I’m pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Ellen Barton’s “Dis­courses of Disability in the Digest.” I would like to use this space to introduce JAC readers to some of the concepts, debates, and directions in disability studies scholarship. In advancing this goal, I necessarily enter into dialogue with Barton’s interpretation of the Digest discourse, but I do so in the spirit of conversation, a continuation of one she and I began in April 2000 when I first heard her read an earlier version of this paper at Miami University.

Barton has exhumed an important record of the popular history of disability by studying the Reader’s Digest as a rhetorical archive. Her article and those cited in her introduction illustrate many of the possibilities for work combining disability studies and rhetoric and composition. Barton could also have mentioned two of her earlier articles: “Literacy in (Inter)Action” and “Textual Practices of Erasure: Representations of Disability and the Founding of the United Way.” In the first, she uses conversation analysis to study literacy as it is co-constructed between disabled patients and their families and doctors at two medical sites. In the second, she analyzes the representation of disability in the United Way campaigns in the Detroit area in the 1940s and 1950s by examining front- and back-stage artifacts such as posters and internal memos. She concludes that these charity campaigns erased the complexity of the experiences of the disabled, replacing them with stereotypes of pity and fear, with images emphasizing success, and with an image of the United Way as a model American business—all of which maintained the segregation of the disabled (172). In closely examining the discourse practices through which the United Way created charity campaigns aimed at businesses (and itself became a charity business), Barton articulates what I think is an important link in the cultural history of disability in the United States—that is, the way in which business became the mediator between donors and the disabled.

I see another link to this cultural history in “Discourses of Disability in the Digest.” Not only does business mediate disability in the United States, and thereby celebrate itself, it also exerts pressure to limit social
Pressure against disability rights takes many forms: resistance through noncompliance with laws, lawsuits challenging the applicability or scope of disability laws, and persistent and insidious everyday rhetoric, as exemplified in the Digest's column "Mugged by the Law" and in "common sense" complaints about the costs of accommodating disability. Anti-disability rhetoric has been largely successful. No matter what one's politics, discourses that "balance" cost and measure "reasonableness" in regard to accommodations for the disabled are widely accepted. In 1990 President George Bush used such rhetoric in signing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), specifically weighing the rights of the disabled against the rights of businesses.

The rhetoric of "reasonable" (and hence also unreasonable) accommodations in the foreground of assimilation discourses might not feel so commonplace and acceptable, however, if we paid attention to the less familiar, more disturbing discourses of nativism, isolationism, and eugenics lurking in America's recent past and in back issues of the Digest. Let me offer, then, an alternative interpretation of the Digest's narrative logic, one that encourages the Digest's discourses to disturb the familiar and commonplace. Instead of emphasizing, as Barton does, a "double, almost paradoxical discourse" of disability in the Digest, I would like to hypothesize a continuum between its rhetoric of eugenics and its rhetoric of assimilation. My purpose here is admittedly motivated and activist. If an incriminating rhetoric of eugenics is understood as a conceptual, not just historical, precursor to assimilationist rhetoric, my hope is that "common sense" perceptions would shift, leading to a deconstruction of the "reasonable," ordinary, and familiar facade in the discourses that presently construct mainstream practices and attitudes toward the disabled, including recent reactions to disability law.

Disability Studies in the Humanities
Disability studies is intensely interdisciplinary. In this short space, I can only point to a small sample of disability studies work in the humanities. There are contending definitions of what a disability studies approach entails. One dispute, for example, is between a modern or postmodern critique of social practices, material conditions, and subjectivity. Most people working in disability studies would agree, however, that a disability studies approach always includes a critique from the perspective of the disabled. It's important to make clear that to argue from "the perspective of the disabled" is not to claim a more authentic, innocent, singular, or stable ground but to adopt disability as a consciously chosen point of
view. Some persons with disabilities, for example, would not claim a
disability identity and perspective, just as others who are nondisabled, as
I am, adopt a disability perspective. Such a standpoint isn’t innocent. It
doesn’t take long, working in disability studies, to realize the importance
of self-reflexivity and the difficulty of entirely escaping the everyday
discourses and assumptions that disable others through exclusions and
that reaffirm prejudice based on impairments. When I look back at my
earlier writing, for example, I see that I have used metaphors of disability
in careless and complicated ways that reproduce disabling thinking and
hierarchies.

