Introduction

The Approach

John Dewey, the famous philosopher of education, in 1895:

“It is advisable that the teacher should understand, and even be able to criticize, the general principles upon which the whole educational system is formed and administered.” (199)

As Ellen Cushman began writing about the “Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change,” in her influential article about breaking down the barriers between universities and the communities around them, she first described the steep steps of “the Approach,” a set of stairs, long in disrepair, between the city of Troy, New York, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. The Approach, for her, symbolized that which “prohibit(s) scholars from Approaching people outside the University” (374). Every day, she writes, “we reproduce this distance so long as a select few gain entrance to universities, so long as we differentiate between experts and novices, and so long as we value certain types of knowledge we can capitalize on through specialization” (374). Here is a postcard picture of how the steps used to look (see page 2).

The steps are made of a light gray stone. They are about 20 meters wide on their bottom flight, which is at the forefront of the photo, so that we look up from the very bottom. The steps narrow further up, at the point where two large cylindrical marble columns stand. The steps con-
continue to climb up to an imposing set of gates. Behind these gates there are green trees and foliage and, we assume, the university. Five people stand up near the very top of the steps and they look very small, giving perspective on just how steep and massive the approach is.

The very fact that these steps are featured in a postcard reveals the ways that such structures are the stylistic and aesthetic center of many campuses. If we were to object that such steps make the university inaccessible, many universities would make the argument that steep steps are stylistically desirable, that they fit with the template, the architectural fingerprint of the school: all the buildings are the same color, with the same size Ionic columns, maybe even the same number of stairs leading up to buildings. These counterarguments show the ways that in the construction and maintenance of the steep steps there is also a latent argument about aesthetics or appearances, one that trips over to the classroom, into ideology and into pedagogy, where teachers are also sometimes concerned about pattern, clarity, propriety—and these things are believed to be “beautiful” (access Hunter).¹ Today, the steps in this postcard are in ruins, but the ideology of the steep steps persists, at Rensselaer and elsewhere. Even as universities have become more accepting of diversity, academics tend to stay “inside,” as Ellen Cushman suggests. And the steps aren’t the only way in which the university is inaccessible, even
if they might be the most physically arresting and apparent. As a select few stay in, disability is kept out, often quite literally. If it isn’t the steep steps of this approach, it might be the ornate gates you encounter in the approach to Ivy League schools like Harvard and Princeton—gates that are reproduced in a movie like *Monsters University* as emblematic of college architecture and its ideology (more on this later).

**Lower Education**

Disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education. Or, let me put it differently: higher education has needed to create a series of versions of “lower education” to justify its work and to ground its exceptionalism, and the physical gates and steps trace a long history of exclusion.

For most of the 20th century, people with disabilities were institutionalized in asylums, “schools” for the “feeble-minded” and other exclusionary institutions, locations that became the dark shadows of the college or university, connected with residential schools, prisons, quarantines, and immigration stations in these shadows. These shadow locations also had steep steps and ornate gates, meant to hold the public out and to imprison people within, ensuring that the excluded couldn’t mix with others within society; they were connected in a perverse way to the hope that the elite would mingle and mix with one another exclusively in colleges and universities. Further, the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness.

In the early 1970s, David Rothman, a social historian of medicine, wrote a highly influential book called *The Discovery of the Asylum*. The book showed not just how asylums developed but how they allowed society to impose order through their connections with factories, hospitals, schools, and other institutions. When Rothman lists the similarities between the asylums, prisons, mental hospitals, reformatories, and almshouses developed in North America, he suggests that “there is a consensus among historians about their major characteristics”:

Confinement became the prime response to deviance;

All of these places, regardless of their official function, adopted the same patterns and regimes of order and organization and they had a “unity of design and structure”;
They were “in every sense apart from society”;
“All of the institutional routines were segmented into carefully
defined blocks of time, scrupulously maintained and punctuated by
bells”; The routine was based on “work and solitude . . . steady labor and
isolation” in which individuals are enveloped in the same work in a
parallel way;
They began as orderly and eventually became overcrowded and
corrupt;
They all housed the lowest orders of society. (xxv)

What is ironic about this list is that if you flip a few key points, you
have a great description of the universities also being developed in the
same period: fully removed, rigidly patterned, isolating, labor-intensive,
increasingly corrupted and corruptible, but for only the highest orders
of society. Perhaps the university should always have been thought of as
similar to other “total institutions”—to borrow Erving Goffman’s term.
Perhaps the college or university is in fact exactly the same as the almshouse or asylum, organizationally and even architecturally. And yet it is
viewed as the opposite. Thus the subjects in one total institution, the col-
lege, are elevated. The inmates in the other spaces are confined. Impor-
tantly: one studies; the other is studied.

As Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell have shown, “historically, dis-
abled people have been the objects of study but not the purveyors of
the knowledge base of disability” (Cultural, 198). As Tanya Titchkosky
writes, “disabled people are socially organized under the rubric of knowl-
edge bases . . . within the everyday practices and procedures of univer-
sity environments, for example, [we think of] disability as a problem in
need of a solution” and not as an “important form of critical knowledge
production within the university” (Question, 70). Disability is studied;
people with disabilities have been research resources. More than this,
higher education has been built upon such research.

It is important to map the history of this research, but also to inter-
vene in showing some of the ways that we might hope higher educa-
tion can be redesigned. We need to understand how universities work
to fully understand disability. Inversely, we really need to understand dis-
ability to understand the history and the future of higher education. To
develop this understanding, I will build upon the crucial historical work
of scholars such as Craig Steven Wilder, Heather Munro Prescott, and
Christina Cogdell, who have revealed the racist, ableist, eugenicist roots
of higher education. I will also build upon the crucial theoretical work of scholars such as Stephanie Kerschbaum, Tanya Titchkosky, Margaret Price, and Sara Ahmed who have revealed the racist, ableist, eugenic character of current academic culture. This research has allowed for an ongoing critique of the exclusive machinery of higher education and its physical, economic, affective (or emotional) costs. I will engage with all of this work carefully and extensively in this book. More broadly, this book will also bring together two specific academic fields or approaches: rhetoric and disability studies.

Disability Studies and Rhetoric

Disability studies is a field that has “emerged”—to borrow the words of one of its leading scholars, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (“Disability Studies”). There are majors, minors, graduate programs, faculty positions, and departments of disability studies at colleges and universities. These departments almost always differentiate themselves from approaches to studying disability medically, or as subject to rehabilitation and therapy. This field of disability studies takes a critical approach to disability, grounded in disability rights and foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities, maintaining that disability is a political and cultural identity, not simply a medical condition.

