings because he loved to sing and clap with the music. Fortunately, we attended a small church and most everyone knew and loved David, so they weren't bothered when he would shout or laugh during odd times of the service. One Sunday morning, he had stuffed a clean pair of underwear into his pants pocket. During the sermon, out of nowhere, David stood up and

swung the underwear around like a lasso. He loved cowboys and old Western films, and something about the sermon made him want to rope a calf. This was also shortly after SORC was shut down and David had been moved into a group home, so he was feeling unsettled and was more prone to outbursts. My mother was horrified at the incident, but in hindsight it was incredibly funny.

David was very tactile. In addition to fabrics, he had a fascination with magazines. The clothes had a clear connection to his job at the thrift store, but we are unsure why he had an affinity for magazine pages. While living at SORC, he would confiscate any magazine he found at the institution, rip out all the pages, fold them in a repetitive pattern, and stuff them in his pockets. Whatever he could not fit in his pockets he would hoard in his closet. To this day we are unsure why David did this, but it was one of his funny habits that brought him comfort. My mother believes it to be a sign of undiagnosed autism in addition to his profound intellectual disability. Whatever the cause may be, David has a strong attachment to touching things–whether it be paper, fabrics, or loved ones. He was unable to share his feelings or thoughts through language, so he relied on what "available means" were left–most often, that was touch.

Shannon Walters's *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics* brilliantly introduces touch as a rhetorical act (and an integral one at that) by reexamining rhetorical histories, particularly those laid out by Empodecles, Aristotle, and Burke. Similar to my own purposes in this dissertation project, Walters works to "[question] the accepted model of the able, autonomous, independent rhetor and [disturb] the boundaries and bodies of rhetoric" (19). Rhetorical touch, for Walters, is "a potential for

identification among bodies of diverse abilities that takes place in physical, proximal, and/or emotional contact" (3). Most interesting to me is Walters's exploration of Burke's theory of identification from a disability studies perspective when she calls upon the famous quote (at least to rhetoricians) from *A Rhetoric of Motives*: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (21). Burke explains how language includes "common sensations, concepts, image, ideas, attitudes" which leads to people becoming "consubstantial with one another" (21). For Walters, one of these common sensations is touch, which she argues is a "particularly productive means of consubstantiality and identification" (11). Virtually all creatures–human and nonhuman–communicate through touch whether or not those messages are consciously sent. People with disabilities, however, are more likely to intentionally use touch as a rhetorical vehicle–they "often actively employ their senses of touch in diverse ways to relate to others and to establish a sense of their own bodies in the world" (6). David related to others through touch, primarily through hugs, high-fives, and leaning on shoulders. He never met a stranger; he embraced any human he came into contact with, even when his presence made others uncomfortable. Likewise, David used touch to self-soothe, sometimes in ways that we did not always understand. The hordes of magazine pages still puzzle us, but for David these ripped and folded squares of paper were meaningful and comforting. It is easy to write off these habits as simple quirks, but Walters argues that such common sensations *are* rhetorical–they "convey messages, craft character, and create emotion in a way that fosters a potential for identification among toucher and

touched" (3). Defining touch as an epistemic, rhetorical act is important not only because it widens the scope of what meaning-making sites rhetoricians can explore, but it also "makes rhetoric accessible to a wider range of bodies and minds," and therefore challenges the oft-discriminatory rhetorical tradition as we know it (4). Touch as a rhetorical act is an embodiment of "rhetorical energy" that George Kennedy proposed in 1992 and is an example of the force, energy, and intensity of new materialism. Furthermore, viewing touch as rhetorical is a way to conceive of people with I/DD as being *already* participatory in rhetoric, as opposed to developing a theory that *grants* rhetoricity to them, which Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson discourages in "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities."

As I have seen with my own family member, rhetoric "happens" in the in-between. For those of us close to David, we knew what certain sounds signified. What may be incomprehensible to a stranger was clear to us. He was hungry, or tired, or frustrated. If he was pacing the room in a certain way it was because he was experiencing a strong emotion. Often we were able to determine his needs and wants through his utterances or through physical touch. Other times, though, we were left with even fewer clues. It was clear that something would be wrong–or off–but David gave us no information. Schedules, information from his caregivers, and/or other material signals helped us piece together how to best support him. Without words and without touch, what is left? Rhetoric seems to fall apart without even these minimum linguistic markers. However, there are still pathways. Though not within the context of disability, rhetoricians and folks in communication studies have begun to explore this territory, with

such keywords as “ambient” and “ecology.” Moving toward the rhetoricity of intellectual disability not only involves listening and feeling, but *sensing*.

Sensing Disability

Listening to disability and feeling disability converge when we *sense* disability. One way to piece together how this takes place is to frame rhetoric as ecological. Similarly, Thomas Rickert argues for what he calls “ambient rhetoric,” an approach that “no longer sees rhetoric as a direct extension of human will or human meaning making” (254). This view breaks down the commonplace understanding of rhetoric “as a discursive exchange between contextually arranged but otherwise disparate rhetorical agents” (254). Instead, rhetoric emerges from the ambient environment—essentially engendering what new materialists call “flat ontology” in which all objects (human and non-human) are equally valued and equally agentic. My contention is this: if we as a field have decided to “give objects their due,” should we not likewise be compelled to broaden the limits of rhetorical capacity to fellow humans who may not communicate conventionally? I intentionally use the language of capacity here as a nod to communication scholars Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy. In “Thinking Ecologically about Rhetoric’s Ontology,” Stormer and McGreavy propose a shift away from rhetorical agency (static) to rhetorical capacity (dynamic), arguing that in doing so “we revise the commonplace for discussing qualities that empower rhetoricity, emphasizing the ecology of entanglements between entities over the abilities that are inherent to humans” (5). Stormer and McGreavy are not writing with disability in mind, but I argue that the framework of rhetoric as ecology offers relevant and helpful entry

points for a rhetorical theory that accounts for cognitive impairments. The "entanglements" of such rhetorical ecologies may help us move toward answering the questions of authorial intent for rhetors with I/DD. Stormer and McGreavy further explain that "rhetoric's ontology, approached ecologically, considers qualities of relations between entities, not just among humans, that enable different modes of rhetoric to emerge, flourish, and dissipate" (3). Though the authors are pushing toward ecological rhetoric that is formed by and with environmental factors, I argue that we should likewise think about ecological rhetoric as formed between and among humans of different abilities. To move in this direction, I find it helpful to look to examples laid out by scholars working at the intersection of rhetoric and critical animal studies, who are experts in listening to the non-verbal, to mediated communication, to what feminist rhetoricians might call "illegitimate discourses."

Before briefly exploring the world of animal rhetoric, I want to acknowledge the danger in drawing comparisons between people and animals, especially for vulnerable populations who have been historically deemed alien or non-human. However, I have embraced (at least temporarily) new materialism's flat ontology that rejects any hierarchy that positions humans above animals, humans above the earth, etc. Within this flat ontology, which bears striking resemblance to an Indigenous worldview, I am attempting to investigate the "entanglements" of rhetoric to discover the possibilities of a rhetoric for people with I/DD. Within this philosophy, we are all animals–some of us are human and some of us are nonhuman. Typically, new materialist scholarship refers to rhetorical

beings that do not use language as nonhuman; nonverbal people with intellectual disabilities blur this line. For rhetoricians, blurry lines are ripe for analysis.

Bridging the Human and the Nonhuman

In a 2010 *Radiolab* podcast, hosts Robert Krulwich and Jad Abumrad begin the episode *Animal Minds* at a New York Catholic church on St. Francis Day of the Animals, a day for congregants to bring their pets (ranging from hermit crabs to barn owls to bulls) to be blessed by a priest, ensuring that their soul will be at peace when the animal dies. Krulwich and Abumrad speak with a few participants, asking probing questions about their beliefs regarding their animals' souls. One owner believes, "It's a thinking being. They're as smart as we are, really." Another owner notes her dog's intuition and loyalty: "When I'm feeling sad he comes in the bed, and he lays down spine to spine with me, and he just doesn't leave my side." Another equates the blessing of the pets to baptizing babies. For her, the blessing ensures that when her pet passes she will have a place in heaven. The hosts wonder, though, if these participants are presuming a bit too much: "[Are] the animals they love going to feel the grace of prayer, or feel the blessing… all those things you might feel in a church, grace, gratitude, guilt. Can the animals feel those things too? How much can we share? And can you measure it?" This introductory scene foregrounds the focus of this episode, which is on fisherman Mick Menago and a humpback whale who has allegedly learned to say thank you.

The whale had become entangled in crab gear and was close to death. Menago gathered a group of people to assist the whale. Menago and the crew slowly but surely sawed off the ropes while they observed her closely tracking them with her eyes. As soon

as she was freed the whale disappeared into the ocean and the crew celebrated their hours-long efforts. Suddenly, the whale reappeared and rose up quickly toward one of the crew members, James Moskito. Fearful, Moskito was stunned when the whale did not harm them:

> When she was only inches away from my chest... She stopped. And pushed me on the chest backwards, and then released me, and then kind of pushed again, and then release, and pushed again, and again. And then she swam up right next to me, puts her head up above the water so that her eye was above the water, and then came up and looked directly at me. The pupil didn't move around. She wasn't looking for anything else. She was just looking at me. It, it really was a, a very emotional feeling. You know I wasn't quite sure what to make out of it, make of it.

The whale then proceeded to share the same encounter with each of the crew members. She would arrive just a few inches away from each diver to look at them, let them touch her, and then swim to the next one–one by one. Hosts Abumrad and Krulwich ask what the divers think the whale was doing, to which they respond, as if it is obvious, “This mammal, this 50 ton mammal was literally saying thanks.” The hosts, moved by the story, want to believe that the whale was, in fact, saying thank you, but are reasonably speculative. Therefore, an animal psychology expert is brought onto the show, Clive Wynn.

As an animal lover, Wynn is hesitant to emphatically deny that the whale is expressing thanks to the divers. However, as an animal psychologist, he is likewise

hesitant to say with any surety that the whale *is* communicating gratitude, most of all because he "[doesn't] speak whale." Ascribing emotions to animals, for Clive, is an unuseful way to understand animals and, in fact, demeans them. Doing so denies the diversity of species in the world, who all have their own unique ways of communicating within their own species and to other species. Centralizing human experiences by claiming an animal is capable of expressing gratitude diminishes the inherent brilliance and beauty of animals. To add more complexity, the hosts also interview neuroscientist Patrick Hoff who discusses the brain-y layer of this conversation, particularly the discovery of spindle cells. These cells, which are found in the brains of chimpanzees, elephants, dolphins, gorillas, and whales, give the brains "people-like" features and suggest an "inner-life" capable of emotions similar to those experienced by humans. Hoff also discusses how humpback whales depend heavily on their clans: "The males have a song. They hunt together, they develop hunting strategies, which requires perfect coordination of many whales, so they have to act together to do that." The hosts highlight this "acting together" and the embedded complex social structures that necessitate it. The takeaway from this neuroscientist perspective is that the presence of spindle cells in both humans and select animals suggests that it *might be* possible to legitimately claim that animals and humans have "cross species sharing [moments]." Animal psychologist Wynn denies the theory that the presence of spindle cells warrants the belief that any species of animals has a certain psychological capacity; rather, Wynn argues that developmental experiences (such as a dog growing up in a home with humans) determines an animal's psychological capacity. Essentially, we've come down to a nature vs. nurture argument.

All this to say–the scientific community does not agree on the possibility of cross-species communication. But what might the humanities say?

I've summarized this very interesting story to bring a highly theoretical conversation into an existing question that involves the public and scientists alike. There is *something* there that suggests humans and animals communicate, that meaning is being co-produced between entities, but the science does not quite add up. Rhetoric has much to offer this conversation, which will position us to get to the crux of a specific debate within the disability community. If we return to George Kennedy's influential "A Hoot in the Dark," and subsequent scholarship on creaturely rhetorics, we may begin to articulate how rhetoric functions between species. Kennedy made bold strides in the field of rhetoric by making the claim that rhetoric may exist *outside of* and *before* language. Theorizing rhetoric as a presence and a force that is not limited by alphabetic text opens up rhetoricity for animals and for nonverbal people alike–any being who may not communicate through conventional means. Kennedy goes so far as to say that rhetoric "in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication and is biologically prior to speech" (2). These bold words were not well-received by all critics, however. Diane Davis, for example, disagrees with Kennedy's pure biological essentialism and instead argues for:

> an always prior rhetoricity, an affect*ability* or persuad*ability* that is due not to any creature's specific genetic makeup but to a corporeality more generally, to the exposedness of corporeal existence. To be affectable, persuadable, is to be always already affected, persuaded, which means:

> always already responsive. Rhetoric is not first of all an essence or property *in* the speaker (a natural function of biology) but an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality. (89)

Despite Davis's contention with Kennedy's theory of rhetorical energy, I will engage this theory in order to make connections between existing scholarship on creaturely rhetorics and the possibility of a nonverbal human rhetoric.