I come to disability studies as the parent of a disabled son and through
the doors of women’s studies and rhetoric and composition, carrying with
me a postmodern view of subjectivity and of rhetoric as the art of critique.
From my point of view, discourses cannot escape being situated and
motivated, they bear the traces of history, they advance interested actions,
and they mediate material practices and consequences. I would argue for
the multiple and conflicting subjectivities within the category disabled.
The term disabled functions like the category woman in women’s studies:
it does not refer to a homogenous identity group but is a strategic naming
of identity. Much in the way that Gayatri Spivak discusses feminism as
a strategic practice, disability can be a strategy for inquiry, a disability
perspective providing a critical mode for understanding the interrelations
of various subjectivities (137–40, 162). In this regard, I would pose the
following question: When in the late 1940s the Digest briefly advocated
for disabled World War II veterans, which identity category—“disabled”
or “war veteran”—most motivated this changed stance?

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder use the term narrative prosthesis
to express the idea that “the experience and representational life of
disability” depend on “the ironic grounding of an unsteady rhetorical
stance” (6). Within narratives, disability functions variously and
relationally. I would ask, then, how the figure of the disabled veteran,
assimilated back into the mainstream of the American workplace,
functions within narratives to advance the Digest’s rhetorical purposes after
World War II. Whose interests does this figure serve? The Digest’s
history both before and after this period suggests that the figure of the
reassimilated veteran serves the magazine’s purpose of patriotic flag-
waving. That is, he deserves reintegration because he is a veteran, not
because he is disabled. The magazine’s pro-assimilation stance and
celebration of war heroes served to maintain the dominant business
ideology of a conservative magazine during the cold war period of the late
1940s and early 1950s. Its rhetoric reaffirmed the norm: returning veterans replaced women in the work force; celebrating the veteran as hero reaffirmed post-war U.S. global leadership won through manly competition. In contrast, the alienation from mainstream values in the aftermath of the first World War (typified in Hemingway’s ironic heroes or Sassoon’s antiwar poetry) was figured in part through the trope of the wrecked or crippled veteran, cut off from mainstream life. The Digest’s depictions in the 1920s of vets as “derelicts” with “no hope,” as “human wreckage,” served rhetorically to promote its isolationist stance during that period (Barton, “Discourses” 561). In both cases, these figures, whether pitiable or celebrated, may be read more as political tropes than as about the lived experiences of different kinds of people with various disabilities.

Even those in disability studies who do not find postmodern theory relevant or useful usually agree that a disability perspective means interrogating the assumptions, practices, and representations of the dominant, nondisabled TABs (the temporarily able bodied) and the assumptions and constructions of “the norm.” For example, some histories trace the roots and effects of bell curves and “deviations from the norm” or critique norms of the body (Davis and Trent, for example). Rosemarie Garland Thomson has coined the term normate to point to “the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries” (8). In “Constructing Normalcy,” Lennard Davis follows the concept of the norm from its origins in late eighteenth-century statistics to its application to distributions of human features in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Davis notes the tight connection between statistics, eugenics, and Darwinism. Sir Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s cousin, introduced the terms psychometrics and eugenics in his 1883 book on human development (Trent 86). Davis states that “the very term that permeates our contemporary life—the normal—is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie.” He concludes that “one of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues” is “to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal” (26).

I would argue that the Digest’s double discourses work together to reinforce a conservative ideology that keeps in play a majority/minority construction, with the majority defining itself as the norm and then
grounding its own privilege on that. In everyday social and political rhetoric, the construction of a minority group with “special” needs functions conservatively as an argument for a limit to rights. Fears of balkanization, arguments against the claims of “special” interest groups, and claims of reverse discrimination—these kinds of arguments are constructed on assumptions of the norm: that civil rights are owned by the majority; that the majority has the right to calculate, balance, or limit the “costs” of a minority group’s claims to rights as exceptional, not normal; and that the majority is differentiated from, not interpenetrated by, the minority. As I have argued elsewhere, Americans traditionally employ “injury rhetoric” to contest equity. Carl Gutierrez-Jones explains that such rhetoric models “a balance of moral equivalences, legitimat[ing] notions of harm and remedy that only make sense in reference to the norm itself—to injure may thereby be equated with displacement from the norm” (88).