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary field of study. Disability studies disrupts the idea that disabled people should be defined primarily through their disabilities by others, retaining instead the right for disabled people to define their own relationships with disability. As I have shown in other work, but also (more importantly) as has been shown within the field over decades of work, disability studies critiques representations of disability as pathology, as needing to be cured or killed or eradicated, as needing to be overcome or compensated for, as an object of pity or charity, as a sign of an internal flaw or a social ill or signal from above, as isolating, as a symptom of the abuse of nature, as existing on a continuum in which one disability is always accompanied by other disabilities or, conversely, in which some disabilities are clearly better than others. In the words of Danielle Peers and Joshua St. Pierre:

Stories about us [disabled people] are boring. As predictable and ubiquitous as they are dangerous, normate narrations of our lives are as straight as they come: one-dimensional narratives of tragic loss
and/or progressive normativity. We are dying or overcoming. We become a burden or an inspiration. We desire vindication or marriage. Our entire narrative worlds are defined by our Otherness, yet revolve around the normates and the normative. These stories cut straight to the point, using—and used as—well-steeped, easily readable metaphors bolstered by the requisite piano-based musical cues. If we didn’t know us better, we would bore us. (1)

As Lennard Davis and other disability studies scholars have pointed out, the categories of normal and abnormal, able and disabled are invented and enforced in service of “a certain kind of society,” in service of particular ideologies (Enforcing, 9–11). This “certain type of society” or ableist “reality” that Davis alludes to has been created, and is maintained, through higher education. Further, as Douglas Baynton has written, “disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups. . . . the concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them” (33). Again, higher education has been the place where the dividing lines of this discrimination have been decided. Thus, when Garland-Thomson suggests that disability studies has “emerged” as an academic discipline, this is a notable spatial metaphor. What disability studies has emerged out of are institutions in which disability as a negative concept, as a form of disqualification, was invented and applied and cemented. Even if disability studies has emerged, it has emerged only partially from within an architecture in which ableism has an incredibly powerful hold. In discussing this emergence, it is essential to understand that disability studies has emerged into higher education, the location so powerfully responsible for the suppression of disabled people. And if disability studies has emerged in academia, this emergence cannot overwrite the activist, community-based roots of the disability rights movement, even when these connections and roots are often ignored.

But let me pause here to define some terms. Because higher education employs logics of both ableism as well as disablism. “Disablism” can be defined as “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities” (Kumari Campbell, 4). Disablism, in short, negatively constructs disability. Disablism negatively constructs both the values and the material circumstances around people with disabilities. Disablism says that there could be nothing worse than
being disabled, and treats disabled people unfairly as a result of these values. Ableism, on the other hand, instead of situating disability as bad and focusing on that stigma, positively values able-bodiedness. In fact, ableism makes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness compulsory. Disability constructs disability as negative quite directly and literally. Ableism renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default. The title of this book focuses on the term ableism not because disablism isn’t present in higher education and academia—it absolutely is—and disablism can never be fully disconnected from ableism. But academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism. In fact, few cultural institutions do a better or more comprehensive job of promoting ableism. What we also learn from higher education is that disablism is almost always wrapped into, and sometimes hidden within, ableism. That is, to value ability through something like the demand to overcome disability, or a research study to cure disability, there is also an implicit belief that being disabled is negative and to be avoided at all costs. This belief then leads to structures in which disabled people live in poverty, are underemployed, and so on. As activist and scholar Lydia Brown writes, “ableism is not some arbitrary list of ‘bad words,’ as much as language is a tool of oppression. Ableism is violence, and it kills” (n.p.).

The book then moves back and forth between a perspective from this “emergence” of disability studies, a perspective in which we can use disability studies to effectively critique education, and a perspective in which disability is still actively submerged or controlled within academia, in which there is no more ableist location than the university.

To facilitate this movement between spheres, it helps to bring disability studies together with rhetoric. Rhetoricians focus on the uses of language to persuade or to change people’s actions and opinions. Most people think of rhetoric only in a negative sense—as the intentional misuse of language to mislead and misdirect. Yet rhetoricians recognize the ways that words and languages and meaning-making systems shape beliefs, values, institutions, and even bodies—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively, often powerfully. One simple way to define rhetoric is to say that it is the study of all of communication. But more specifically, rhetoricians foreground the persuasive potential of all texts, linking language to power. As Melanie Yergeau and John Duffy write in an article defining autism and rhetoric, “rhetoric functions as a powerfully shaping instru-
ment for creating conceptions of identity and positioning individuals relative to established social and economic hierarchies. A function of the rhetorical scholar is to identify such powerfully shaping instruments and their effects upon individuals, including disabled individuals” (n.p.). As they argue, rhetoric is not only useful for studying disability, it is necessary, indispensable.

In previous work I have defined rhetoric as the strategic study of the circulation of power through communication (access Disability Rhetoric). Further, I believe that we should recognize rhetoric as the circulation of discourse through the body. This circulation takes on added meaning when we combine rhetorical study with what we might call “institutional critique” and with “rhetorical space.” Institutions (and their geographies) are powerfully rhetorical, and this rhetorical power shapes the bodies within these spaces. Finally, then: colleges and universities are rhetorically constructed. It isn’t necessary to be a rhetorician to understand this shaping. But all stakeholders in higher education can utilize rhetorical tools both to better understand academia and to change it.

James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeff Grabill, and Libby Meyers wrote about the rhetorical methodology they call institutional critique, a means of carefully interrogating how organizations are put together. They noted that “the materiality of institutions is constructed with the participation of rhetoric” (625, italics mine). One builds academia as one imagines its spaces. It follows that stakeholders can also “change disciplinary practices through the reform of institutional structures” (619). As Amy Wan shows (channeling philosopher John Dewey), the classroom is a “protopublic” space (31). This term means that the classroom shapes larger communities. There is tremendous potential, and tremendous responsibility, then, to examine these buildings we work in, and how they are involved in building a larger social and public space outside of these walls (and gates and stairs).

These institutional structures can then be understood through the lens of what feminist rhetorician Roxanne Mountford calls “rhetorical space.” Mountford urges us to consider “the effect of physical spaces on communicative event[s]”; the ways that “rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history upon them, but also, perhaps, something else: a physical representation of relationships and ideas” (42). She argues that space “carries with it the sediment of cultural tradition, of the social imaginary” (63). Richard Marback builds on this argument, claiming that a location can be seen as a “nexus of cultural, historical, and material con-
ditions” of oppression, and can become a “physical representation of . . . injustice” (1). Simply: one can read inequity and inequality in the buildings, patterns, and positions of the university. *Academic Ableism* will both study the university as a rhetorical space that holds a history of injustice in its architecture, but will also seek to reshape these spaces through critique, persuasion, and pedagogy. If rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them.

Such an approach flips back and forth between physical space and rhetorical space. That is, while rhetorical space may take as its inspiration or focus actual physical structures, it extends these structures to better understand how they also discipline or influence ideas. Something like the steep stairs outside of a university lecture hall can be critiqued as a spatial and architectural feature that excludes; the stairs can also be understood as making a rhetorical argument or sending a message at the same time; and also at the very same time the stairs should push us to understand that other features of the institution that may not be as immediately recognizable to us, also set up steep steps—and these can range from the subject matter being spoken about in that lecture hall, to the rote, stand-and-deliver model of pedagogy and its toll on many students and many teachers, to the actual cost of being in that lecture hall in the first place. When we bring together a study of rhetorical space, institutional critique, and disability studies, we have to understand that all of these things as connected.

This connected reading shows that while the stairs may keep out certain bodies and exclude certain disabilities, institutions don’t just make it hard to get around in wheelchairs or on crutches—though this is absolutely part of how academia excludes. Instead, physical inaccessibility is always linked—not just metaphorically—to mental, intellectual, social, and other forms of inaccessibility.

Disability studies scholars often show how disability is represented as a catch-all. People with physical disabilities are assumed to be cognitively disabled, representations of physical disability often rely on reinforcement from suggestions of mental or physical deficit, something we might call “disability drift” (access Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*). Drift is linked to the idea that some disabilities (i.e., physical disabilities) are better than others (i.e., mental or cognitive). On campus, this hierarchy is very real. To a certain degree, all disabilities on college campuses are invisible—until an accommodation is granted, they have no legal reality.
But so-called invisible disabilities are particularly fraught in an educational setting in which students with disabilities are already routinely and systematically constructed as faking it, jumping a queue, or asking for an advantage. The stigma of disability is something that drifts all over—it can be used to insinuate inferiority, revoke privilege, and step society very freely. But the legal rights that come with disability do not drift very easily at all.