To begin, Kennedy explains his goal for identifying "some of the universal rules of the rhetorical code" while adding new ones to the mix (3). For one, he posits that "rhetorical energy is not found only in language. It is present also in physical actions, facial expressions, gestures, and signs generally" (4). To flesh out this theory, Kennedy offers several theses about rhetoric that complicate, expand, and even defy traditional understandings of rhetoric's purpose and function. Though these theses originate from and support theories about animal rhetoric, I find that their ingenuity offers useful ways of thinking about human rhetoric, especially how people with intellectual disabilities use rhetoric. The first of Kennedy's theses is that rhetoric is prior to speech, based on his claim that "speech would not have evolved among human beings unless rhetoric already existed" (4). To me, this rings true when considering the length and breadth of human civilization, especially the hundreds of languages that have developed throughout our planet. From a logical standpoint, rhetoric *must* pre-date language if productive communication was ever able to gain traction in ancient civilizations with limited vocabulary, if any vocabulary at all. Situating rhetoric as a force that can exist without

the bounds of alphabetic text validates the claim that nonverbal beings whose communicative practices do not conform to the normed rhetorical situation can and do participate in rhetoric, regardless of their ability to understand or formulate words.

Kennedy also acknowledges the doubt that readers may have. He writes that "there is no room for doubt that animals communicate among their own species and with other species; what is in doubt is the extent of their intentionality and consciousness of sending and receiving messages and the resulting question of whether some animals have a sense of self and of mental individuality" (6). This doubt echoes the complaints that autistic rhetorician M. Remi Yergeau has against the depiction of autistic people as non-rhetors, as they write in *"*Clinically Significant Disturbance: On Theorists Who Theorize Theory of Mind:

> I am bombarded with representations of autistic people as non-rhetors—as non-rhetors who cannot emote (goodbye pathos), as non-rhetors who cannot recognize the mental states nor visualize the needs of the people around them (goodbye ethos), as non-rhetors whose logics are so mechanistic and rigid that their only comparable non-rhetor analogues are robots and chimpanzees (goodbye, logos). As a rhetorician, I am supposed to understand autism as a limit case, one that signifies everything that rhetoric is not. I am supposed to understand that autism is the antithesis of narrative. As a rhetorician, I am supposed to understand that autism prevents me from being a rhetorician.

Though Kennedy was referencing the doubt that animals maintain intentionality and consciousness in exercising rhetorical agency, similar thought processes occur when pondering the rhetoricity of people with intellectual disabilities and neurological conditions like autism. Animals and people with disabilities alike are sold short. To counter this doubt, Kennedy proposes a "deep universal rhetoric" that unites animal communication and human communication. He argues that "animals, whether for physical or mental reasons, do not naturally employ human language, though some birds can learn to do so for limited purposes, and conversely human beings are inept in employing most systems of animal communication" (6). Here, Kennedy acknowledges that animal language and human language are not one in the same; however, it is also true that *rhetoric* and *language* are not one in the same. To remedy this dissonance, Kennedy writes that "we can, however, by observation learn to understand animal rhetoric and many animals can understand some features of human rhetoric that they share with us, such as gestures or sounds that express anger or friendliness or commands" (6) This ability to understand animal rhetoric through gestures or sounds engage what he calls the "universal rhetoric." Kennedy would likely argue that such universal rhetoric was being exercised between the whale and the crew that saved her. I propose that furthering an understanding of universal rhetoric beyond a human-animal relationship would be a useful and productive way to begin repairing Cartesian mind/body dualism and thus theorizing rhetoricity for people with intellectual disabilities.

Kennedy also asks, "What is the meaning of a particular communication by an animal? Since conscious intent cannot be assumed in the case of most animal

communication, the answer is that the 'meaning' is the interpretation given to the communication by another animal" (7). In the case of animals in nature, an animal assigning meaning to another animal is not necessarily a problematic occurrence. For the case of people with intellectual disabilities, however, another human's assigned meaning and/or assumed intent is more complicated. Following the thesis that rhetoric is prior to speech, Kennedy further explains that "the receiver's interpretation of a communication is prior to the speaker's intent in determining the meaning [and that] in nature the meaning of what the receiver does is a result of receiving the message, which should be some comfort to the pragmatist school of philosophers" (7). It is within this claim that I believe many dissenters may have the strongest foothold in rejecting a synthesis of animal rhetoric and the rhetoric of people with intellectual disabilities. By shifting the authority of determining meaning to the receiver and away from the speaker (such as I have suggested in de-prioritizing speaking and emphasizing listening), the validity and legitimacy of rhetorical agency is once again brought into question. This is the exact tension that has surfaced in the debates regarding facilitated communication.

The controversy of facilitated communication symbolizes the difficulty of translating animal rhetoric to human rhetoric in terms of determining meaning from nonverbal, nonlinguistic rhetoric—the role of the author/originator of discourse becomes hazy. Kennedy's claim that theories about rhetoric in nature "run somewhat counter to the claim of Aristotle and his successors that the function of rhetoric is not persuasion but observing the available means of persuasion. A speech may not succeed, but in Aristotle's view may still be the best possible speech and demonstrate the speaker's

rhetorical skill" (8). Overall, Kennedy's theories about rhetoric do not completely translate to the problems within the field of rhetoric pertaining to its exclusion of rhetors with intellectual disabilities. Yet, these theories still function as a springboard for expanding thought. Kennedy best summarizes his approach to rhetoric in this way:

> There … appears to be some features of communication in common among many species, including human beings, apparently favored by natural selection in evolution from the earliest forms of life. These various features are vehicles, techniques, or rules of rhetoric, which itself is a form of energy driven by a basic instinct to survive. Research on the forms of rhetoric in nature can be a first step toward a theory of general rhetoric and a comprehensive history of its development. The study of rhetoric is essentially distinct from the study of speech or language, which rhetoric has exploited. (20)

By discussing Kennedy's ideas about animal rhetoric, we may join in his cause of developing a theory of general rhetoric that may help us conceptualize a discourse that includes diverse forms of communication.

Many years later, Debbie Hawhee weighed in on this conversation and noted its untimeliness. Despite the confusion and controversy that it stirred within the field, Hawhee finds that Kennedy's attention to animals produced three crucial challenges to the field: "first, it shifts attention from 'wordy' language to language rendered with calls, tones, facial expressions, band bodies. Second, it posits rhetoric as energetic intensity, a

movement, or an urge to move others. And finally, the speaker or author takes a back seat to the audience. Or better said, the speaker is kicked to the curb" (82). Though Kennedy's argument was not well-received by the field at the time of its publication, Hawhee argues that now, it is timelier than ever. In "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric," Hawhee reignites the discussion of creaturely rhetorics and attempts to further its claims in a more welcoming time for such radical scholarship. "A Hoot in the Dark," Hawhee writes, "leaves room for more specific considerations of nonhuman rhetoric, and one might as well begin such an effort with Aristotle, whose zoological writings shaped the knowledge of bestial bodies, lives, and activities for subsequent generations" (83). Hawhee, then, moves forward this discussion by engaging Aristotle's work in a way that might make this discussion possible. However, this is not possible without first suspending our belief about Aristotle's unwavering dedication to a humanist, rational rhetoric (83). Furthermore, Hawhee notes that while rhetorical energy is the greatest legacy of George Kennedy's contentious article, it is important to understand that "rhetorical energy resides in places where human animals may not even tread" (85). It is here where my own scholarly endeavors become even more challenging. In opposition to Hawhee, I argue that humans *may* tread. From a normed understanding of the human condition, which generally excludes bodies and minds with disabilities, perhaps rhetorical energy is not a place where humans may tread. From a disability studies perspective, however, I argue that rhetorical energy is key to developing an understanding of nonverbal rhetoric. But, what does all this animal talk have to do with disability? Here is a place where we benefit from

the esteemed Temple Grandin–an author, speaker, and professor of animal science who is also autistic.

In her famous TED talk, "The World Needs all Kinds of Minds," Grandin begins by stating that "[understanding] animals, autism, and art requires getting away from verbal language." Grandin herself thinks in pictures rather than alphabetic text, and excelled as a young child in hands-on activities and work with visual elements. Though Grandin's differing way of engaging with the world made her childhood difficult, eventually it led her to making critical improvements in how livestock are handled because of her ability to think through technical designs and her attunement with animal behavior. In an interview preceding a lecture at Stanford University, Grandin explains that "verbal language is not required for communication with animals" and that "animal cognition has similarities to autism cognition." She recalls how many parents of nonverbal children confide in her that their child has an almost "telepathic" connection with their dog. In response, Grandin explains that it is not telepathy–"Instead, the child is observing subtle body posture changes that many people do not notice. The child is observing detailed changes in the dog's behavior." In such settings, I argue the child is using their "available means" to engage in the universal/general rhetoric that George Kennedy theorized: they are listening, feeling, and sensing to co-produce meaning with the dog. Just like the whale may have been listening, feeling, and sensing to co-produce meaning with the crew that saved her. Scholars Todd Rohan and Maria Hynes help lend credence to this line of thinking from a Sociology perspective, arguing that the "encounter" with the animal "demands an acknowledgement of the limits of our humanist

frames of thought." Much like I am examining disability itself in order to uproot many of rhetoric's disciplinary assumptions, Rohan and Hynes are sifting through Grandin's quasi-scientific public writings in order to uproot many of Sociology's disciplinary assumptions regarding animals. Using Grandin's discussions of her relationship with animals, and her writings on slaughterhouses and animal violence, they argue that the questions at stake are at the level of ontology. It is here where we see flecks of Kennedy's universal rhetoric emerging, traces of Shannon Walter's rhetorical touch, currents of Thomas Rickert's ambient rhetoric. According to Rohan and Hynes, "Grandin is able to reconcile her understandings of livestock animality by relaying the intensities of experience through language, but only after being fully immersed in the first instance into a world populated with sensorial ebbs and flows, intensities of touch and pressure, agitations and anxieties." Together with animals, Grandin experiences the world differently than neurotypical people. In her own words, "We [autists and animals] see the details that make up the world, while normal people blur all those details together into their general concept of the world" (qtd. In Rohan and Hynes). For Rohan and Hynes, Grandin brings a "more emergent mode of thinking… [she] gestures toward the inadequacies of the representational thinking at the heart of humanism and its penchant for perceptual and conceptual abstraction." Grandin's attunement to the details of life, in conjunction with her visual thinking and sensorial attunement brings to life my view of a rhetorical ontology of intellectual disability. It is ecological. It requires listening, but in ways that put pressure on established paradigms and hierarchies of speaker and listener. It involves touch and bodily sensorial experiences that don't quite fit into the rhetorical

situation. It is posthuman. However, as Jennifer Clary-Lemon writes in *Planting the Anthropocene*, referencing Scott Barnett and Casey Boyle, "the attunement to nonhumans and things may move us outward from a humanist frame–a posthuman turn–yet… 'it need not be an a*nti*human one' (134)."

I would like to end this section by pivoting to Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's 1995 proposal for what they call "invitational rhetoric." Foss and Griffin describe their theory of invitational rhetoric as a way for "rhetors to disengage from the dominance and mastery so common to a system of oppression and to create a reality of equality and mutuality in its place, allowing for options and possibilities not available within the familiar, dominant framework" (17). Though many of the specifics of this theory are not necessarily applicable to the ontology of intellectual disability, there are two facets that I find particularly relevant: trust and shared accountability. Invitational rhetoric is essentially a counter to the view of rhetoric as a rigid process of persuading and asserting power over an audience, a process in which people with I/DD would likely not be able to participate under the traditionally prescribed conditions. From the purview of invitational rhetoric, rhetoric is relational. Rhetors and audiences work together to think about an issue "so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity" (5). To me, invitational rhetoric works alongside the ambient, ecological, energetic functions of new materialism, but with a stronger focus on collaborative meaning-making. In both invitational rhetoric (which is fundamentally feminist) and rhetorical new materialism, we see the devaluing of any one entity. Rather, the burden of making meaning and interpreting meaning is equally dispersed. From my

perspective, sharing the burden of rhetorical invention is critical for the future of rhetorical theory, including a future that makes space for people who have been excluded rhetorical capacity. Invitational rhetoric pairs well with the disability justice principle of interdependence, which I argue is key to developing an understanding of the rhetoricity of intellectual disability. Thus far, in this chapter I have discussed a slew of rhetorical theories, concepts, and arguments swarming around disability, language, and human and nonhuman entities. In an attempt to reach some level of synthesis I will now dive into a specific controversy within the disability community: facilitated communication.