Assimilation rhetoric serves the interests of mainstream culture because such rhetoric reasserts “the hegemony of the norm.” The power of dominant groups manifests itself in their privilege of representing the different as Other, in their great material and social privileges, and also in their invisibility behind the veil of the norm. Just as race studies examines whiteness and white privilege, disability studies not only seeks access for the disabled to more positive self-representation, but also represents the nondisabled in ways that unmask the very real histories of violence, oppression, exclusion, and bias toward the disabled. And, in addition to analyzing themes or representations of the disabled or nondisabled, disability studies can also be a critical tool to analyze other social formations. I find especially interesting, for example, studies that use both race and disability as critical frames for mutual exploration.

Can positive representations perform the work of “de-othering” within a structure that reaffirms the “hegemony of the norm”? Tejumola Olaniyan asks a similar question in his investigation of the poetics of othering in two films about blacks in America, Coming to America and Do the Right Thing. He cautions that simply creating positive representations is “particularly problematic for a dominated people and potentially problematizing in relations with the dominant group.” More important are “access to resources,” “abundance and variety of representations,” and the conceptual depth of representations that present difference “as a category to apprehend relationally and critically” so that a representation can “potentially turn a gaze back on itself, interrogating its position and history and relations with the object” (107, 101).
I refer to *Do the Right Thing* because Spike Lee’s movie raises in my mind one of the biggest objections to basing rights on “the right thing to do.” As Olaniyan interprets it, Lee’s depiction of the disabled character, Smiley, the stutterer, “tells us in clear terms to keep our objectifying ‘do-good’ sympathies to ourselves” and warns against universalizing assumptions of identity, both of disability and race (101). While Smiley may seem to “lack the capacity for self-representation and, therefore, to lack power,” he is the one who burns down Sal’s pizzeria (100–01). Complex representations, showing that cultural identity “refuses to be a stable otherness,” lead viewers back to history to examine interrelated processes (104). “Doing the right thing” is a discourse of charity. In addition to objectifying the disabled, discourses of charity reaffirm the power of the giver and the tradition of control through philanthropy. Charity is not the same as rights. Charity is given or withheld by the person of privilege. In the United States, charity is a business that mediates donations to the disabled, and the discourse of charity, of private giving, is deployed to limit claims to civil rights and government services. Charity, like concern, can euphemistically veil violence and oppression.

Simi Linton discusses the various ways that disability studies attempts to “wrest control of the language” and “bring to light language that reinforces the dominant culture’s views of disability” (9). The language in the *Digest’s* articles of the 1920s and 1930s suggests that the dominant culture’s attitude was less a discourse of “eugenic concern” (Barton, “Discourses” 564) and more a view of disability as “menace,” as James Trent argues in *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (4). *Digest* articles advocated hereditary improvement through “scientific” mate selection designed to weed out diseases and disabilities, and they depicted the disabled as con artists, pitiable human derelicts, or non-human defectives: “a tiny bit of flesh that stared with fishy eyes” (Barton, “Discourses” 563). “Eugenic concern” understates the real history of violence toward the disabled—including enforced institutionalization, sterilization, and even eradication through neglect or through state extermination, as in Nazi Germany. In his stunning history of mental retardation in the United States, Trent scrupulously delineates the violence against the mentally retarded and uses the language of particular social eras (idiot, feeble-minded, moron, and so on) to reveal that history which is “unavoidably manifest in the words we now find offensive” (5).