Ableism drifts. Therefore, so must accommodations and access. When educators recognize physical inaccessibility, they can and should read intellectual and social inaccessibility into this space. We currently live in a society in which one single disability can be linked to any other disability in a negative way. But could we live in a society in which the accessibility we create for one person can also lead us to broaden and expand accessibility for all? On the way to this world, educators at least have to recognize that physical access is not “enough”—it is not where accessibility should stop.

Disability is also used to shore up other stigmatization—very importantly, the categories of gender, race, and sexuality have relied upon the attribution of biological inferiority, for instance. This is another way disability drifts. So I will be trying—very carefully—to show how academia has used ableism (and continues to use ableism) to marginalize specific groups of students.

It may seem problematic to group different disabilities and different communities of people with disabilities, including those who may be labeled or stigmatized, but don’t claim disability identity (and may even disavow it). Certainly, perspectives on disability vary and are constantly contested. There are many different disabilities represented within disability studies—visible and invisible, physical and mental, et cetera and so on. There are tensions created by this grouping; and on the other hand the grouping constantly grows as new alliances and commonalities are found. Disability studies creates common ground in the experience of stigma and oppression, in the fight for more positive representations, and in the ongoing struggle for physical and intellectual access. In the end, what counts as a disability (and especially what does not) is of much greater interest to those who seek to criticize disability studies from outside of the field. Unfortunately, I will need to dig much more deeply into these accusations of “faking” disability throughout this book.

The goal here is not to deconstruct the concept of disability as it attaches to certain bodies by saying that this person or that group is not disabled. Instead, the goal is to affirm disability as a shared and positive
identity, while challenging the use of disability as something that can be used to disqualify or stigmatize. We cannot recognize the foundations and futures of academia if we are constantly dodging the idea of disability. Instead, educators have to recognize these very foundations and futures as being built upon ableism, and as—literally—being built upon the bodies of disabled people.

**Eugenics and Colonial Science**

Another key term within the history of higher education is eugenics. I define eugenics as the “science” of controlling who lives, who procreates, who thrives, and who dies, based on flawed ideas about our genetic makeup. For instance, as I have shown in other work, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, eugenics characterized and drove North American national health and immigration policy. In addition to the “negative” eugenic programs of sterilization, lynching, and so on, carried out over decades across the country, immigration was ideal for “positive” eugenics, literally offering opportunities to control and edit the gene pool, using immigration stations as an elaborate sieve (access Dolmage, Disabled Upon Arrival). Eugenics led to practices and processes that selected and sorted bodies into geographical areas, classes, and regimes of discipline. Eugenics also inspired genocide. Eugenics was a philosophy, a dogma, a rhetoric, a religion.

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, eugenics was “anointed guardian of [American] health and character,” as Nancy Ordover has shown (xiv). Historians have come to understand that eugenics was a powerful rhetoric as well as a series of practices. As L. Glenna Leland, Margaret A. Gollnick, and Stephen S. Jones show in their research on course offerings, the teaching of actual classes on eugenics, especially at larger land grant institutions, was widespread at North American schools, providing an “opportunity structure” for eugenics to become a widespread and transnational social movement. Simply, the teaching of eugenics at North American schools markedly sped the growth and popularity of the ideas. The authors go on to say that these “opportunity structures persisted even after eugenics faded as an international movement” following the Holocaust (67). In sociology, an “opportunity structure” names the conditions or factors that might empower people to create social movements. A university class is a particularly powerful, authoritative, legitimizing opportunity structure. In this case, teaching
eugenics explicitly, or even simply asking students to record their own family trees and then mail these to the Eugenics Record Office (access Krisch), these curricular inclusions created the environment in which eugenics could germinate and grow as a movement.

In 1911, a leader of the American eugenics movement, Charles Davenport wrote the extremely influential *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, a book that “was assigned reading in many of the eugenics courses that were springing up at colleges and universities across the country, and was cited in more than one-third of the high school biology textbooks of the era” (Cohen, 112). In the book he suggested that “summarizing the review of recent conditions of immigration,” after he had looked in depth at each group, “it appears certain that, unless conditions change of themselves or are radically changed, the population of the United States will, on account of the great influx of blood from South-Eastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality” (219). This was the lesson being taught in North American classrooms.

We also know that the American Eugenics Society, for instance, began to reach out to American intellectuals to insinuate eugenic rhetoric into American higher education. As Henry Laughlin, one of the leaders of the Society wrote, in 1922:

> Teachers of biology, sociology and psychology are finding it profitable to include in their practical laboratory work, provisions for building up, by the research method, authentic family histories with special reference to the descent and recombination of natural physical and mental qualities. . . . the average University student is able to compile a valuable biological record of the family within a few months’ time. This record centers about the student himself, and, thus, when analyzed, throws light upon the origin of his natural capacities and limitations, and upon his potentiality as a parent in passing on particular traits. (3)

He continues: “this cooperative work promises to be not only profitable from the standpoint of the University giving the particular course, but also in building up biological family records of the better American families” (4). In 1925, 1,457 of these records were collected.

Angus McLaren argues that, for Canadian eugenicists, their final “chief success” was “in popularizing biological arguments” (67). And as
Francis Galton wrote in his 1909 *Chapters in Eugenics*, “The first and main point is to secure the general intellectual acceptance of Eugenics as a hopeful and most important study. Then let its principles work into the heart of the nation, who will gradually give practical effect to them in ways that we may not wholly foresee” (43). Clearly, getting eugenics into the curriculum of higher education was a way to plant a seed.

So, the actual curriculum at North American colleges and universities both fueled the rise of eugenics and allowed eugenics to continue to be taught in more subtle or covert ways well after the Holocaust. If you doubt this, I encourage you to search the historical course catalogues at your own school for the word eugenics.

Not only did eugenics actually reshape the North American population through things like immigration restriction, not only did it reshape families through its campaigns for “better breeding,” not only did it reshape bodies through medical intervention, but it reshaped how North Americans thought about bodies and minds.

Academia is implicated very deeply in this history. Academia was the place from which eugenic “science” gained its funding and legitimization so that eugenicists could undertake massive projects in both “positive” and “negative” eugenics. But the university was also itself a laboratory for “positive” eugenics, a place where the “right” combinations of genes could be brought together (“the better families”) and where eugenic ideals and values could be conveyed to the future teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals on campus.

As Craig Steven Wilder showed in his landmark study of the racist roots of academia, *Ebony and Ivy*, in the United States, “European powers deployed colleges to help defend and regulate their colonial possessions and they turned to [the slave trade] to fund these efforts” (9). “College founders and officers used enslaved people to raise buildings, maintain campuses, and enhance their institutional wealth” while they also “trained the personnel and cultivated the ideas that accelerated and legitimated the dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans” (Wilder, 10). Other U.S. college founders raised money from England, ostensibly to educate “barbarian” natives. Henry Dunster, Harvard’s president, did so when his institution was running low on cash—building the Indian college in 1654 (Wright, 78). These founders raised money to convert “lost heathens” but really furthered “their own political, economic and educational agendas, which included Indian education as an ancillary aim at best” while they acted pious and righteous, while they “revitalized [their] colonial enterprises” (Wright, 78).
In Canada, with a different but similarly devastating history of enslavement and dispossession, (nonetheless) university founders relied on what Ian Mosby calls “colonial science.” I would define that as experimentation on aboriginal peoples in the name of or under the disguise of reeducation or assimilation, as well as the depletion of their connections to the environment and the deletion of their own forms of knowledge. This colonial science was thoroughly institutionalized and reinforced by government policy, at the same time establishing the knowledge and power of universities. These eugenic practices, and in fact eugenics itself, can be seen as the invention of the North American university, which in turn was also built upon the exploitation of people with disabilities. Colleges and universities were colonial projects—places for settlers to continue the work of forcibly changing their landscapes and these landscapes’ inhabitants, but also as sites of a sort of internalized imperialism, because universities were mainly where North Americans went to Europeanize. Eugenics was not just implicated in these moves, but was in many ways the perfect ideological vehicle for the settler colonialism of higher education. More simply, academia became the place where North Americans could most efficiently destroy what and who came before European settlement. Eugenics—the idea that certain bodies were biologically inferior—was rhetorical fuel for this very efficient destruction.