The Controversy of Facilitated Communication

Debating Authorship: What is FC?

When stumbling over their thoughts of whether or not the whale was truly expressing gratitude to the divers who saved her, host Robert Krulwich said, “So maybe she was just psyched… I really don't know what she.. I don't feel completely comfortable just saying... of course, I know what I want to feel.” Such sentiments of *wanting* to believe the entity was actually communicating, but feeling pulled to resort to more logical explanations for the behavior is strikingly similar to the heated debate surrounding facilitated communication. Just as in the numerous scientific studies and postulations made by psychologists and neuroscientists regarding human-animal communication, we still haven’t come to an agreement on whether facilitated communication is “real”; whether or not it is “ethical” is even more complicated. Most scientists disapprove of the practice, but many researchers and members of the disability community (including both nonverbal people themselves and loved ones of nonverbal people) argue that it is valid

and life-saving, and that its effectiveness cannot accurately be assessed by controlled studies. A persistent problem in this debate is that there is (and will always be) a degree of unknowability. Just as in creaturely rhetorics, we reach a point where all we can do is speculate. For animal science, there is a relatively low level of harm to animals in assuming that we can truly communicate with them. For nonverbal people, however, the harm can be (and has been) significant. I will not reach a definitive answer on whether or not facilitated communication is "real," and I will not make suggestions on whether or not the practice should continue. Such claims are outside of my expertise. Rather, I seek to apply the rhetorical concepts discussed in this chapter in order to enter into this conversation. It is always my goal to join theory with praxis, and analyzing this issue through the lens of rhetorical theory and disability studies is one way to work toward this goal.

Facilitated Communication (FC) is one issue that makes understanding the rhetoricity of intellectual disability so sticky. The practice has received much scrutiny from the scientific community despite the praises of many families of disabled individuals. Facilitated communication may take many different forms, as it suits the individual person's unique impairment, but it is premised on physical and/or emotional support provided by a second party in order to aid an individual to communicate, perhaps through typing, holding their hands, or pointing to pictures. Most often, the facilitator observes their behaviors (ex. posture or eye movements) and assists their movements, such as slowing or stabilizing their hands, in order to type on a keyboard and convey messages. FC became popular in Australia in the 1970s by special educator Rosemary

Crossley, though state health authorities disapproved of the practice. A decade later, Education scholar Douglas Biklen brought the practice to the United States and has remained a vocal proponent. He argues that facilitated communication has been especially helpful for individuals with autism, cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, and other disabilities that may affect the ability to perform motor tasks. However, the notion of facilitated communication as "authentic" discourse has been controversial, with some dissenters going so far as to call it a "hoax" or "pseudoscience." The main disagreement comes down to authorship: Are people with disabilities who use FC the authors of their own communication, or is an aide influencing the individual's communication? Secondly, critics take issue with the perceived lack of repeatability; i.e. if an autistic person cannot communicate consistently without facilitated communication in various situations, then the validity of the practice should be questioned. Many controlled studies conducted in the 1990s fiercely discredit FC on the grounds that participants repeatedly failed the researchers' tests. Biklen takes issue not only with the attempt to "legitimate" facilitated communication, but the conditions under which the conclusions were drawn. Many factors persist for Biklen, such as the disabled individuals' inexperience with test taking–including self-confidence–and the power relations between the test-giver and test-taker. He argues that in each of the investigations, "the test taker, like the clinic child, is portrayed in a position of ambiguity. That is, the test will presumably determine whether the person can communicate or not. The test giver, on the other hand, holds a position of legitimacy, not only to judge the test taker but also to determine the standards by which the test taker will be judged" (28). Furthermore, requiring test takers to answer "Where

do you live?" or "What is this a picture of?" does not answer the larger question at hand: "Are people who use facilitated communication able to convey their own thoughts?" (29). Too many variables were not accounted for in these studies, including how individuals might have performed in environments more familiar to them and with closer acquaintances facilitating the test. I, myself, was not always able to interpret my uncle's communicative acts, whereas my mother was able to decipher what he wanted or needed with tremendous accuracy; his case managers and staff at his institutional home, who spent every day with him, were even more capable. The tension here bears striking resemblance to the persistent tension between qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers. Controlled studies do not always account for what lies in the margins.

I would be uneasy to confidently make claims about the validity of FC even if I had the relevant disciplinary expertise, as psychologists Weiss and Wagner argue, "facilitated communication is evanescent and fragile" (135). Even 20+ years after the series of studies were published, science writer Jonathan Jarry explains that "addressing the topic of facilitated communication in a public arena feels like walking into a military academy with a target on your back. It requires disentangling the emotions from the science, because these emotions run high." *Slate* writer David Auerbach wrote a scathing indictment of the practice in 2015 and called for the "damage" to come to an end and cease to be pushed in public schools. The "cult," as Auerbach calls it, is premised on the pseudoscientific belief that facilitators are giving profoundly disabled people a voice. According to Auerbach, "This is the core faith of FC, and its central deception and motivation. The community of believers in facilitated communication claim to be letting

the disabled speak, when they are actually stealing whatever voices they have." Many of the dissenters, such as Auerbach, are not participating members of the disability community and are invested in the debate because of their commitment to science. Auerbach himself is a software engineer and regularly writes on social issues at the intersection of humanities and technology. But what do folks inside the disability community have to say?

In 2019, the National Down Syndrome Association (NDSS) hosted a free public webinar entitled "Down Syndrome and Facilitated Communication." NDSS is only one of many associations committed to equity and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities; however, it is important to note that this group was founded by parents of children with Down syndrome, not self-advocates. Their promotion of facilitated communication is in stark contrast to many other large organizations, such as the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAID). Regarding the practice, AAID has a published statement on their website that confirms that they endorse the right of people with intellectual disabilities to self-determination, but that they do *not* support the use of facilitated communication on the grounds that "there is no scientific evidence supporting its validity, and [that] there is considerable evidence that the messages are authored by the facilitator rather than by the individual with a disability." Echoing Auerbach, they fear that FC has "the potential to effectively take away people's voices." The webinar hosted by NDSS featured Special Education scholar Dr. Christina Ashby who, notably, was trained by Douglas Biklen and serves as the director of the Center on Disability and Inclusion at Syracuse University–where

facilitated communication is fiercely championed. The presentation included testimonials from users of FC to convince webinar participants of the life-changing power of the practice. Stuart Vyse, psychologist and writer for *Skeptical Inquirer* was critical of the webinar, as were many other FC dissenters. Vyse writes:

> Ashby's presentation had all the earmarks of a belief system rather than a description of an educational technology. She repeated a popular motto of the modern FC movement, "presume competence," and she repeated the word "believe" several times in her presentation. Furthermore, she expanded the idea of presuming competence, asserting that it was also important to "construct competence": "It is not enough to believe people are capable of communicating; there are things we need to do…. So, constructing competence is something that requires action." As this quote suggests, Ashby encouraged facilitators (a) to believe these non-speaking individuals have the ability to communicate and (b) to be active when helping them—a combination that is likely to lead facilitators to control the typing while believing they are not.

What I find important from Vyse's commentary is the focus on belief. For Vyse, and most dissenters who label FC as pseudoscience, one of the main issues is that there is no real proof to back supporters' claims of FC's efficacy. The proclaimed results of FC hinge on belief with hints of hope and faith, which bears striking resemblance to the Catholic pet owners who brought their animals to be blessed, and the divers who rescued the whale and shared a moment of gratitude, or the nonverbal autistic child who seems to

share a “telepathic” connection with the family pet. All of these scenarios are held together by belief, not science, despite scientists’ efforts to either support (such as the neuroscientists who discovered spindle cells) or discredit movements that make claims regarding speaking with/for nonverbal entities. Though the science is very convincing (at least to me) that facilitated communication is not “real,” let us for a moment side with those who cling to belief.

Taking the Risk and Presuming Competence

There is always a chance that facilitators will misinterpret and/or inaccurately represent individuals’ self-expression. Even larger issues have stemmed from the practice, including a facilitator misreading an individual’s message leading to a false accusation of sexual assault against a relative, and another failitator sexually assaulting an non-communicative partner on the grounds that he gave consent through facilitated communication. Clearly, there is a very real possibility for harm from this practice. Despite the inherent risk and the controversy behind the practice, FC still takes place in the twentieth century. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, one of the foremost academic journals publishing scholarship written for, from, and about people with disabilities, has published numerous articles with various perspectives on facilitated communication. One such article, that has since been retracted, is the 2011 article written by facilitated communication user DMan Johson and his facilitator Anna Stubblefield. Johnson requires assistance from a facilitator to stabilize his body, which allows him to point to a keyboard and communicate. Johnson’s contention in the article is with detractors who argue that facilitators are the ones guiding communication, which he argues stems from

"their assumption that people who cannot talk cannot have learned language and cannot think." He argues against the assumption that "the only way to learn language is through interaction," drawing on Harvard neurologist Steven Pinker's theories about language, which is that thinking does not need communication. Johnson writes,

> I believe my knowledge of language lies in listening to people talk. I learned to use language in my head before I began communicating. But having communication helps me think more clearly. I might not be making sense in my head. Communication means I get feedback. I got my means of communication later than most people. But people know how to think in their heads before they learn to talk.

Johnson's argument is that disabled people have the innate ability to learn language even if they are not able to communicate. Facilitated communication allows him access to the world, and FC detractors operate from the assumption that "people who do not talk do not think," which is "a part of disability oppression." This article was written with the aid of Johnson's facilitator Anna Stubblefield. I cannot discuss Johnson without also mentioning Stubblefield and the *very* controversial headlines surrounding Stubblefield's sexual assault of Johnson.

Anna Stubblefield is a former philosophy professor at Rutgers. Stubblefield's parents both earned doctorates in special education, and Anna was involved in many causes benefiting people with disabilities in addition to her professional work in racial justice. Her scholarship began to focus on racism and ableism, specifically as it involves poor, black, disabled Americans, like DMan Johnson, often referred to as D.J..

Stubblefield began working with D.J. as his facilitator and championed the practice of facilitated communication. Her own article in *Disability Studies Quarterly,* published the same year as Johnson's, "Sound and Fury: When Opposition to Facilitated Communication Functions as Hate Speech" fiercely supports FC and offers a highly articulate criticism of FC detractors. The same year that these two articles were published, D.J.'s brother grew frustrated that he was not able to communicate with him the way Anna seemed to, echoing the 1990s controlled studies that "debunked" FC on the grounds that the communication is not replicable in various settings (Engber). The trouble really began a few months later when Anna approached D.J.'s brother and mother to inform them that she and D.J. had begun a romantic relationship. Stubblefield was eventually put on trial for two counts of first-degree aggravated sexual assault despite her stance that their relationship was consensual. Daniel Engber's *New York Times* feature, "The Strange Case of Anna Stubblefield" offers a comprehensive overview of what was and is a very complex series of events. Stubblefield was found guilty of assault after the jury agreed that D.J. was not capable of giving consent, despite Anna's faith in his typing. "In the language of moral philosophy," Engber writes, "she was, at best, 'culpably ignorant,'' lost in a fog of good intentions." I am not comfortable making claims about whether or not D.J. was capable of giving consent. Liam Caelyn Randall's 2021 *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* article, "Consent as Rhetorical Ability in 'The Strange Case of Anna Stubblefield'" bravely dives into this question with disability studies principles in mind, arguing that "the question of consent at the core of the Stubblefield case is ultimately then a question of rhetorical meaning-making: What are the conditions that make the

communicative act of consent possible?" This is a critical question that deserves further contextualizing, but is outside the scope of my present inquiry. I mention the Anna Stubblefield case because I do want to underscore the potential harm of facilitated communication, while also acknowledging the pesky unknowability that haunts this conversation. As I have repeatedly stated, I am not taking a firm stance on whether or not facilitated communication should continue to be practiced. I am well aware of the risks. However, we must acknowledge that the practice is still taking place despite such controversial events such as the Stubblefield situation and most of the scientific community "debunking" it. We may once again return to *Disability Studies Quarterly* for a renewed interest in facilitated communication studies.