A disability studies critique of language or social issues often coincides with critiques made by other groups. Take the issue of access and the word *choice*, for example. In his discussion of African American
images in film, Olaniyan points to the importance of access to self-representation. I would argue that the Digest's stories celebrating assimilation cannot simply be understood in terms of choice, the exercising of independent and “different choices [from disability activists] in their definition of assimilated identity” (Barton, “Discourses” 574). I'd question how much access to self-representation persons with disabilities had and continue to have in the pages of the Reader's Digest.

Sometimes, though, an analysis from a disability perspective complicates established left/right politics, as in views about abortion and physician-assisted suicide. The rhetoric of choice operates here as well, as in “a woman’s right to choose.” While I support abortion rights, my thinking about abortion issues has become progressively more complicated as I’ve adopted a disability perspective. First, given the pressure of social attitudes, the word choice is deceptive. I learned—in giving birth to a disabled child myself—the immense cultural pressures arrayed against the disabled. In a culture in which, as Mitchell and Snyder state, disability is “the master trope of human disqualification,” in a culture that seeks to correct and perfect all deviations (now even through the manipulation of DNA), in a culture with fetal testing and imaging technologies, and in the face of discourses that rail against the social costs of accommodating the disabled, choosing to abort a disabled fetus becomes a coerced choice (3). Second, the discourses and practices of fetal selection contribute to the social devaluation of the lives of disabled persons as tragic, defective, and burdensome. Persons with disabilities, thriving and very much alive, are presumed to feel that their lives are not worth living. Recent legal rulings and scientific research reinforce notions that disability is something that can, should, and will be eradicated through DNA manipulation, stem cell research, and medical/legal vigilance. If a disabled infant slips through the medical screens, lawsuits can be filed. France’s equivalent to the U.S. Supreme Court ruled this year that handicapped children are entitled to compensation if their mothers were not given the chance to have an abortion. According to the BBC online news, “the case was widely described as establishing in law a disabled child’s ‘right not to be born’” (Russell). Bringing a disability perspective to public policy discussions on abortion, reproduction, and euthanasia is especially important in current debates about medical and scientific technologies because the disabled sit at a crucial intersection, having both much to gain and much to lose in this brave new world.
The Rhetoric of Assimilation
Assimilation rhetoric is powerful because it sounds "reasonable" and is, in fact, familiar. The 1990 ADA law itself is couched in similar rhetoric. "Reasonable accommodation" and "costs" defined by the needs of the business community are key concepts in its construction, as President Bush stated on signing the ADA on July 26, 1990:

The Administration and the Congress have carefully crafted the ADA to give the business community the flexibility to meet the requirements of the Act without incurring undue costs. Cost may be taken into account in determining how an employee is "reasonably accommodated," whether the removal of a barrier is "readily achievable," or whether the provision of a particular auxiliary aid would result in an "undue burden." The ADA's most rigorous access requirements are reserved for new construction where the added costs of accessible features are minimal in relation to overall construction costs. (1070-071)

The conclusion of "Discourses of Disability in the Digest" concerns a case of noncompliance with the accessibility requirements of the 1990 ADA. The Michigan Center for Independent Living sued a baseball stadium for failing to incorporate accessible dugouts in the construction of its new ballpark. Noting that there was an immediate backlash in local newspapers against the provisions of the ADA, Barton argues that a carefully crafted piece using the familiar discourses of the Reader's Digest would be "more persuasive to the Grand Rapids public than the CIL lawsuit" (576). As a rhetorician, I believe in the power of rhetorical persuasion and the importance of wielding rhetoric for action in the public forum; I do find it difficult, however, to imagine that a craftily written piece in the Reader's Digest would be more effective in enforcing compliance with the ADA than a lawsuit. Several, but not all, of the Supreme Court rulings in the last few years do seem to suggest that we are currently experiencing a backlash against disability rights. But to my knowledge, none of the cases "lost" (from a disability rights perspective) directly strike down the architectural accessibility provisions of the 1990 ADA. A spate of recent Supreme Court cases in the last two years, most of which have narrowed definitions of disability and the applicability of disability law, do illustrate that gradualism often means one step forward and two steps back.²