In Canada, there has been some public acknowledgment of this history, following the Canadian government’s settlement and apology for the ongoing abuse of aboriginal children in residential schools. As the opening passage of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Report, developed as part of this ongoing apology, states: “For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (1). As indigenous scholar Richard Atleo writes in Principles of Tsawalk, the evolutionary ideas of Darwin were effectively transformed into eugenic rhetorics that were employed against indigenous people because they “created, for colonizers, a view of differences between people that was and is characterized by superiority and inferiority” (9). Absorbed early into political and imperialist domination ideologies, Darwin’s theories of natural determinism justified the white European’s central mythological conviction of racial superiority (Saul, 9). As Canadian public intellectual John Ralston Saul writes, “Canadians of
European origin decided that ‘Indians,’ ‘Half-breeds’ and ‘Esquimaux’ were among the destined losers when faced by our superiority—our Darwinian destiny” (12).

Immediately below, I am about to provide some specific evidence of this eugenic research, and it is potentially upsetting or triggering.

As Mosby and others have proven, universities provided the capital and the research to solidify this invented superiority. Mosby’s research, for instance, reveals that children at residential schools were used in nutritional experiments. As further evidence continues to be uncovered, it is clear that these indigenous children were seen as readily available research resources. The construction of native youth as eugenically inferior coincided with their usage as test subjects. They were disabled by eugenic and settler colonial ideology and then disabled—literally, starved—by science.

As James W. Trent, author of Inventing the Feeble Mind, and others have shown, the history of eugenic research, testing, and promotion at Western institutions such as Stanford and Harvard shows us that universities have been the arbiter of ability and the inventor of disability as a sign of eugenic deterioration—as the evidence that somehow some genes, some racial groups, were innately disabled. North American academics have delineated and disciplined the border between able and disabled. These line-drawers were able to solidify their own positions as they closed the doors upon others. The disabled, in this history, were more than left out: disabled people have been experimented upon, sterilized, imprisoned, and killed.

As Trent has pointed out, North American academics systematically developed the means to segregate society based upon arbitrary ideas of ability—the university was the place for the most able, the mental institution or asylum or school for the “feeble-minded” the space for the “least.” Charles Benedict Davenport, a Harvard PhD and instructor, and David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University, are recognized as the fathers of the U.S. eugenics movement. Davenport, perhaps the eugenics movement’s greatest proponent, defined the movement as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding” (in Quigley, 1). The eugenics movement resulted in the institutionalization of millions of North Americans in asylums, “idiot schools,” and other warehousing institutions, where people were abused, neglected, and, often, forcibly sterilized. Many children from large immigrant families were shipped to these “asylum schools,” women were incarcerated as
“hysterical,” and they housed a radically disproportionate number of indigenous people, African Americans, Eastern Europeans, and lower-class children, all expendable according to eugenic thinking. Starr Jordan and Davenport worked to apply these ideas to bodies they deemed weak, and this was all made possible by the privileged position of these men within North America’s “finest schools.” These leaders didn’t just make universities their own platforms for their own eugenic ideas; they made universities societal platforms for the very popular movement of eugenics; they made universities both places where you could learn about eugenics, and they created universities as experiments and laboratories for eugenics, built out of bricks and mortar.

As Heather Munro Prescott, a medical historian, has shown, “by the late 1920s, more than three hundred colleges and universities offered courses that covered eugenic themes, with as many as twenty thousand students enrolled” (102). Hygiene departments at these schools also advocated for “euthenics,” “the notion that American racial stock in general could be improved through better nutrition, health care, and other preventive health measures” (102), and colleges and universities were some of the best places to implement these measures. Mental hygiene programs became prevalent at U.S. schools in the ‘20s and ‘30s. Despite this, many schools did not want to publicize their presence: “faculty members were skeptical of mental hygienists, believing them to be coddling students who could not meet standards” because “the popular conflation of mental illness and mental ‘defectiveness’ was all too common” (120, 121). These efforts proved to be tinged by homophobia and antisemitism, and powerfully shaped by sexism: “the focus on protecting women’s bodies and minds reflected widely-held beliefs about the physical and mental characteristics of the “weaker sex”” while “concerns about race suicide and racial degeneration would surface in discussions about the health of college men, serving to justify the development of hygiene programs aimed at building their bodies along with their brains” (29). Thus “sex education programs, in the form of family life education, sought not only to control the spread of venereal disease but also to eradicate the ‘homosexual menace’ on campus” (127). It’s not much of a leap to begin to understand how these two projects came at odds on “coeducational” campuses: How could women be protected while men were also encouraged to propagate? As Andrew Lucchesi shows, at many schools (including the City University of New York, where he traces a specific lineage) the mental hygiene or student health movements led directly into the creation of disability services offices. Elsewhere, or sometimes
concurrently, these led to counseling offices and the current trend of “campus wellness,” which might be defined as a kind of hybrid of mental hygiene and physical health.

Not only did eugenic ideas actually reshape the North American body, eugenics reshaped how North Americans thought about bodies and minds, and this had overt curricular reinforcement. But more than this, as Eileen Welsome, James Trent, Vera Hassner Sharav, and others have argued, institutional basements were labs for the social and biological experimentation of scholars from the Ivory Towers. For instance, institutions for “feeble minded” children like Wrentham or Fernald in Boston were tightly connected to Harvard and MIT. Wrentham was opened in 1906. In the 1950s, “residents” at this and the Fernald School (founded 1854) were fed radioactive isotopes in a scientific experiment. Young boys at these schools signed up to be part of the “science club,” a name invented by the MIT faculty, and they were given Mickey Mouse watches and armbands, and taken on special outings, in return for taking part in a “nutritional study.” Seventy-four boys were fed oatmeal injected with radioactive iron or calcium (Welsome, 231, 235). Welsome suggests there was “nothing unique” about this study, as the school had become a “veritable laboratory” with a “captive population” for academics from Boston (231, 233).

I could go on: Paul Yakovlev, a Harvard scientist and resident doctor at several institutions, built a collection of nearly 1,000 brains, turning institution morgues into labs and making some young boys dissect these specimens (Welsome, 233). His collection was later donated to Harvard, where they are still proudly displayed. Fernald School came to be known by Boston academics as “the zoo” because of the wide range of ailments represented there, and the bodies held there for easy viewing and study. Many of the pictures used (and still found) in medical textbooks came from these schools. These phrenological and physiognomical (now renamed “neuropathological”) studies, along with the genetic studies of eugenicist like Henry Goddard and others at such institutions, led to a catalogue of dysgenic deterioration, the inverse of the pursuit of perfection at the university. Upward academic movement was fueled by the objectified bodies and minds in these basements, which the steep steps also reached down towards.