A 2020 article by Aja McKee and Audri Sandoval Gomez, "The Voices of Typers: Examining the Educational Experiences of Individuals Who Use Facilitated Communication," offers a fresh perspective on the practice of FC in an educational setting, particularly involving autistic students. Notably, McKee and Gomez frequently cite Dr. Ashby, who presented the highly criticized webinar "Down Syndrome and Facilitated Communication." The study involved interviewing eight autistic students who used FC in their classroom (the students used FC to participate in the interview) to answer questions regarding how the students feel about their educational experiences, especially how the use of FC has changed their experiences, and what educators should know about students who type to communicate. The results of the qualitative study suggest that once students were able to type to communicate, their educational experiences dramatically improved. Many students expressed that before using typing to

communicate, they had “terrible experiences in special classes” and were “mistaken as unintelligent.” The introduction of FC seems to have helped educators develop a “presumption of competence,” which is a key phrase in the conversation around facilitated communication. Once teachers began to view students as competent, through the use of FC, a shift took place. Student Jill shared that once this shift took place, “[I was] treated better by everyone. They could know my thoughts and feelings. I can tell people what I want at school, and I can work on assignments with facilitators. I feel better with FC.” In addition to improved educational experiences, students began to build meaningful relationships with their teachers, facilitators, and peers. Angie explained, “I had no real social reality until typing. I easily was my only friend. I creatively hid inside and pretended I had friends, but I did not. Long I prayed for friends. Long would run into people hoping they would notice me, but they only always saw my autism.” Of course, it is difficult to generalize results with so many variables at play, but the study suggests that despite the years of controversy, there is still hope for facilitated communication.

What I find most helpful from this study is the proclamation that “future research in FC is needed.” As I have documented, the controversy of facilitated communication is fierce. Despite how emotionally charged the debate has become, the authors argue that “academia needs to reexamine its behavior about how it treats both individuals who use this method and individuals desiring to conduct research with people who use the method. Not providing an ethical space for work to be done will not halt use of the method, but instead will sustain stagnancy of the method which continues to rise in use.” This same philosophy is echoed in the 2022 article “Presuming Autistic Communication

Competence and Reframing Facilitated Communication" by Melanie Heyworth et al., who argue that "the current dismissal of FC is rooted in ableist and outdated approaches [and that] FC research should be reconsidered and reconducted." The studies from the nineties, which were quantitative rather than qualitative, were conducted when FC was in its infancy. Thirty years later, "with co-production and neurodiversity beginning to shape autism research questions, design, and research priorities," they argue, "it is time to reassess."

Part of me wants to believe that facilitated communication is "real" and "possible" despite the mountain of scientific evidence that has debunked it. My uncle did not technically use facilitated communication devices or setups, but he often relied on institutional personnel and/or his family to communicate. Though I am not comfortable fully endorsing the practice, as a rhetorician, I am interested in the philosophical arguments embedded in the controversy, particularly regarding authorship and meaning-making. FC is certainly risky, but disentangling the practice from a rhetorical perspective may give us the opportunity to consider what a futuristic rhetoric may include in more concrete terms. Though I will not be conducting in-depth studies, I do hope to answer this call by reassessing facilitated communication. It is at this juncture where I think I may have helpful entry points to further our thinking about FC from a rhetorical perspective.

Illegitimate Discourse: Facilitated Communication, Disability, and Rhetoric

In "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities" Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson addresses the criticism she faced for precluding scholarship on intellectual disabilities in her earlier work *Embodied Rhetorics.* To open the discussion, Lewiecki-Wilson questions

how people with mental disabilities--encompassing mental illness, psychiatric disabilities, and profound intellectual disability—can exercise rhetorical agency and, even further, questions if and how a revised understanding of "rhetoricity" could improve the lives of people with disabilities (157). These questions build on the work of Brenda Jo Brueggeman, who primarily analyzes deafness and rhetoric. In *Lend Me Your Ear*, Brueggeman admits the difficulties of disentangling deafness and rhetoric, which also makes it difficult "to separate the rhetorical tradition, the theory and practice of rhetoric for some 2,500 years now, from the 'problems' that deafness poses for a cultural imperative to speak and speak well" (11). Brueggeman's scholarship informs Lewiecki-Wilson's analysis by pointing out the problem of the will to speech in rhetoric, which affects both deafness in Brueggeman's analysis and mental disabilities that inhibit the ability to understand or to produce speech as in Lewiecki-Wilson's analysis. For the latter, the rhetorical tradition and its emphasis on speaking well puts "emphasis on the individual rhetor who produces speech/writing, which in turn confirms the existence of a fixed, core self, imagined to be located in the mind" (Lewiecki-Wilson 157).

For Lewiecki-Wilson, granting "rhetoricity" to people with mental disabilities may not be through independence, productivity, or self-advocacy, as in many cases the reality of disability makes these unattainable paths for reaching equality. Instead, she argues, we should reevaluate "rhetoricity" by studying facilitated communication. Facilitated communication, or "mediated rhetoricity" as Lewiecki-calls it, harkens back to Krista Ratcliffe's notion of rhetorical listening, which involves "the active process of interpretation on the part of the audience, involving commitment and care to similarities

and differences, to other cultural logics, and to ethically responsible action" (161). For people with intellectual disabilities, rhetorical listening can take the form of close attention to a disabled person's bodily movements, sounds, interests, and disinterests (161). Most importantly, "mediated rhetoricity" requires a caring advocate who observes closely the nonverbal performances of the disabled person's everyday life and then "carefully and ethically co-constructs narratives and arguments from the perspective of the disabled person for the purpose of enhancing his or her daily life" (162). Lewiecki-Wilson's article represents the awareness of the limits of rhetoric and addresses the need to reconfigure the role of speech in discourse. The 2003 article remains one of the few texts that looks specifically at the intersection of rhetoric and profound intellectual disability. Though she called for further research, not many scholars have answered the call other than Shannon Walters (*Rhetorical Touch*) and Zosha Stuckey (*A Rhetoric of Remnants).* Here is where I believe we may circle back to defining rhetoric by its force, energy, and intensity. Doing so requires not only listening, but *feeling* and *sensing*, as I have explored in my efforts to locate a rhetorical ontology of intellectual disability. Coming back to these modes, with attention to rhetorical new materialism, helps us arrive at the disability justice principle of interdependence. As I have demonstrated, detractors of FC argue that disabled people's voices are being taken away, primarily on the grounds that facilitators are influencing their communication; they are not functioning as independent, autonomous rhetors. Though there is a very real potential for harm when facilitators take liberties with messages and/or dramatically misread communicative efforts, I must beg the question: Why must rhetors be fully independent and autonomous?

At the first conference where I presented a disability-related issue very early in my graduate studies, a scholar in the audience asked me a question that obliterated my argument in the kindest and most helpful way possible. I had written a paper that analyzed a handful of children's novels that included characters with intellectual disabilities. There already were few such novels, and I took issue with the fact that in none of the novels did these characters seem to exercise any sort of agency. I proposed creative ways for authors to give characters agency in literature, while acknowledging the risks of inauthentically or unethically representing disabled people. At the Q&A, the man asked me, "But what if we just devalue agency?" He continued to speak, but to be frank I have forgotten everything he said after this simple question. I had spent much effort thinking of ways to represent people with intellectual disabilities and make them "fit" into existing paradigms. At that time it had never occurred to me that perhaps this could work in reverse. Instead of giving characters agency by somehow making them autonomous speaking subjects, why cannot we instead reconsider the value of independence, autonomy, and speaking?

As I noodled around this question, and re-read my sources, my argument shifted and began to crystallize. I also realized Lewiecki-Wilson was largely arguing the same. Like me, she is not necessarily arguing for the practice of facilitated communication, but rather is poking holes in the arguments against FC that seek to uphold what she calls "liberal subjectivity." Even within the disability rights movement, which tends to advocate most loudly for physical disabilities rather than cognitive, liberal rhetoric is used to argue that "the goals of independence, productivity, and a voice in self-advocacy

is attainable, with social accommodations" (159). I have provided evidence of such rhetoric in chapter two of this dissertation project in JFK's call for mental retardation to be eradicated, for people to be put to work, and integrated back into society as independent, autonomous members of society. I am guilty of fantasizing about the same idyllic circumstances, but for David, this would have never been possible. People like him whose disabilities necessitate round-the-clock care and supervision would never fit into this liberal model. Lewiecki-WIlson echoes this, arguing that "even within disability communities, stigma against severely disabled people who cannot communicate remains high. For them, independence, productivity, and self-advocacy may not be the most salient paths for achieving (inter)subjectivity, satisfying human relationships, and securing dignity" (159-60). From the catastrophe of deinstitutionalization we have seen that haphazardly working toward these goals left hordes of such people suffering alone on dirty city streets. With a few articles calling for renewed research in facilitated communication, and the thriving area of rhetorical new materialism, there is great potential for carving out theoretical space for a rhetorical argument in support of facilitated communication.

As discussed, critics have scrutinized the scientific objectivity of facilitated communication, as the role of the author in producing these alternative modes of discourse is unclear. We may begin analysis of FC by pivoting back to the world of illegitimate discourse, particularly within a postmodern framework. Education scholar Nirmala Erevelles has posed important questions on this exact issue: "Are people who have been identified as cognitively disabled competent (or incompetent) to represent

themselves? Is it possible that these people can have observable physiological, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities, but also exhibit behavior and thinking that could be termed 'normal,' that is, rational?" (47). Erevelles situates the controversy as a debate between the humanist subject (which is predicated on pre-existing notions of Self, Truth, Reason) and the poststructuralist subject (who comes into being through language). If we consider the poststructuralist subject as Michel Foucault does, in that "subjectivity is not an originary force, not an originator of speech act and ideas, but rather is the constituted effect of knowledge regimes (discourses)," then we may begin to see the potential integrity of facilitated communication, regardless of whether a rhetor communicates independently or with the aid of another party (qtd. In Erevelles 48). In fact, Foucault and post-structuralist ideology has much to offer the subject.

Alongside feminism, disability studies is fundamentally grounded in postmodernism and poststructuralism. Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson argue that "disability is the essential post-modern concept, because it is so complex, so variable, co contingent, so situated. It sits at the intersection of biology and society and of agency and structure. Disability cannot be reduced to a singular identity: it is a multiplicity, a plurality" (19). A postmodern approach, then, might be most helpful in re-examining facilitated communication–specifically, Foucault's notion of enunciative modalities as described in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In this text, Foucault delineates the "rules of formation," which are the conditions by which objects become knowledge. These rules, which include the surfaces of emergence, authorities of delimitation, grids of specification, and enunciative modalities, work well as a critical apparatus for

understanding how disability (as an idea) has been formed through a complex web of socially constructed meanings and discursive tropes. For the issue of facilitated communication, I will focus on the final rule: enunciative modalities. While studying objects of discourse necessitates the study of contextual information that gives rise to those objects, the enunciative modalities of discourse–which includes considerations of speakers and their qualifications, the institutional sites from which the speaker produces discourse, and the speaker's subject position and relation to the object–should also be considered. In summary, enunciative modalities are concerned with the authenticity and authority of the speaking subject–a touchy topic within facilitated communication.

Foucault's definition of enunciative modalities in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* centers on the medical official as the speaking subject, arguing that "medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic powers, and, generally speaking, their existence as medical statements cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them, and to claim for them the power to overcome death and suffering" (1442). Though in this sense the subject refers to a medical authority of delimitation, we may apply these same principles to the authority and authenticity of the intellectually disabled person as a speaking subject—considering subjects are formed both by those who make subject to and those who are subjugated. If subjects are formed through knowledge-power relations, it is possible for a subject who does not produce conventional utterances to exercise agency (and, thus, power) through the vehicle of facilitated communication. This is only possible by a retheorizing of agency, which will require new considerations of the rhetorical situation—namely the

ethos of a rhetor. I will produce a more thorough investigation of "cripping" the rhetorical situation in chapter five. To set the stage for that conversation, though, we may pivot back to defining rhetoric by its force, energy, and intensity. The example of facilitated communication helps us do just that as it quite literally involves listening to disability, feeling it, and sensing it.

A key word for my argument is the disability justice principle of interdependence. Created by queer, disabled women of color, Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacey Milberg spearheaded "disability justice" as a response to their dissatisfaction with the disability rights movement as a whole, as it tends to reinstate exclusionary practices and ignore the needs and voices of many multiply-marginalized people within the disability community. Disability justice includes ten principles that work together to acknowledge the intersectionality of the disabled experience and examine the overlapping systems of oppression that harm multiply-marginalized people. One of these principles, interdependence, is one that I find especially relevant for my analysis of facilitated communication. The principle is as follows:

> Before the massive colonial project of Western European expansion, we understood the nature of interdependence within our communities. We see the liberation of all living systems and the land as integral to the liberation of our own communities, as we all share one planet. We work to meet each other's needs as we build toward liberation, without always reaching for state solutions which inevitably extend state control further into our lives.