There is no question in my mind that gradual inclusion is indeed the path that American society has followed since the 1950s. The 1990 ADA law grew out of a thirty-four-year-long history (from 1956 to 1990) of
gradual disability-related legislative reform. President Bush, in his statement upon signing the ADA, took pains to place the new law within the context of previous legislation, several times mentioning the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. I readily grant that gradualism has produced (some) improvements in the lives of (some) persons with disabilities. I know that my family and disability community, as well as countless other Americans, have benefited from progress in education and legal rights and a more accessible environment (such as curb cuts, bus lifts, access bus service, captioning, and so on). However, differences in race, class, and gender, as well as in kinds of impairment, figure prominently in the calculus of who benefits from current improvements. People who have mental illnesses face an inhospitable environment with few services; instead of residing in mental hospitals, they are now more likely to be incarcerated in prisons. Overall, since the passage of the ADA, there has been little improvement in employment of the disabled. Seventy percent remain unemployed (Russell). Without employment, disabled people lose access to independence and self-esteem (especially in a society such as ours where work and consumption define subjectivity), and they become socially isolated.

I doubt that the Digest’s rhetoric has led the way to positive changes for the disabled, though it may follow and reflect general changes. The Digest’s eugenics discourses should both disturb and remind us that today’s “reasonable” language of gradual assimilation to the norm evolved from a past when it seemed “reasonable” to advocate institutionalization, sterilization, and even eradication. Under its facade of reasonableness, assimilation rhetoric preserves the notion that the disabled are abnormal by nature and therefore ethically can be excluded from full citizenship and human subjectivity by the “normal majority” on pragmatic grounds of cost or sociomedical arguments about eliminating disease or defect.

In contrast, disability studies begins from the proposition that what is disabling about an impairment does not come from nature but comes from social and material practices. Disability activists work to change social environments and attitudes to enable, not disenable, people with impairments. By bringing to light the history of disability, and by critiquing language, rhetoric, and social practices, disability studies seeks social transformation. Disability activists, organizations, and magazines have been successful agents for change. David Pfeiffer, editor of Disability Studies Quarterly and professor of disability studies at the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawaii in Manoa, argues
that concerted efforts by disability activists precipitated the passage of the ADA: "Disability rights issues had ... been around a long, long time, but a series of events brought them onto the national agenda" (44). Pfeiffer lists some of these events, including the protests for a deaf president at Gallaudet University in 1988; "the brilliant strategy of having people with disabilities keep daily diaries of discrimination, to recite them at committee hearings, and to mail them to Members of Congress"; the mailing of 350,000 postcards to Members of Congress in support of the ADA; and the publication of pro-ADA articles by, among others, the National Association of the Deaf’s Broadcasters, the American Federation of the Blind, the Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-Secondary Education, and the Disability Rag (44, 45). Pfeiffer concludes, "Controlling the agenda, the alternatives, and the dimensions of the debate brought victory to the supporters of the ADA in 1990" (46). It is these discourses of disability, I would argue, that have been politically effective in advancing the cause of disability rights.

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Notes

1. In Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, “Constructing.”
2. For a history of disability legislation in the U.S., as well as a description of statutes, programs, policies, and methods of administering and monitoring them, see Silverstein. For rulings by the Supreme Court on disability issues, see “The Supreme Court Collection,” Legal Information Institute http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/.
3. Russell explains, “In part, the lack of progress can be attributed to Social Security work disincentives; but other barriers factor in, such as employers’ ongoing resistance to retaining workers with disabilities, and consistently negative court outcomes that thwart successful disability discrimination lawsuits. Workers who try to assert their employment rights must wage an uphill battle in the courts. Employers are winning against disabled plaintiffs in most cases. Professor Ruth Colker, of the Ohio State University College of Law, says ADA employment lawsuit outcomes are ‘worse than results found in comparable areas of the law.’ She adds, ‘Only prisoner rights cases fare as poorly.’”

Works Cited


Olaniyan, Tejumola. "'Uplift the Race!': *Coming to America, Do the Right Thing*, and the Poetics and Politics of 'Othering.'" *Cultural Critique* 34 (Fall 1996): 91–113.


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