Let’s remember as well the fact that this entire map of academia is already superimposed over indigenous land that was stolen, swindled, appropriated. For instance, when Harvard created their aforementioned Indian College in the 1650s, they did so by grabbing a parcel of land
that had not long ago been forcibly taken from the Wampanoag—so that they could turn around and Christianize the Wampanoag, most of whom became terribly sick from attending Harvard, while others were killed as traitors for working as research assistants to Harvard professors like John Eliot (access Blood and Land by J. C. H King). On the campus of my undergraduate alma mater, the University of British Columbia, a longhouse was built on campus with the collaboration of the local Musqueam First Nation, and opened around the time that I was a student there. What wasn’t included? The surrounding nearly 1,000 acres of land that had, since time immemorial, been an educational ground for the Musqueam, and continues to be the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Musqueam people. UBC has now fully monetized all of this land—converting this Musqueam territory first by building campus buildings and housing, but then by creating a UBC Real Estate Corporation to develop condominiums, condos that now sell, at a minimum, for $1.5 million, bringing 8,000 private residents onto campus in under 30 years, and growing the university’s endowment from $100 million to $1.2 billion as a result (access Rosenfeld). Campus mapping decidedly cannot begin just when the first academic building goes up. And clearly, one entailment of colonial development is that all available resources will be extracted as efficiently as possible.

In Canada, since their very beginnings, universities were deeply invested in making careful, long-term investments in social and even agricultural programs to erase First Nations (access Daschuk). Even more specifically, “during the war and early postwar period—bureaucrats, doctors, and scientists recognized the problems of hunger and malnutrition, yet increasingly came to view Aboriginal bodies as ‘experimental materials’ and residential schools and Aboriginal communities as kinds of ‘laboratories’ that they could use to pursue a number of different political and professional interests” (Mosby, 148). The scientists’ ambitions were always more powerful and clear than their ethics. “In the end, these studies did little to alter the structural conditions that led to malnutrition and hunger in the first place and, as a result, did more to bolster the career ambitions of the researchers than to improve the health of those identified as being malnourished” (Mosby, 148). Further, “the early architects of Canada’s residential school system saw the schools as social laboratories in which people’s beliefs and ways could be refashioned. But as these experiments made clear, the systematic neglect and mistreatment of students in these schools also made them into ide-
al scientific laboratories” (Mosby, 162). What has not been studied as deeply—or, really, at all—in Canada is that such experiments have also been performed on people with disabilities for over one hundred years. For instance, the Children’s Psychiatric Research Institute, a residential “school” in London, Ontario, was in part established because researchers from the University of Western Ontario were tired of having to travel all the way to Orillia, Ontario, to access patients and research subjects at the Hospital School there (access Zarfas). This research strengthened the career ambitions of the researchers, and the research reputations of the universities from which they came.

Institutions like the Hospital School also benefited greatly from their affiliation with research and academia. As Julia Oparah similarly shows, collaborations with universities have provided corporations, government initiatives, and the industrial complex in the United States with technology and with research capital, but also with “moral capital because of their association with progressive values” and “liberal credentials” (101). Universities have generally been given a blank check and open doors to perform research at North American spaces of incarceration for over a 150 years, and in so doing have fortified these exclusionary spaces and strengthened them by wrapping them in academic values. Bringing in academics to head asylums and “idiot schools” brought moral capital as well; association with universities likely protected these segregated spaces from more careful public scrutiny and critique.

Thus, one way to map the spaces of academia and disability would be to look at the ways land was parceled out in North America in the late 1800s (parceling that always took place as though this was settlers’ land to divide up as they pleased). While universities were popping up in urban settings and on land grant tracts, asylums and “idiot schools” were popping up in other, nearby rural settings—on old farms and “abandoned” land. Yet the two institutions were often tightly hinged or yoked together. For instance, as Katie Aubrecht has shown, the University of Toronto had roots as an asylum for women (9). Later, the same buildings expanded, multiplied, and the university became a colonial “experiment” as a place to reproduce British traditions on stolen land (9).

From within one privileged space, academics were deciding the fate of others in similar (sometimes identical), yet somehow now pathological, other, and impure spaces. This eugenic program relied on the attribution of disability to society’s Others and is tightly connected to scientific
racism and sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, the control of reproductive rights, the creation a bifurcated workforce, even a global capitalist system. The legacy of this invention is still part of our academic identity.

Snapshots of Exclusion

In these ways, disability has been studied at the university and at the college, where research has also advanced a series of disabling studies. Yet this book is featured within one of the first book series in North America devoted to disability studies as an academic discipline. Thus you might think that there will be a narrative of progress here, moving toward more equitable approaches to disability and a disavowal of the legacy of academic eugenics.

Yet as disability studies scholar David Bolt and others have shown, even though “disability is relevant to most if not all disciplines” in the contemporary academy, there is a “critical avoidance [and a] lack of critical engagement” with disability that evidences a “manifestly academic form of Othering” (2). While academics will talk about health, or the body, they will rarely talk about disability studies, rarely engage with the authority of disabled people on these matters, and rarely locate their work within the field of disability studies itself. As David Mitchell argues, the root cause of this is “unabashed commitment of universities to the reproduction of practitioners of normalization as the terms of exchange in the awarding of higher education degrees” (18–19). Universities create doctors and special educators and therapists who learn how to rehabilitate or cure disability, or how to tokenize or minimally include it. Seeing disability as fixable is very, very different from seeing disability as desirable, or understanding disability subjectivity as diversifying a “stagnating cultural knowledge base about differential embodiment” (David Mitchell, 19). In short, educating people to erase and diminish disability ensures limitations on our knowledge about bodies and minds.

Moreover, the continued struggle to fight for small accommodations for students with disabilities also ensures that perhaps we are now in the era of people with disabilities fighting to get the chance to study at all. Educators must recognize both the long history of exclusion and experimentation upon people with disabilities, as well as the more recent history of academic ableism experienced by disabled students. I begin this exploration with some numbers, and some anecdotal facts, all wrapped together to give a snapshot of disability and higher education today.
The university sorts the population by a medicalized and legalistic definition of “ability” as effectively now as it ever has. Universities continue to function to keep certain groups of individuals out of the work force and away from status positions, and away from knowledge and dialogue and power, and not just through admissions. Thirteen percent of U.S. citizens 25 and older with a disability have a bachelor’s degree or higher. This compares with 31 percent for those with no disability (Census). Twenty-seven percent of Canadians have university degrees. But only 17.6 percent of Canadians with “mild or moderate” disabilities have postsecondary degrees, and only 8.8 percent of those with “severe or very severe” disabilities have a degree (Statistics Canada). In the United Kingdom, “disabled people are around 3 times as likely not to hold any qualifications compared to non-disabled people, and around half as likely to hold a degree-level qualification” (UK Labour).

While, recently, more students with disabilities are enrolling than in previous eras in the United States, “nearly two thirds are unable to complete their degrees within six years” (Smith, n.p.). This shows how the university is a sorting gate but also a holding pen. This impact is doubled for students with disabilities because if they do graduate it takes them at least 25 percent longer to complete the same degree requirements as non-disabled students (Looker and Lowe). Just 41 percent of students with learning disabilities complete their postsecondary education, compared to 52 percent of the U.S. general population (Cortiella and Horowitz; Walpole and Chaskes). As Wessel et al. show, “students with disabilities, when compared with their counterparts without disabilities, were more likely to delay their college attendance a year or more after finishing high school (43 versus 32 percent). They were also more likely to have earned a GED or alternative high school credential (12 versus 6 percent), to have dependents other than a spouse (25 versus 13 percent), and to have financial and family obligations that potentially conflicted with their schooling” (117).