Though I identify as nondisabled and do not suffer injustice in the ways members of the disability community do, I interpret this principle as a call on disabled and nondisabled people alike to work toward a cooperative effort to meet each others' needs. With my current inquiry into facilitated communication, I believe this also includes a renewed interest in facilitated communication as a potential avenue for liberation. On another level, interdependence works as the literal practice of nondisabled facilitators working alongside disabled communicators. I believe we can work to enact interdependence by synthesizing this principle with tenets of rhetorical new materialism, which likewise champions co-producing and acting together. I can be quick to dismiss FC detractors as ableist. However, I also recall making similar quick-fire judgments when I first learned of rhetorical new materialism. I vividly recall laughing out loud when hearing of heliotropic rhetoric and scholars who assigned rhetoricity to a flower bending toward the sun. I firmly rejected the view that plants could be rhetorical. Like the scholars who rejected George Kennedy's universal rhetoric, I, too, wondered what these scholars had been smoking. However, with many assigned readings and the relentless arguing of a certain professor with expertise in nostalgia, I began to recognize that I was looking through Euro-centric goggles, compounded with my positionality as a straight, white, cisgender person. When I accepted that, once again, I had been looking at this all wrong, I began to see how rhetorical new materialism could add to my working theories about intellectual disability. The rhetoricity of intellectual disability, specifically as it manifests within the practice of facilitated communication, can gain further ground by joining forces with rhetorical new materialism.

A very recent 2022 issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* includes a forum on rhetorical new materialisms, including analyses and musings by scholars moving the dial in this area, summarizing and extending knowledge of such key ideas such as "collective life," "co-production," "attunement," and "vitalism." They also remind us that though we have slapped a catchy label to the inquiry, new materialism is not new. Laurie Gries and Jennifer Clary-Lemon remind readers that for Indigenous scholars, such as Kristin Arola, these key ideas have always been present; they have always been "inherently linked to relationality while knowledge has never been divorced from the body" (142). What they argue *is* new, and what Arola discourages rhetoricians from doing, "is decentering humans to the point of contemplating the 'thereness' of things without taking into consideration their relations and involvement with humans" (142). The authors of this forum are not addressing disability, let alone facilitated communication, but the implications of the claims made in the series of essays have tremendous implications for facilitated communication, particularly the embedded questions regarding agency and authorial intent. In Carolien Gottschalk Drushke and Nathan Rivers's "Rhetorical Drift," they dabble in the same questions that haunt the facilitated communication debate:

> It's fair to say that rhetoric *still* struggles through questions of *purpose* and *intent* (frequently folded together under *agency*). Much work has been done to complicate this articulation that for rhetoric to have happened or to be happening there must be, if not agency, than at least some purpose, aim, or direction. Else how could one be rhetorical, be a rhetor, and how could we then be rhetoricians? (152).

Much like Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson discussed in her criticism of the disability rights' movement liberal rhetoric pursuing independence, autonomy, and self-advocacy, these goals reach the end of the road when they come into contact with profound intellectual disability, or, plants. Gottschalk Druschke and Rivers bring to the table *hydrotopic* rhetoric to complicate the notion of the plant bending toward the sun (*heliotropic* rhetoric). They argue that "rhetoricity inheres not only in the flower turning toward the sun but in the rocks that have turned (in)to soil… the motion and the motive of the flower is derived in part from the soil in which it turns: the flower's circling around toward the sun takes part in the nitrogen cycles motivated by the river's turning" (152). In other words, the flower is not rhetorical because it chooses to bend toward the sun. It is rhetorical because it acts together in a collective life with its surrounding entities. This claim troubles agency, purpose, and intent; the plant is not independent or autonomous, but it is involved in co-production. I argue that this same line of reasoning applies to facilitated communication. Nonverbal people who participate in facilitated communication may not have clear purpose or intent (or at least purpose or intent that is decipherable to verbal people), but they *are* participatory in the happenings of everyday life, which constitutes rhetoric under rhetorical materialism. In a FC setting, a nonverbal rhetor shapes and is shaped by moods, the temperature of the room, a sitting position, the time of day, hunger or sleepiness. The facilitator, a co-rhetor, is likewise affected by such factors. A major criticism of FC is that the facilitator influences the nonverbal rhetor's communication, but if a facilitator is skilled, knowledgeable, and personally invested in the life of the rhetor, is this as problematic as it seems? To follow the lead of the scholar

who questioned me, what if we devalue personal agency and accept interdependence for what it is?

Karen Barad, a feminist theorist and physicist that new materialists often turn to, summarizes these relations as *entanglements.* In *Untangling the Universe,* they write:

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future. (ix)

Rhetoric emerges within facilitated communication, a practice with deep entanglements. It is not as simple as two separate entities joining to create meaning, as Barad explains, but a moment of co-production. A facilitator may be moved by the nonverbal rhetor as the rhetor is shaped by the material environment, and so on. In this sense, agency is distributed, rather than located within each autonomous entity. Detractors argue that facilitators may take too many liberties when speaking with/for a nonverbal rhetor. This is certainly possible, and certain precautions should be taken to avoid potential dangers,

such as in the Anna Stubblefield case. But, "translation" work is at the heart of any individual drawing conclusions about what they observe. In "A Trophic Future," Laurie Gries argues that "rhetoric emerges dynamically from the conditions and constellations of the world, and the rhetorician attunes, comports, listens, and voices. The rhetorician, in this view, translates or represents the voice of an ecosystem." As a rhetorician, I translate the voices I am most attuned with in the ecosystem around me, just as the facilitator translates the communicative acts of nonverbal rhetors. Gries also argues in "New Materialist Ontobiography" that rhetorical new materialism is "an experiential journey into the study of how rhetoric… emerges from diverse human-nonhuman entanglements and comes to co-constitute collective life" (302). By extending this journey to exploring nondisabled human-disabled human entanglements, we gain exciting new insights into how "rhetoricity is co-constituted and how response-ability can be cultivated through deep relationality" (307).

Conclusion

Though I have made every effort to write with as much specificity as possible, the suggestions I've offered and conclusions I have drawn in this chapter are still imprecise. I don't know what rhetoric "in the wild" looks like for a person with Down syndrome or Cerebral Palsy. I can't confidently define a rhetor's intent when a mother helps her child communicate. The question of what nonverbal rhetoric could be has pushed me for many years to challenge what I thought I knew about rhetoric. Is rhetoric only about the conscious, human intention to persuade an audience? Surely it doesn't stop here. If rhetoric is about finding the available means of persuasion, how far can we stretch what

counts as available means? In arguing that rhetoric is in everything and exists everywhere, do we risk making it nothing? These questions still seem dangerous to me. I worry that I risk insulting the tradition that first drew me to rhetorical studies—its attention to reason, logic, and order, its dedication to "the study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (Richards 23). As I hope I have illustrated in this chapter, though, the current state of rhetorical theory is experiencing a kairotic moment that positions me to push on the borders and boundaries of rhetoric by imagining new ontologies and epistemologies for humans who have been denied rhetoricity, agency, capacity. As Caroline Gottschalk Druschke and Nathan Rivers write, within the world of rhetorical new materialism, "Rhetoric here isn't getting bigger; *it's getting stranger and more intense"* (154; original emphasis).

We have seen from the global COVID-19 pandemic that rugged individualism is no longer sustainable. Whether it be fighting climate change, finding community amid disconnection, or surviving a worldwide health crisis, it has become clear that we desperately need each other. Rhetoric as a field may be insulated within the academy, but our scholarship can and should extend beyond the boundaries of the ivory tower, especially in addressing the challenges in the twenty-first century. In thinking about people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and rhetorical capacity—and thus weaving together rhetoric as energetic, ecological, and relational—we might engender a richer, more inclusive rhetorical tradition. The claims I want to make about nonverbal rhetors whose rhetoricity requires listening, feeling, and sensing–perhaps through facilitated communication–require much more research than I have been able to conduct

in this chapter. What I do know at this juncture is that scholars in rhetoric and writing studies must do more if we are to create the inclusive world that so many of us claim to want. One way to move toward this goal is by re-examining who is a part of our rhetorical world, and how they participate in rhetoric alongside us.

Chapter 4

Emancipating Rhetoric

Introduction

At this juncture, I have analyzed the past and future of intellectual disability–a landscape that is painted with both devastation and promise. Public policies that began under the Kennedy administration in the 1960s that waged war on disabled bodyminds, who were then altogether abandoned and left to their own devices in the 1980s, demonstrate the failed attempts to "fix" the problem of intellectual disability. In response, I have offered my own suggestions for a more hopeful future for this population from the purview of the field of rhetoric and writing studies. My efforts to define the rhetoricity of intellectual disability warrant a reimagining of some of our basic assumptions about rhetoric and cornerstone concepts in the field. In this penultimate chapter, I will "crip" some of these concepts as a springboard for future research at the intersection of intellectual disability and rhetorical theory. In "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer," Carrie Sandahl explicates the overlap of disability studies and queer theory, not unlike the overlap of disability studies and feminism. Sandahl acknowledges the shared origins and commitments to activism, as well as their communities' ongoing experiences of injustice. The most significant similarity, Sandahl argues, "is their radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)" (26). Sandahl thus helps to delineate the work of "cripping," akin to the work of "queering." In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explains that the term "queer" functions as "a site of collective

contestation… the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings" (223). Sandahl adds that *"*queer" was initially used as a pejorative term targeted at homosexual people, but has been rearticulated as a term of pride, used equally by those who may not claim a homosexual identity. Likewise, "crip," short for "cripple," was once used as a pejorative term for people with physical disabilities but has been rearticulated as an empowering word "and has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well" (27). Though "crip" as a term is still undergoing reclamation, Sandahl was influential in bringing "cripping" to the forefront as an active, purposeful verb. While "queering" involves "putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts," Sandahl explains that "cripping spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects" (37). In this chapter, I will begin to crip the rhetorical situation and rhetorical research method(s) not only to reveal exclusionary effects for people with intellectual disabilities, but ideally to offer a way forward for the field of rhetoric that is more inclusive.

Cripping the Rhetorical Situation

As I broached in chapter three, agency is a tricky thing. Early in my studies, I was eager to find ways to "grant" agency to people with intellectual disabilities in creative works, such as in young adult literature. In hindsight, I fell into the trap of trying to reinstate normalcy, to make disabled people behave more like their nondisabled counterparts. What is more productive, and more in sync with disability justice, is to question normalcy itself. In this section, I will work toward reconceptualizing rhetorical

agency, primarily as it is housed within the rhetorical situation. Lloyd Bitzer argued that theorists had long ignored the formal properties of the rhetorical situation, focusing instead on rhetors' methods of delivery and the message itself. Bitzer thus mapped out the nature of the rhetorical situation, which hinged on the notion that rhetorical situations exist in reality and *invite* discourse. While Bitzer's theory has endured, it has not been unchallenged. I seek to extend this conversation by taking up the rhetorical situation within the context of intellectual disability.

The Rhetorical Situation Wars

According to Bitzer's definition, discourse is only rhetorical as a response to a situation. The situation is the foundation of rhetorical activity–"not the rhetor and not persuasive intent" (6). Rhetoric occurs when a speaker responds to exigence by addressing an audience that is capable of acting upon that exigence, which Bitzer defines as "an imperfection marked by urgency" (6). Many exigences exist, but they are not rhetorical if they cannot be modified via discourse–such as "death, winter, and some natural disasters" (6). As discussed in chapter four, rhetorical new materialism puts pressure on this assertion, much like George Kennedy did when he argued that rhetoric is fundamental and that it exists in nature–that it comes before and outside of language and is prior to intent. I also take issue with Bitzer's mapping of the rhetorical situation when it comes to audience. As rhetoric always requires an audience (for Bitzer), this audience must be distinguished from mere hearers or readers; in Bitzer's words, "a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (7). As I have consistently protested throughout this

project, drawing these boundaries around rhetors precludes people with intellectual disabilities who may not be capable of being influenced (or influencing others) in the exact ways Bitzer imagined. Rather than find ways to conceptualize disabled people within the rhetorical situation, I would rather challenge the rhetorical situation itself. Fortunately, I am far from the first rhetorician to do.

Richard E. Vatz first fired back at Bitzer in "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," arguing that rhetorical discourse *creates* exigence, that situations are mediated through rhetoric, and that rhetoric is "a *cause* not an *effect* of meaning" (160). Rhetors don't create situations, but they decide what situations to give "salience" to. Though Vatz complicates Bitzer's theory, I am not much more inclined to buy in. For Vatz, "to view rhetoric as a creation of reality or salience rather than a reflector of reality clearly increases the rhetor's moral responsibility" (158). In this view, rhetors have much more agency than within Bitzer's paradigm, but this still poses a problem for rhetors with intellectual disabilities who cannot "assume responsibility for the salience he has *created*" (158). Seeing usefulness and validity in both views, Scott Consigny entered the conversation. Consigny agrees with Bitzer's depiction of the rhetorical situation as "characterized by 'particularities,'" though he takes issue with the rhetorical situation as "determinate and determining"; likewise; he agrees with Vatz's depiction of the rhetor as "creative," but does not appropriately account for the real constraints on the rhetor's activity (176). As a middle ground, Consigny proposes viewing rhetoric as an "art," harkening back to the discipline's classical origins. He argues that "the real question in rhetorical theory is not whether the situation or the rhetor is 'dominant,' but the extent, in

each case, to which the rhetor can discover and control indeterminate matter, using his art of topics to make sense of what would otherwise remain simply absurd" (185). This moves us in the right direction, but Consigny's two required conditions for rhetoric–integrity and receptivity–do not yet advance rhetoric toward inclusivity. For Consigny, rhetoric offers an "integrity" to "disclose and manage indeterminate factors"; at the same time, rhetoric demands that the rhetor "remain receptive to the particularities of the individual situation in a way that he can discover relevant issues" (181). Consigny's compromising approach brings us closer to rhetoric as we know it in the twenty-first century, which unfortunately has not done enough to account for disabled bodyminds' engagement with the rhetorical situation.