Disabled students are likely to have up to 60 percent more student debt by the time they graduate. As Sarah Mohamed reveals, “debt is particularly onerous for students with disabilities who consequently require more time to complete their degree or diploma [and] this is a major contributing factor to persons with disabilities having lower application, admission and graduation rates as well as higher rates of leaving and switching programs” (n.p.). These statistics are skewed because they only account for the students who receive accommodations. What would the overall retention and graduation rates be for all students with
disabilities regardless of documentation or accommodation? Because despite the fact that one in seven Canadians has a disability, only 2 percent of Canadian students actually seek disability accommodations and—unbelievably—8 percent of Canadian colleges or universities have reported having no students with disabilities at all (Fichten et al.). The simple extrapolation tells us that at least 100,000 and probably more like 200,000 Canadian postsecondary students need accommodations but never seek them. In the United States, some studies show that two-thirds of college students “don’t receive accommodations simply because their colleges don’t know about their disabilities” (Grasgreen, n.p.). Those who do seek accommodations are likely to do so only in their third or fourth year of school. In the UK, in 2015/2016, 176,480 postsecondary students were known to have a disability—that’s 12.29 percent (Higher Education Statistical Agency). According to the most recent statistics, published in 2016, in the United States, 11.1 percent students were known to have disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics). But whatever the numbers, and whatever the statistics tell us about how dire prospects might be for disabled students, the statistics only speak for the very small number of disabled students who successfully navigate the complicated accommodation process to seek help.

The economics of accommodation might tell us that universities get the outcomes they pay for. The most recent Association of Higher Education and Disability (2008) survey of U.S. disability services offices revealed that “the average annual DS office budget was $257,289 (SD=$306,471)” (Harbour, 41). The numbers in Canada are very similar. That’s the entire office budget. That is about what a dean at an Ontario university makes, on average. It’s about what any U.S. college pays its chancellor. It’s less than one-sixth of the average salary for a U.S. college football coach. So a dean or assistant coach makes as much in a year as the average school spends on all students with disabilities. Deans and football coaches are also seeing their salaries climb precipitously. Those are growth industries. The same can’t be said for these office budgets. The ratio at these offices was one staff member per 80 students with disabilities (Harbour, 52). In Canada, there are barely more than 200 professionals employed to provide disability accommodations at Canadian colleges and universities, and so the rough staff-to-student ratio or “caseload” is somewhere between 1:125 to 1:250 (Fichten et al., 73). Offices of disability services are thus clearly overworked and underfunded. Thus we shouldn’t really be surprised that the number of college and university students identified as having disabilities is drastically below the
average within the general population. It shouldn’t be surprising that, for instance, while 94 percent of learning-disabled high school students get assistance, only 17 percent of college students with learning disabilities do (Krupnick, n.p.). These offices are already working above capacity, and may have implicit incentives or restraints, or both, that minimize the supports they can offer and the ways that students might be able to access assistance. This underfunding also tells the rest of the university that disability doesn’t matter.

The underfunding should also be linked to other pressing trends in higher education. For instance, the impact on disabled faculty is similarly remarkable. As a teacher using the pseudonym Alice K. Adjunct wrote in a *Disability Studies Quarterly* article in 2008:

> Unfortunately, the opportunities for Ph.D.s with disabilities to become full professors are growing less, rather than more, available. Research suggests that there is still a pervasive atmosphere of malignant neglect toward faculty accommodation. This neglect, coupled with the explosively expanding shift toward an adjunct, rather than tenured, academic workforce bode ill for aspiring professors with disabilities. The adjunct economy adds yet one more inherent workplace disadvantage to the load of them already borne . . . by new Ph.D.s with disabilities. (n.p.)

Recent statistics show very low numbers of tenure-track professors with disabilities nationwide: just 3.6 percent, based on a U.S. Department of Education study in 2004. There is no data available on the exact number of disabled professors pushed into the adjunct ranks, but given the general trends around employment discrimination against disabled people, we can assume that the majority of disabled Ph.D.s who do teach, do so as adjuncts. As Alice K. Adjunct wrote, “meanwhile, students suffer. The low pay, negligible administrative support and packed schedules inherent to the adjunct system prevent able-bodied professors from doing their best for their students” and “these barriers to great teaching loom even higher for adjunct lecturers with disabilities” (n.p.).

On the other side of the scale of academic prestige and privilege, the managerial class on campuses has grown. And since the 2008 financial crisis, student debt has risen precipitously. What’s the connection? Interestingly, the universities in the United States with the top 25 highest executive pay rates also had the worst student debt crisis, with “the sharpest rise in student debt . . . when executive compensation soared
the highest”; with “administrative spending outstripping scholarship spending by more than 2 to 1 at state schools with the highest-paid presidents”; with “part-time adjunct faculty increasing 22 percent faster than the national average” at these schools while “permanent faculty declined dramatically as a percentage of all faculty” (Wood and Erwin, n.p.). All of these statistics come from Marjorie Wood and Andrew Erwin’s study “The One Percent at State U,” in which they suggest that “state universi-
ties have come under increasing criticism for excessive executive pay, soaring student debt, and low-wage faculty labor. In the public debate, these issues are often treated separately,” but their “findings suggest these issues are closely related and should be addressed together in the future” (n.p.). While I am unable to connect their data with rates of investment in disability services and with the adjunctification of disabled PhDs, it is certain that the drop in scholarship money and the general increase in student debt impacts disabled students disproportionately, and that the rise of the academic “one percent” is bad for all students—and most teachers, amplifying the employment discrimination that disabled people experience.

But the structural and financial details are just one part of this picture because the process of seeking accommodations for those students who actually do try to do access them is so difficult, the path strewn with bar-
riers.

Students with disabilities often meet peers who have little familiarity with disabilities, hold stigmas about people with disabilities, or even consider academic accommodations for students with disabilities to be an unfair advantage (Olney & Kim). It is not uncommon for students with disabilities to find themselves in a position of explaining to faculty details about eligibility for accommodations, the accommodation process, and the range of available support to students with disabilities on campus (Cawthon & Cole; Ryan). These same faculty are very likely to believe—just as students do—that the accommodations are an unfair advantage (O’Shea and Meyer).

For most students who seek accommodations for our classes, they aren’t allowed to know what the actual range of accommodations might be. Instead, they have to go in to disability services, offer up their diagnosis, and have that diagnosis matched with a stock set of accommodations. In other exchanges, students might be asked by disability services to “tell us what you need”—and again students have to guess. Just imagine how much further this disadvantages students from other cultures, first-generation college and university students, and other students who
might not fully understand the culture of higher education. Throughout the book, I will explore the toll this accommodation process takes.

Another crucial but drastically understudied aspect of disability in higher education: How does disability diagnosis intersect with other markers of difference? We know that “African American males are disproportionately placed into categories of special education that are associated with extremely poor outcomes” at the K-12 level (Losen and Gillespie). Yet education researcher Joy Banks has shown that “African American students with disabilities experience difficulty accessing disability support services and appropriate accommodations” at colleges and universities (28). So how can it be that for the same group of students, a disability diagnosis at the K-12 level can be hastily applied, and will speed them into the school-to-prison pipeline, and at the postsecondary level is so much more difficult to get? As Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, points out in an interview:

> [Y]outh of color, particularly those in ghetto communities, find themselves born into the cage. . . . The cage is the unequal educational opportunities these children are provided at a very early age coupled with the constant police surveillance they’re likely to encounter, making it very likely that they’re going to serve time. Middle-class white children, children of privilege, are afforded the opportunity to make a lot of mistakes and still go on to college, still dream big dreams. But for kids who are born in the ghetto in the era of mass incarceration, the system is designed in such a way that it traps them, often for life.” (n.p.)

Further bars within this cage metaphor, then, are the disability diagnoses that might be applied to these students.

What about international students? While many schools are targeting these students and charging them quite a bit more tuition than domestic students, and while the number of international students in the West climbs every year, very few schools consider the difficulty these students may have getting the diagnoses required to obtain accommodations, or dealing with other linguistic and cultural barriers to access. Will they be eligible for government support programs? How will they access doctors? Will diagnostic tests even be offered in languages other than English? Is the passive approach to their support in fact a form of immigration restriction? That is, if higher education is a pathway to recruiting talented immigrants, could a lack of disability support act to filter out disabled immigrants?
As Marjorie Johnstone and Eunjung Lee point out,
currently, the world’s primary education hosts are the colonizing
countries and the offshoot white settler societies from the 19th-
century age of imperialism. . . . This exchange contributes to Western
nation-building and reduces the capacity of source countries to build
their own knowledge economy with research and education based on
their own resources and power. In a marriage with neoliberal ideas,
this exchange decimates national social welfare systems, thus increas-
ing wealth disparities, inequality, and the oppression of marginalized
populations (such as newcomers, racialized, disabled and gendered
groups) while fostering private purchase of social services (e.g. educa-
tion brokers, tutoring, and counseling). (219)

In short, international education can be disabling on a global scale.
As Patricia McLean, Margaret Heagney, and Kay Gardner argue, “as
global educational opportunities expand, the implications for students
with a disability must also be considered; not to do so is potentially dis-
criminatory” (226). Though statistics were unavailable in North Amer-
ica, Higher Education Strategy Associates show that “between 2001/02
to 2004/05, the percentage increase in disabled international students
entering British higher education (38.24 per cent) exceeds both dis-
abled domestic students (37.02 per cent) and non-disabled internation-
al students (31.38 per cent)” (quoted in Soorenian, n.p.).

I offer this tangle of citations, this stack of numbers not as decisive
facts—the numbers shift, and they are used from a wide variety of angles
to make a wide variety of arguments. Someone might use many of the
same numbers or studies I have tangled up here to fashion a strong warn-
ing about the ways students with disabilities are infiltrating higher educa-
tion, for instance, or to encourage teachers and administrators to panic,
or to argue for exclusive programs.

It may seem that we have moved through the approach, mentioned
at the beginning of this book, away from the era of eugenics, and toward
an era of access, fueled by the disability rights movement and the rise of
academic disability studies. But a few facts are irrefutable. Students with
disabilities are still kept out of the university in large numbers. Disabled
students will face steep steps as they work to attain an education. The
programs and initiatives that are developed in the name of diversity and
inclusion do not yet deliver tangible means of addressing the ableism
inherent in higher education.
In Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos*, a powerful critique of the concept of diversity as it has been evoked in higher education, she identifies three eras in academic history in North America.

1. First a focus on “developing intelligent thoughtful elites and reproducing culture”;
2. Then a focus on “enacting a principle of equal opportunity and cultivating a broadly educated citizenry”;
3. Now, higher education “produces human capital, thereby turning classically humanist values on their head.” (Brown, 24)

In Brown’s scheme, the first step unequivocally, undoubtedly excluded disability, and folded the invention of disability into the mission of those inside elites. This was the eugenics era, and academics were very actively involved in this work, and founded universities on eugenic research. As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education. Or, as I put it more simply: higher education has needed to create a series of versions of “lower education” to justify its work and to ground its exceptionalism. This was the era of disabling studies and disability studied.

The second step—the use of higher education as a principle of equal opportunity—opened many doors and removed many barriers, but all too often disability was used to test the edges of opportunity; for people with disabilities, the equal access promised by the second step never really came, or only ever came in a qualified way. Here, while the discourse or discussion about disability was about welcoming and including, the back end was being built to construct disability purely under what might be called a medical and a liability model: define disability medically, treat it in a legalistic, minimalistic manner designed to avoid getting sued. This can force accommodation to happen, but it also tends to force—always and only—the legal minimum accommodation. Disabled people, then, come to have their experiences of education shaped by these legal minimums. That’s a difficult way to learn, and a difficult way to live.

Now the concept of equality has been co-opted by the third step, wherein disability, like other forms of embodied difference, gets commodified. As Zahari Richter powerfully writes, “ableist knowledge production consists of the knowledge practices of constituting disabled people entirely through detached observation and disembodied gazing or studying practices” (n.p.). Disabled people are objects for education, not
subjects or agents of it. In this scheme, disability might be mentioned as a unique “special” part of the fabric of society, universities and colleges might preach inclusiveness and promote neoliberal values like diversity, but in the end disability is still just studied, and the impact continues to be disabling in the sense of further distancing disability from power and further stigmatizing disability.

In this book, I will study all three of these “eras” of disability in higher education, matching these eras with spatial metaphors and mapping them across specific disciplines within the university. Yet Academic Ableism is written from the third era, the era in which students and teachers find themselves today, within the neoliberal university.

It is “neoliberalism” that Wendy Brown is defining in Undoing the Demos when she suggests that humanist values have been overtaken by a focus on human capital—or the economic value that might be gained or taken from human bodies and their work. Liberal values then become the things that economic motivations hide behind. Cash rules everything around modern higher education, and cash rules most effectively when it can be hidden behind values like individual choice and responsibility. More simply, higher education is an industry which, beyond the surface, is dominated by economic considerations, but most of the time doesn’t want to be seen as a business. Perhaps more dangerously, because higher education does champion values like autonomy, freedom of expression, and creativity, it becomes altogether too easy to ignore its economic character. Unsurprisingly, but also depressingly, higher education is a neoliberal business like any other. Maybe this is because governments have been cutting funding to schools, maybe it is because the managerial class within universities knows no other way. Regardless, unlike other businesses, higher education is highly capable of disguise the dominance of economic considerations behind liberal values.

The result is that the rich—rich students, rich administrators, rich institutions—get richer. Those who need higher education to “get ahead” don’t have the same path to success as those who are already privileged. As Mark Bousquet argues, workers in education “have seen the compulsory acceleration of market behavior (such as competition for resources and profit-seeking) in their professional cultures. . . . the management of professional activities has resulted in the return of . . . dizzying inequalities” (1). In his words: “If it sounds a bit Orwellian, or a bit like Foucault goes to business school, it should” (12). Henry Giroux also argues that we need to “connect the dots between the degradation of higher education and those larger economic, political, cultural and
social forces that benefit from” this degradation (129). Neoliberalism is more than a “set of economic policies,” it is a “normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality [that] transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct” (Brown, 10). Universities, colleges, and the industries that orbit them benefit from this conduct while the vast majority of students do not. This understanding of imbalanced benefit and harm, then, must be used to examine the workings of academic ableism.

Who benefits in academia, today, from the inclusions and exclusions of disabled students, and who hides these inclusions and exclusions behind other liberal values? For instance, and as a means to avoid creating a narrative of progress for disability in higher education, what is the likely future “economic conduct” of ableism and disability? Who seems to be investing, who is benefiting from, and who is paying the costs for ableism? Well, online courses are growing at a rate of 10 times the growth of on-site classes, and more than 20 percent of U.S. students took an online course in fall 2007 (Allen and Seaman). That jumped to 33.5 percent in 2013 (Allen and Seaman). How can we ensure that these courses are going to be accessible to all students? How will we guard against an impulse that is the seeming inverse of this inaccessibility? That is, how will we make sure that students with disabilities are not going to be funneled away from on-site classes and into online classes as a method of exclusion?

What about at the level of admissions? As Jennifer Doyle points out, the “administration wants students who are richer and better educated. How do we get better students? How do we get students who need less from us?” (97). Yet other colleges recognize disabled students as a particularly promising market. Segregated colleges now exist for students with learning disabilities, and, within regular colleges, many extra support programs for students now also come with huge price tags. If some doors are opening wider, what other doors are closing? If schools are providing minimal accommodations, and anything extra costs a lot, how are our colleges really responding to the diversity of learners?

There is also huge growth in programs like “disability management” at the same time that disability studies programs are in a holding pattern on most college campuses. Learning how to minimize and manage disability’s impact on the workplace is an academic field that will likely continue to grow. Soon enough, unfortunately, the skills these students
learn in minimizing and managing disability might make them ideal candidates to work on college campuses in disability resource offices. What does it mean that more and more students are learning that disability should be understood mainly as having a negative economic impact, one that needs to be creatively diminished?