Barbara A. Biesecker finally moves this conversation past the chicken-or-the-egg debate set up by Bitzer and Vatz with a deconstructionist view of the rhetorical situation by drawing on Derrida and the concept of *différance*. On the grounds that rhetoric is a non-linear, interactive process with shifting identities, Biesecker argues that rhetoric creates exigence *and* exigence creates rhetoric. It is not helpful to focus on whether exigence becomes before rhetorical discourse or vice versa; the traditional understanding, even with the complications proposed by Vatz and Consigny, points to a limited, insufficient concept of the role of the subject in rhetorical discourse, and a reductive view of the rhetorical situation as a whole (111). The notion of *différance,* and the larger school of deconstruction, according to Biesecker, "allows us to take seriously the *rhetoricity* of discursive practices" (120). Here is where Biesecker's contributions to theories of the rhetorical situation pique my interest as a disability studies scholar.

Beisecker's use of Derrida is familiar to me as I am guilty of relying a bit too heavily on Foucault–a teacher of Derrida. I blame my extensive study of French literature and philosophy. The usefulness of deconstructionism in criticism of the rhetorical situation (at least for my work in disability studies) lies in its interrogation of the audience. When digging into Bitzer's question of "What is a rhetorical audience?" Biesecker traces the generally agreed upon views of audiences being comprised of "sovereign, rational subject[s]"; the definition of audience tends to "hold firmly to a conception of the human being that presumes an essence at the core of the individual that is coherent, stable, and which makes the human being what it *is*" (123). Biesecker problematizes this notion of the audience as an always-sovereign subject via Derrida's theory, which rejects the subject as a "stable presence constituted and operating outside the play of *différance*, but instead as a production or effect-structure of *différance*" (125). In my own rudimentary understanding of *différance*–a combination of *difference* and *deferral*, the thematic refers to how meaning is always contingent upon other meaning(s); meaning is constantly deferred, and therefore unstable. Deconstructing the subject through this metric allows us to see the rhetorical situation as an "event that makes possible the production of identities and social relations" (126). For Beisecker, Vatz and Bitzer weren't arguing over the right question. Applying deconstructionism, and putting pressure on the audience constituent of the rhetorical situation, positions us to "rethink rhetoric as radical possibility" (127). Key to envisioning such radical possibility is resisting essentialism and universalizing claims about rhetors and rhetorical discourse. Biesecker argues that the "gift" of deconstructionism is that it opens up space where it "becomes possible for us to discern

the considerable heterogeneity of the social sphere and the formidable role that rhetoric plays in articulating this heterogeneity" (126). Here is where I may finally arrive at the work of "cripping" the rhetorical situation–revealing its able-bodied assumptions about subjects and its exclusionary effects.

Getting Down to "Cripping"

Returning to the original version of the rhetorical situation set up by Bitzer, not all situations are rhetorical. Only situations that can be remedied by speech are granted this privilege. Of course, I am dissatisfied with this premise as it disqualifies all the other rich sites of rhetorical possibility. Fortunately, much work has been done since Bitzer first defined the formal elements of the rhetorical situation in 1968 that sets the foundation to "crip" this concept. I have discussed many of these in chapter three in my efforts to locate an ontology of intellectual disability, which I argue warrants a deeper understanding of how meaning is made manifest in listening, feeling, and sensing. By zooming in on these modes of exercising rhetorical agency (which I firmly maintain *are* real forms of rhetorical agency), we begin to see the embedded ableism in Bitzer's rhetorical situation. In a similar vein, communication scholar James E. Schulz boldly argued that Bitzer's rhetorical situation constructs compulsory able-bodiedness, and that it normalizes ableism through its disembodied theory of rhetoric. Most poignant to me is Schulz's illustration of Bitzer's definition of exigency, which he cannot separate from his own lived experience as a non-normate:

> Exigency marks what is imperfect, abnormal, out of place, that which urges one to compel others to perform a needed correction. I remember

> hearing Bitzer's definition of exigency and wondering if my own body, frequently unable to use desks in classrooms, seats in planes, or the driver's seat in many standard vehicles was the imperfection marked by these material conditions. These situations are marked by urgency. The lack of a desk in a classroom immediately speaks to how my body is out of place, or marked by a non-place in an ableist classroom. The passengers assigned to sit next to me on a plane directly speak to the urgency moving out of the imperfect state of sitting next to me. My own body becomes filled with pain with a sense of time that is all too urgent, on flights with relatively modest distances travelled. (5)

Bitzer's definition of exigency—an imperfection marked by urgency—causes many rhetoricians to bristle. Jay Dolmage, my go-to theorist for help in thinking about rhetorical theory from a disability studies perspective, argues that because exigence has been associated with imperfection—and therefore a flaw or an abnormality—"the rhetorician has [therefore] been constructed as the person who can diagnose the shape and nature of the exigent flaw and then fix it. In this view of rhetoric, disability itself shadows the entire transaction, as the specter of rhetorical failure" (*Disability Rhetoric* 105). But, the issue here is much larger than the evocation of deficits and deficiencies within "exigency." The technical language of much research from the 60s and 70s is this way—as demonstrated by the many hours I've spent working with the term "mentally retarded." What Schulz and Dolmage are getting at it is the way that the idea of

"imperfection" as an embedded component of the rhetorical situation leads rhetoricians down a slippery slope.

Schulz has done much of the groundwork of "cripping" the rhetorical situation by sussing out the compulsory ableism embedded in Bitzer's rhetorical situation, which was not remedied by Vatz, Consigny, or Biesecker. According to Schulz, "they omit the lived experiences of those who do not fit within the able-bodied norms" (17). Schulz's response to the spirited conversation around the rhetorical situation is his analysis of im/perfection, time, and fluidity as integral components of the rhetorical situation. Rather than reinventing the wheel, I will offer a brief, bulleted summary of Schulz's analysis regarding the rhetorical situation and situational rhetoric at large:

- Im/Perfection: Bitzer's definition of exigency functions as an imperfection/deviation from the ideal. Likewise, "disability is intimately intertwined with a relationship to perfection, the ideal normate being the paradigmatic figure against which disability is cast" (18.) By centering exigence as an "imperfection" and the motivator for rhetors to move an audience "toward the perfect social" Bitzer perpetuates ableist assumptions (19).
- Time: "The timeliness of exigence has a profound relationship to disability, the urgency required to redress the abnormality begs the question of the ability to respond in such a timely fashion. Kairotic spaces do not have a universal relationship with diverse bodies" (27). Anyone can become disabled at any time, and everyone will become disabled if they live long enough. If we lessen rhetoric's grip on "fixing" urgent imperfections, we may "[free] situational

rhetoric to focus on the here-and-now without staying beholden to compulsory able-bodiedness of the future perfect" (29).

- Fluidity: Bitzer does not account for rhetors' differing bodies or minds: "assuming a universal access as either the rhetor or audience does not match the material conditions of lived experience. Many will never have access to the right to perform as either rhetor or audience, or equal access to a foundational right to have rights" (30). Because disability is not a neat, tidy identity or a static categorization, "it can be understood as a process of becoming, a constantly shifting embodiment that allows us to relate to other individuals and communities in fluid, ever changing capacities" (30).

Schulz's poignant criticism of the ableism embedded in the foundational concept of the rhetorical situation—which all rhetoricians rely on consciously or not—gives us concrete ways to consider how we as a field may alter our thinking about the most basic building blocks of our scholarly expertise. If rhetoricians do not take into account how our disabled peers "fit into" the rhetorical situation—and therefore change how we apply this concept and teach this concept to our students, we will continue to miss the mark on inclusion. Now that I have spent time poking holes in the rhetorical situation, I'd like to move toward a bit of hope. I still value the rhetorical situation. I proselytize in my first-year writing classroom the value of analyzing the rhetorical situation of any given text; I am not boycotting Bitzer and I am not suggesting we do away with this fundamental concept. Rather, I am arguing for a renewed interest in the rhetorical situation from a

disability studies lens, and an interest in how we make sense of the way persuasion happens between audience and rhetor.

In *Raveling the Brain*, Jordynn Jack explores the intersection of rhetoric and neuroscience in order to better understand the rhetoricity of the science of persuasion. Jack pushes back on a study that claims to be able to identify neural responses in the brain during the exact moment that persuasion occurs. Though Jack is calling for a uniting of rhetoric and neuroscience, here she draws a line in the sand as a rhetorician. *Kairos* is clearly important for scholars of rhetoric, but Jack argues that persuasion does not occur in a single moment, but rather over time (much like the fluidity of disability and rhetoric that Schulz argues for). Jack's point is made clear through the example of an individual's proclivity to apply sunscreen:

> In the example of sunscreen use, it may not be any one advertisement or public service announcement but the broader, repeated exposure to such ideas that convinces someone to wear sunscreen. For instance, we may see advertisements for sunscreen on television, encounter sunscreen on the shelves while shopping at the pharmacy, see others applying it at the beach or pool, read articles about skin cancer in magazines, see social media posts about which sunscreens are safest for children, or recognize the unmistakable scent of coconut and chemicals at the pool and be reminded to reapply. We may apply sunscreen to our bodies on a sunny day and notice that we don't get burned. And while, in theory, everyone should wear sunscreen, we see those products being targeted especially to

> white people and particularly to women and children. Some individuals are more likely to be interpellated by sunscreen arguments than others. Together, this set of identifications contributes to the message that it is important to wear sunscreen (for some people)—probably more so than a single exposure to a single message. (74-75)

Jack's description is apt for my purposes not only because she recognizes the sensorial experiences embedded in persuasion–seeing, feeling, smelling–but also how persuasion is experienced in stages, with repetition. The rhetorical situation, at least as is often taught in first-year writing courses (of which I, myself, am guilty) is presented as a contained, momentary circumstance with clear conditions and boundaries. Jack reminds us with this imagery that persuasion does take place with clear speakers and audiences–such as in brand commercials marketed to targeted viewers, but it also happens passively, such as in public arenas like the pool where a swimmer is influenced by seeing someone else apply sunscreen, or in nature when a hiker is affected by a blazing sun and feels motivated to protect their skin.

I find this example so compelling because it reminds me of the ways that my Uncle David not only communicated his feelings to us, but how he learned new skills and took in information. For many people with intellectual disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, rephrasing questions or repeating questions can remedy a lot of communicative dissonance. This was not the case for David. No amount of rephrasing or swapping out vocabulary would make certain things clear. He relied on experiential knowledge: being physically guided through a space to find what he needed, familiar

touches, smells, sounds. The ways that we persuaded David (such as to lower his voice in restaurants, or to begin getting ready for bed), and the way that he persuaded us (to dance with him, to turn on the TV, to drive him back to his institutional home) did not happen neatly. Like Jack argues, it was not a "single exposure to a single message." Of course, I don't think that any rhetorician truly believes persuasion happens quickly or neatly; our nation would not be on fire if minds were changed so easily. But I do think that when rhetoricians take into consideration the conditions necessary for successfully moving an audience to action, very rarely are diverse bodyminds accounted for, at least not bodyminds with intellectual disabilities). My hope is that scholars of rhetoric will begin to think more inclusively when engaging with the rhetorical situation; this might mean rearticulating some of its terms (exigency), or it may be time to develop a completely new metric. Whatever the solution may be, I hope that it makes space for people with intellectual disabilities who, at present, are precluded from the rhetorical situation.

Cripping Rhetorical Research

The mantra of the disability studies movement is "Nothing about us without us," which demands a foregrounding of disabled people's voices in conversations and policies that affect them. While this mantra is a guiding principle for disability researchers, its enactment can quickly become complex. Margaret Price explains that disability studies "lacks a unified methodology," which in some ways speaks to the positive interdisciplinary nature and expansive scope of the field, but also makes it difficult for researchers to develop questions and practices (159). Disability research can be further complicated by the positionalities of nondisabled researchers, who generally resist

speaking for or on behalf of disabled research participants. Disability researchers (Brueggemann; Hughes et al.; Price; Stone and Priestley) have worked to develop theoretical frameworks for conducting ethical qualitative research with disabled research participants; however, most of these approaches presume the researcher can "check in" with participants, which may not be feasible for studies involving people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. In this section, I will wrestle with imperatives that past disability researchers have put in place, as well as possible avenues for inclusive research moving forward.

In the early nineties, disability researcher Mark Oliver coined "emancipatory disability research" as a response to the long history of research objectifying disabled people and focusing on individual impairments. The emancipatory research agenda not only calls for a shift in focus in research production (away from individual impairments and onto broader material and societal factors), but also a reorganization of who is in control of the research process–in other words, disabled people should be calling the shots rather than nondisabled researchers. The latter goal has proved to be difficult for researchers to carry out. A decade later, sociologist Colin Barnes argued that "such ideas [were] utopian to say the least" and that "today, the situation is somewhat different" (5-6). The emancipatory research paradigm is noble in cause, but the strict boundaries it draws around disability research poses problems for researchers who seek to conduct studies that may benefit people with disabilities. Nondisabled researchers, such as myself, have largely relied on Emma Stone and Mark Priestley's hallmark article "Parasites, Pawns and Partners: Disability Research and the role of Non-Disabled Researchers" to

guide our methodologies. Though published nearly twenty years ago, Stone and Priestley's efforts to "make [themselves] more accountable to disabled people" and "introduce more 'vulnerability' into [their] own research projects" remain helpful models for how nondisabled researchers may approach disability research that aims for the goals of emancipatory research from a nondisabled researcher positionality (700). For example, they problematize the paradigm's somewhat "uncontentious" conclusion that disabled people should have more involvement in disability research; it is more problematic, however, "to determine exactly what the form and content of this involvement should be. Simply increasing levels of participation does not necessarily challenge or alter the power relations of research production" (709). The article goes on to demonstrate their own efforts in conducting field studies during which they brought respondents together in one room with the goal of "[creating] *an environment in which disabled people are empowering themselves* through research participation" (711 emphasis in original). Stone and Priestley set the stage for researchers, particularly nondisabled researchers, to continue disability research that prioritizes emancipation while navigating logistical and institutional obstacles. Even with the responses to the emancipatory research paradigm in mind, sticky problems persist when faced with the stratification of disability I am most interested in.

As I have demonstrated, profound intellectual disability is undertheorized in disability rhetoric and disability studies at large. There are a few explanations for why this is. For one, many (though certainly not all) scholars in disability studies are themselves disabled, and their research tends to focus on their own experiences, which

are very different from those with profound intellectual disabilities. A person with Down syndrome, for example, is less likely to conductrigorous scholarly research. Similarly, researchers are often concerned with accessible pedagogy in order to revolutionize their own classrooms and workplaces--but, a person with Down syndrome is also less likely to be enrolled in a first-year writing course or graduate seminar, making this stratification of disability appear less relevant to a discipline concerned with written communication and persuasion (however, as I will briefly discuss in the conclusion, this is changing!). Furthermore, the Institutional Review Board gives special consideration to protect the welfare of vulnerable groups, including people with intellectual disabilities. Federal law considers this population vulnerable to abuse in human research because they may not be able to make informed decisions for themselves, might be easily manipulated, etc., making such studies difficult to conduct. Despite these obstacles, and the many ethical concerns raised by the emancipatory research paradigm, I argue that there is still room for researchers to do work *for* and *with* people with intellectual disabilities, especially rhetorical researchers.

Education scholars Melanie Nind and Iva Strnadova have boldly approached this topic in the recent collection *Belonging for People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities*. Scholarship involving profound intellectual disability is scarce for a multitude of reasons, as I have explained, but Nind and Strnadova and the collection's contributors step into fragile territory by calling for ways that people with intellectual disabilities should be included in education, in communities, and in research. For my present inquiry, the latter is especially pertinent. The editors explain that though people

with mild intellectual disabilities have been taking a more active role in projects as part of the self-advocacy movement, the shift towards democratization in research has not readily embraced those with profound disabilities. For this unique group of people, they argue:

> It may be that including people with profound intellectual disabilities in research is more likely to be research *on* than *by* them, but it can be *for* them and in some ways *with* them. It may mean researchers working as allies, alongsiders or fellow travellers and it may be that for people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities to belong in research we need to open up our thinking about research itself. (10)

Contributor Debby Watson offers an example of how such research can be conducted *for* and *with* children from this population in "Crossing the Wobbly Bridge: An Inclusive Approach to Researching Playfulness and Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties." Watson challenges the belief that people with profound disabilities, especially children, should be excluded from research by demonstrating how her own study was conducted inclusively, drawing on Jan Walmsley, Iva Strnadová, and Kelley Johnson's "The Added Value of Inclusive Research." Walmsley et al argue that "inclusive research adds value when there is a distinctive contribution which only co-researchers with intellectual disabilities can make, when it highlights the contributions people with intellectual disabilities make, and when it contributes to better lives for the wider population of people with intellectual disabilities" (751). Though it holds the same spirit as the emancipatory research paradigm, Walmsey et al's inclusive research

embodies a fresh approach to research involving people with intellectual disabilities that more closely aligns with the disability justice principle of interdependence, especially with the focus on co-researching. My Uncle David would not have been able to write the methodology section of a study, but he certainly would have been able to *participate* in a study within the parameters of inclusive research. Watson's "Wobbly Bridge" study offers one example of what such research might look like.

Watson reiterates Melanie Nind's assertion in *What is Inclusive Research?* that it is more useful to work toward "doing research inclusively" rather than assuring that every criterion for inclusive research is being met. These strict criteria is largely what the emancipatory research paradigm called for, which consequently precluded research with people with profound intellectual disabilities. For Watson, conducting her study inclusively meant efforts such as: considering all possible methods for including the group of research participants, being mindful of the children's limitations and possibilities, and consulting all possible information, advice, and guidance from outside participants who knew the children well in order to best understand their contributions– just to name a few. I am most interested in the latter, as involving loved ones, caretakers, friends of the research participants bears resemblance to the issue of facilitated communication and understanding authorial intent, as I have explored in the previous chapter. Watson carefully discusses the issues with relying too much on support people to draw conclusions–what is sometimes called "proxy research"–which can turn into a support person's thoughts and feelings *about* a disabled person carrying more weight than "direct observation of people with [profound intellectual disabilities] and their

'lifeworlds'" (84). Watson bears this in mind, and admits that as a researcher she is likely better prepared to conduct such research because of her personal, first-hand experience working with children with disabilities. Likewise, I believe I am better prepared to embark on this dissertation research because of my first-hand experience as a relative of a person with Down syndrome, even though I am nondisabled. What is equally compelling about Watson's study is the way she goes about drawing conclusions about the inner lives of her research participants. "Crossing the Wobbly Bridge" questions how playfulness can be encouraged in children with profound intellectual disabilities. By deepening this understanding, which simultaneously encourages more research with profoundly disabled people, "more people can cross bridges and our understanding about what makes life better for people with [profound disabilities] will improve" (95).

In the study, Watson looked at playfulness as a "gateway to meaningfully engage with children with [disabilities], helping to uncover their true personalities and joyfully go with them toward unexpected things" (85). It may seem obvious to encourage playfulness in children, but so often children with profound disabilities are viewed as incapable of or uninterested in activities that nondisabled children typically enjoy. What I find most striking in Watson's study is her attention to the children's sensorial expressions. The study's results are based on the children's nonverbal and verbal-adjacent responses. These include: moving limbs, grinding teeth, breathing patterns, smiling, blinking, holding objects, shivering, sighing, reaching out, banging on objects, and lifting eyebrows, among many others. As discussed in chapter three, these bodily communicative acts are so often taken for granted and are typically viewed as accessories

to meaning-making rather than primary modes of communication. In this study, the children's expressions are rich for analysis; however, the researcher is careful to acknowledge the possibility that some expressions may simply be automatic, physical responses to environmental stimuli, such as shivering in a cold room. But, with consultation with family and support persons, and familiarity with each individual child, Watson was able to distinguish changes in behavior based on how playfulness was encouraged. The study's conclusions warrant the belief that children with profound intellectual disabilities, who are so often viewed and treated as passive or static beings, can be "competent social actors"; the study's evidence of children perpetuating interactions is one way to confirm them as "playful children with agency" (93). The tricky subject of agency creeps up here, leading us to once again visit the rhetorical situation.

My analysis in this chapter has tiptoed around the question of agency—how it factors into the rhetorical situation (*who* can exercise agency according to the rhetorical situation? What *counts* as exercising agency?) and how agency can be coded in research (how far can we ethically go in "reading" disabled research participants' contributions as meaningful efforts to exercise agency?) The studies I have just summarized were not conducted by rhetoricians, but I believe the conclusions have implications for rhetorical researchers. I'd like to end this section by returning to the rhetorical situation, this time with a focus on Jenny Edbauer's model of rhetorical ecologies.

As a later intervention in the conversation around Bitzer's rhetorical situation, Edbauer's "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to

Rhetorical Ecologies" helps to destabilize the stringent borders around the rhetorical situation. Her interest is in how "publics" are constituted, building on Michael Warmer's argument that "no single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient… since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse" (qtd. in Edbauer 5). By bringing this argument into the late-stage rhetorical situation debate, Edbauer works to de-emphasize rhetoric's obsession with speaker-audience-message/ethos-pathos-logos/rhetor-audience-constraints-exigence. These collections of elements, according to Edbauer, are artificial and elementary; in their place, she proposes a shift from rhetorical situation to "rhetorical ecologies." The ecological model, she argues, "allows us to more fully theorize rhetoric as a public(s) creation" (9). From a disability studies perspective, rhetorical ecologies as an alternative to the rhetorical situation bears resemblance to the disability justice principle of interdependence, which I explored in chapter three. Rather than assigning full autonomy to either rhetor or audience, depicting rhetoric as a state of flux that is co-created by public(s) better accounts for the rhetorical contributions of people with intellectual disabilities in meaning-making. I find Edbauer's deconstruction of the etymology of "situation" particularly compelling:

> The Latin word *situs* is closely tied to the originary position of objects… by definition, then, *situs* implies a bordered, fixed-space location. Consequently, the concept of 'rhetorical situation' is appropriately named insofar as the models of rhetorical situation describe the scene of rhetorical action as 'located' around the exigence that generates a

> response. We thus find a connection between certain models of rhetorical situation and a sense of *place.* But the public existence of *situs* is complicated… the social does not reside in fixed sites, but rather in a networked space of flows and connections. (9)

The rhetorical situation as we know it, and often teach it, works in many scenarios that warrant this model of analysis. But for Edbauer's purpose of analyzing publics, and for my purpose of analyzing the rhetorical possibilities from/with people with intellectual disabilities, these fixed sites do not account for the ebb and flow of meaning-making. Edbauer's "rhetorical ecologies" therefore moves us away from the rhetorical triangle (writer, text, audience), which isolates each element and fails to account for how they are "enacted and lived." Edbauer draws on an example of how these simplistic rhetorical metrics—such as the rhetorical triangle and rhetorical situation—forces elements into statis states: e.g., "a writer types her ideas into a computer for an audience who reads the text" (12). An ecological, or a "distributed" model, instead takes the flows and connections into account: e.g., "the event of using a keyboard, the encounter of a writing body within a space of dis/comfort, the events of writing in an apathetic/energetic/distant/close group" (12).

Now, I bring this final nail in the rhetorical situation coffin back to the task of "cripping rhetorical research." The aforementioned studies involving children with profound intellectual disabilities were not "rhetorical" research projects; however, I see traces of rhetorical analysis in the ways that researchers observed communicative acts, registered authorial intent, and coded themes. Inclusive research involving people with

profound intellectual disabilities has a place in rhetorical studies, especially if/when we apply Edbauer's call for a shift toward rhetorical ecologies in place of the rhetorical situation. When setting up methods of analysis involving research participants who may be nonverbal, for example, considering the "distributions" of meaning-making can be key in rhetorical analyses involving people and artifacts from the disability community. Like the education scholars observed children with profound intellectual disabilities, rhetoricians may conduct research by lessening the focus on the isolated elements of speaker, audience, message, or on exigency, agency, etc., and instead bring our creativity and expertise to analyzing how people with disabilities engage with the world in ways that defy the carefully curated models of meaning-making.

Since I began this chapter with Carrie Sandahl's explanation of the critical overlap of queer studies and disability studies, I'd like to end with a return to this critical juncture and its implications for rhetorical theory and research. My dear friend J. Logan Smilges, with whom I co-chaired the Disability Studies Standing Group affiliated with the Conference on College Composition on Communication, understands well the intersection of rhetorical theory, queer theory, and disability theory—all three of which they explore in *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence.* Much like the feminist rhetoricians that have shaped my own identity as a scholar of rhetoric (Glenn, Ratcliffe, Mountford), Smilges explores artifacts that signify absence or silence and susses out their generative potential—they argue that "absence [can] be generative, that what remains undone, unseen, unheard, and untouched [can] be not only transformative but world-building" (3). In fact, Smilges goes so far as to center rhetorical absence as the

heart of all meaning-making via their development of the *rhetorical matrix*. The rhetorical matrix, which maps out verbal, visual, digital, material, embodyminded, and "yet unimagined" as signifying modalities that all point to silence. The matrix sets up Smilges to create their own definition of *rhetorical energy*. Though bearing the same name as George Kennedy's rhetorical energy, Smilges disagrees with Kennedy on the purpose of rhetoric itself. Whereas Kennedy argues that "the function of rhetoric is the survival of the fittest," Smilges's rooting in disability studies positions them to reject the notion of "fitness" or "dominance." Much like Edbuaer and the many rhetoricians who have challenged, revised, and provided alternatives to the rhetorical situation, Smilges offers their own revision to the study of rhetoric that discourages the privileging of any one signifying modality.

For my own interests in "cripping" the rhetorical situation and rhetorical research, I want to emphasize Smilges's illustration of rhetorical energy, as it functions dually to destabilize the notion of the autonomous rhetor and productively complicates researchers' need to accurately represent disabled research participants' contributions. Smilges writes:

> [Rhetorical energy] is the phrase I use to describe the constellation of signifiers and significations that inform how an object comes to mean. While other scholars in rhetoric have likened rhetoric to energy, noting their parallel forms of sporadic movement, my use of the phrase makes a dramatic departure from how it is customarily understood within the field. My invocation emphasizes the gap between how a person wants something to signify and how it actually does signify to those on the

> receiving end of the signification(s). Just as sometimes what we mean to say is not what comes out, or how we mean to sound is not how we are heard, so too do any of our significations exist only partially within our control. The meanings associated with my queerness, transness, and disabilities, for example, all contribute to a rhetorical energy that radiates from me. It's a composition of affective discourses that I do not entirely choose but that nevertheless contribute to how I am seen, heard, and understood by others. (27)

Smilges, a disabled, trans, neuroqueer scholar, offers us an explanation of how our own rhetoricality is often beyond our control; they then go on explicate how queer people "use silence to harness and wield their rhetorical energy." In emancipating rhetoric from the confines of the rhetorical situation and rhetorical research, I proposition rhetoricians to broaden the scope of inquiry to include contributions from/with people with intellectual disabilities. What this may mean is creatively accounting for the contextual elements that comprise an individual's rhetorical energy. Of course, the challenges for the researcher doing this work are many, as "the signification entailed by rhetorical energy is not legible in the way in which rhetorical theory is accustomed… rhetorical energy is not definable, transcribable, or narratological; you can't pin or pen it down" (46-47). Much like the researchers who worked with children with profound disabilities to explore the impact of playfulness, rhetorical researchers could begin answering questions about the inner lives, the aspirations, self-advocacy, and self-determination of people with intellectual disabilities. Such work is tricky—I have no doubt—but by taking the risk and challenging

our foundational concepts, rhetoricians could partner with this population, which would not only benefit the field of rhetoric, but would move the needle forward in understanding, honoring, and making space for disabled and neurodiverse rhetorical contributions in the public sphere.

Chapter 5

Calculating the Risk: Toward Inclusive Post-Secondary Education and Beyond

In this dissertation project, I have taken many risks in arguing what rhetoric is, what it has been, and what it could be—all from a disability studies perspective. Largely, my claims have been grounded in theory rather than praxis. Of course, theory often lays the groundwork for action—such arguments are necessary to set into motion real, tangible change. In this final chapter, though, I'd like to conclude by briefly overviewing the ways that boots-on-the-ground inclusivity is already happening within higher education, and what scholars and teachers of rhetoric and writing studies can do to take part in postsecondary inclusive education.

At the time that I am writing this conclusion, I have just accepted a job offer as a director of an inclusive post-secondary education program at a large R1 institution. Though my new position is not as a professor of rhetoric, it uses my skills as a researcher, an educator, an administrator, and a rhetorician to manage an on-campus program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who desire a college experience. Inclusive Post-secondary Education (IPSE) programs have been slowly popping up around the country since the early 2000s, and my home state is lucky enough to have a handful of programs available to students. Not only do we have programs, but we have program *options* for students with a wide range of support needs. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 earmarked funds available to institutions of higher education to facilitate these IPSE programs. While every college or university is unique in how it chooses to facilitate their program, most include program-specific courses that focus on

life skills, self-advocacy, and vocational training, enrollment in traditional university coursework that aligns with students' personal interests and career aspirations, and extensive support from campus faculty, staff, and peers. Typically, students in IPSE programs are not degree-seeking, and instead receive an alternative certificate of completion. Across IPSE programs, a common issue is lack of buy-in from the larger university community. Often, these programs are regarded as special, feel-good projects to fill diversity, equity, and inclusion quotas. This reflects the unfortunate reality that people with intellectual disabilities are so often seen as "reasons to smile," or "a reminder that other people have it worse." Much like I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the presence of the disabled body and mind has carried different significations across cultures and eras. Inclusive postsecondary education marks an incredible shift toward equity that less than a decade ago was practically unthinkable. I celebrate this victory, but I am simultaneously focused on ways to improve the discourse around these programs and elevate their reputation. In fact, this is exactly why a rhetorician was hired to direct a program largely staffed by with special education experts.

In learning more about inclusive postsecondary education in my new position, I have entered a new world where many of the questions I have wrestled with theoretically now have very practical applications—and thus, very real issues to solve. And they are urgent. In the planning stages of my dissertation, I was often haunted by the fears that I was taking the study of rhetoric too far, that pressing on the boundaries of what made rhetoric—*rhetoric*—was an insult to the tradition that I had spent so long committing my

studies to. In my time thus far as an IPSE program director, I am facing similar fears as a university administrator that I have faced as a scholar of rhetoric. Demanding inclusivity will always carry an inherent risk. My colleagues in Special Education, however, have thought about this in much more productive terms, and come up with an apt keyword: the dignity of risk.

"Messy Inclusion"

In IPSE, the goal is for students to exit their respective programs with the vocational, social, and independent living skills that will position them to live on their own and make autonomous decisions. While different programs are equipped to accept students with higher support needs than others (depending on staff and funding), most programs aim to provide a safety net for students with program-specific courses, tutoring, staff, etc., but ultimately want students to access—and have the confidence to access—the same on-campus resources that all other traditionally enrolled students have access to. In learning about the philosophies of how this work gets done in preparation for taking on a leadership role, I was introduced to the 2022 article "'Messy Inclusion': A Call for Dignity of Risk in Inclusive Postsecondary Education." Before getting to the crux of Bumble et al's argument, I want to first acknowledge that this article was co-written by an individual with an intellectual disability—Christopher R. J. Worth. I have chosen to highlight longer sections of the article written by Worth, which are emphasized in the original text with italics. Regrettably, much of the prose in this dissertation has not centered disabled voices as much as I would like, as I have largely been working with

rhetorical theorists who do not have disabilities. Fortunately, I can do a better job of speaking *with* rather than *for* people with disabilities in this final section.

Though Bumble et al have coined "messy inclusion" as a way forward for IPSE programs who grappled with ways to provide supports to students with disabilities, while also maintaining high expectations and pushing students to develop necessary life skills, the term "dignity of risk" is not new. Robert Peske first introduced dignity of risk in 1972, when the term "mentally retarded" was still in circulation. As a pushback against the infantilization and overprotection of people with intellectual disabilities, dignity of risk challenges the idea that taking risks is inherently dangerous or negative. Instead, risk is a basic human right that enables people to learn to problem solve, discover oneself, establish meaningful relationships, and more (65). This all sounds good on paper, but in the real-life application of risk in IPSE programs, these risks can cause a lot of headaches and, potentially, opportunities for mistakes and real failure—hence Bumble et al deeming their IPSE philosophy as "messy inclusion." Christopher Worth's view of risk and messy inclusion is as follows:

> To strike a balance between risk, dignity, and choice, we must begin by educating, but not through endless training, rather through modeling and authentic experience. We must inoculate ourselves and the person we are supporting to the idea that things might not work, goals might not be reached overnight, or maybe ever, but that is okay. Messy inclusion recognizes that there is no perfect moment to start life. In messy inclusion, we recognize that there is a piece of identity and value that comes out of

> making a mistake. In the mistake, we forge opportunity for the rise of gifts and talents. Failure is powerful and transformative. (68).

In my short time as a director of an IPSE program, I have already made missteps in more ways than I can count. At times I have felt very discouraged and questioned my qualifications and ability to do this work. Taking these risks has been my right as an autonomous adult bestowed with the responsibility of administrative leadership; likewise, I have been given the authority to make risky claims throughout this project by my dissertation committee to prove that I have original ideas to contribute to my field of study. In reflecting on all the ways I have taken risks—big and small—throughout adulthood, those failures and successes have shaped my worldview and given me the confidence to keep making decisions for myself and my family, even when the future is unknown. Making space for people with disabilities to make similar kinds of choices, even when it seems "risky," is critical.

My own IPSE program matriculates students who have higher cognitive abilities and are capable of living independently in campus dorms with minimal supervision. For these students, self-determination is possible with support and practice. I can't help but wonder, though, about people like my Uncle David who would not be eligible for an IPSE program—even those that provide the most support. Because his disability was profound, independence simply wasn't in the cards. How does dignity of risk apply to someone like him, who could not pay his own bills or cook himself dinner? I'm enthusiastic about the progress we have made for people with disabilities who want to go to college, and in disbelief that I now get to devote my career toward this mission, but I

am still disheartened at the work that remains undone for people like my own blood relative. Despite my longing for more, I am confident that scholars from the many disciplines who have a vested interest in disability justice are enroute to envisioning a better future.

What RWS can do NOW

To end on a positive note, I hope any scholar reading this project will feel inspired to find ways to become involved in a local on-campus or community organization that supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. To my fellow residents of central Oklahoma, I recommend buying a coffee from any of the Not Your Average Joe locations (which employees individuals with intellectual disabilities), staying up-to-date on the happenings of the many nonprofits (such as Down Syndrome Association of Central Oklahoma, WingsOK, or The Arc of Oklahoma). To scholars in Oklahoma, I urge you to research the wonderful IPSE programs across the state at the University of Oklahoma (Sooner Works), Oklahoma State University (Opportunity Orange), Northeastern State University (Riverhawks Scholar Program), and University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma (Neill-Wint Center for Neurodiversity). I cannot speak for all IPSE programs, but I have learned from my own program that students and administrators are in need of university partnerships in many forms. Professors who share a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion are needed so that students with disabilities have more mainstream classes to choose from. Typically, IPSE students are not receiving a degree, so they are not expected to master any material from mainstream coursework, but learning what they can alongside nondisabled peers is invaluable, and professors who are

willing to accommodate neurodiverse learners in their classroom is critical to students' success. Not only does this clearly benefit students with disabilities to have a wider range of courses to choose from, but *all* students benefit from exposure to diversity and the different ways that disabled bodyminds engage with the world. For scholars whose courses may not be a good fit for IPSE students, there are still a myriad of ways to be a partner, such as by encouraging nondisabled students to become peer partners—a common organization affiliated with IPSE programs that pairs students with disabilities with nondisabled students to engage in university life together. Or, scholars may volunteer time and labor to participate in grant writing or outreach initiatives.

Final Thoughts

Now having arrived at the end of this writing project, there are many arguments I wish I would have made, and studies I wish I could have conducted. At the onset, I envisioned concrete, hands-on research involving research participants with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of these plans, but I also realized that there was much groundwork that needed to be laid before I embarked on working directly with people with intellectual disabilities. The work I have produced, I hope, has built a foundation for future research at the intersection of intellectual disabilities and rhetorical theory. As I just revealed in this final chapter, I have taken on a leadership role as a director of an inclusive education program that gives students with intellectual disabilities a college experience—a program that just a few years ago would have been unthinkable. In the short time I have held this job, I have already done advocacy work at the state capitol, recruited students for the upcoming

academic year, educated faculty on inclusive education, problem solved issues related to "messy inclusion," and more. This work has been both difficult and exciting; it has also brought to life many of the theoretical issues I have raised throughout this project. Without having wrestled with many of these claims, I don't believe I would be as prepared to take on my new role. I have often been haunted by the fear that my work as a rhetorician has not been "practical" enough to effect real change for the disability community; I no longer believe this. My work, and the work of my peers in the fields of rhetoric and writing studies and disability studies, continues to shape our social, political, and material realities. It is my hope that this project is one more step in the long journey toward inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And I hope that I have made my Uncle David proud.

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