Further, the growth of programs like “disability management” are generally aimed at a “relatively more homogenous population among the ranks of already-employed professionals and upper-level service workers,” as Evan Watkins points out (Class, 93). These programs allow universities to grow without expanding undergraduate education. The expansion is tremendously efficient, as these professional programs usually charge premium tuition and draw very few students from “historically underserved student populations” (Class, 93). Combine this with the aspirations among elite schools towards what Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie call “academic capitalism”: the entrepreneurial goals that place upper-level research and graduate programs above all else. This entrepreneurial research is highly likely to focus on curative approaches to disability and very unlikely to focus on disability as a rights or an identity issue. Thus academia begins to shape itself and brand itself through white-collar programs and enrollments, through curative research, as a way to expand financially without expanding access at the undergraduate level.

The huge industry of for-profit colleges like Everest and Phoenix also spend a disproportionate amount of their government funding on recruiting. Their recruiters are trained to exploit and “poke” the pain and sense of vulnerability and inadequacy of potential recruits (Kirkham). This poking of vulnerability was to have been a key issue in Donald Trump’s Trump University fraud trial (it was settled out of court for $25 million). As the business of these colleges grows, they will certainly find new ways to exploit disabled students for the government grants that might be attached to their enrollment.

An expanded understanding of a wider range of disabilities has also led to a rhetorical outpouring of troubling language: students with emotional and psychological disabilities are characterized according to their “warning signs” (Erdur-Baker et al.); students with PTSD are seen to be “ticking time bombs” and more segregated programs are being created for veterans within U.S. colleges; autism is seen as a costly “epidemic” that is now hitting higher education (Cowen, n.p.). How to we respond to this stigmatization? How can we recognize the eugenic undercurrent in such discourse?
Each of these new developments may translate into a different future—an opportunity to shape or be shaped according to the diversity of the students in the classroom. The goal, then, is to create an approach that recognizes the long history of disability and higher education inflected by the current, often camouflaged, vectors of academic ableism, without separating eras or introducing neat progressions.

Of course, when we talk about the university, we are actually talking about just one relatively powerful example of a social structure. One can likely find similarities in the courthouse, the hospital, in K-12 education, public transportation, many modern workplaces and most old ones, and so on. So, I urge you to make these comparisons. Look for these steep steps and gates everywhere. Similarly, this book cannot diagnose all of the problems with the contemporary university, or dig deeply into the philosophies upon which universities are founded—at least not in great detail. But others can and should take this work further. What is it about the history or the philosophical foundations, or the map or the architecture, or the current mission or set of budgetary priorities of your own school that makes it particularly ableist, or more accommodating, or that allows the ineffectiveness of these accommodations to be obscured or hidden, or that leads to celebrations of inclusion and diversity that don’t ring true or effect change?

Michel Foucault has a particularly powerful quote he used to defend his work against claims it was nihilistic, too negative: “power is everywhere, not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere” (Sexuality, 122). Likewise, it is worth remembering that at the contemporary college or university, ableism is everywhere: not that it overwhelms all of the good schooling can do, not that it invalidates your teaching or your research, but that we are all responsible for looking for it, recognizing our roles in its circulation, and seeking change.

A Note on (Plain) Language and (Open) Access

In a New Yorker article, Joshua Rothman wrote that:

Since the liberal-arts job market peaked, in the mid-seventies, the audience for academic work has been shrinking. Increasingly, to build a successful academic career you must serially impress very small groups of people (departmental colleagues, journal and book editors, tenure committees). . . . they have no choice but to aim for
very small targets. Writing a first book, you may have in mind particular professors on a tenure committee; miss that mark and you may not have a job. (n.p.)

This invention of an academic tone certainly felt like the process of writing my first book *Disability Rhetoric*—a book that has been praised by some for its accessibility and yet criticized by others for its use of academic jargon. I was so obsessed with worry about getting the work published that I was thinking about only a very small group of possible readers and reviewers. But the danger for a junior scholar is that we inflate our work with theory and with difficult language in an effort to sound as smart as possible. For disability studies researchers, this can mean that our work actually excludes members of our own community.

I would suggest that students and teachers of disability studies can add another dimension to the argument Joshua Rothman is making in the *New Yorker*, and argue that the process of making academic writing more and more academic can be a process of ableism and it can reproduce ableism, creating steep steps. Putting academic research in these terms matters.

One of the originators of disability studies, Tom Shakespeare wrote many years ago that “academic work on disability may not always be accessible. I believe writers should use plain language, but this does not equal a duty to be immediately comprehensible. I have quoted Einstein, who said ‘Make everything as simple as possible. But not simpler’” (115). Jan Walmsley has similarly shown that “in learning disability research this debate [about plain language] is not aired. As far as inclusive research in learning disability goes, accessibility is central” because in this field plain language has always been incorporated (205). But Walmsley admits that her worry “is that inclusive researchers are so fearful of saying things which people with learning difficulties cannot follow that they say very little, leaving the field of theorising to others . . . with little or no commitment to inclusion” (205). My hope is that disability studies as a field will not follow this clear bifurcation or division between accessible and responsive researchers and inaccessible theorists. On these pages there will be an effort to create accessible theory, answerable to all. When it feels as though I am slipping into jargon or theory, I will stop and offer a simpler version. Often, the simpler version will also be the much better one. Sometimes, I will fail—that is the rhetorical nature of language, as something that relies upon context and audience to make meaning. But I will always make an effort to be plainly understood.
As Elizabeth Grace, an expert on disability and education, argues in a hugely influential article on the ways disability studies authors need to keep their work accessible, “in terms of access and justice, using plain language is very important. It’s needed to allow the widest variety of people with disabilities to participate in conversations about themselves” (n.p.). Grace shows that this is an issue of economic justice as well. Yet, too often, writing in plain language “marks you as an outsider” and thus makes it difficult to access work, merit, and promotion, and “that’s part of why we do not see it happen more often in certain fields of academic activity” (n.p.). Hopefully, my approach to plain language in this book—through the effort to both keep the prose relatively simple and to provide plain language summaries as often as possible—empowers others to similarly claim this outsider position. In so doing I hope it is possible to collapse some of the dynamics—the steep steps—that create an inside and an outside to begin with.8

In this same spirit, then, the book will be offered in an open access format. The book will be entirely free and offered in easily accessible digital format. The cost of academic publishing is a huge barrier that creates steep steps and ornate gates; insiders and outsiders. Further, print formats are difficult to access for many readers with disabilities. Making the book available for free in a digital format matters, and publishing the book in any other format would invalidate so many of its arguments.

The (now canonical) Bethesda Statement on the issue suggests that open access means anyone can access research on the public internet, for free, and “copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship” (Suber et al., n.p.). Open access also centers the philosophy of the human “right to know” and “right to be known” (Willinsky, 7). That is, open access is a way of formatting and copyrighting scholarship, but it is also a philosophy: that information should be free and that if one hopes to actually engage with ideas (and to have them engaged with by others), rather than simply recording them on paper, the work needs to be made accessible.

That said, as Elizabeth Brewer, Melanie Yergeau, and Cynthia Selfe argue, “We have not, as yet, taken on the professional responsibility of making sure that all . . . [texts] are easily readable. . . . this is also true, of course, of many digital texts” (151). The truth is that in the push for open access, too much of the accessibility that comes along with it is just by chance and not by design—making it free is already half the battle, but it is also barely half the battle. So, in this spirit, this book will be offered in an open access and accessible format.
To have an accessible dissemination or movement of research, the reception and reading of texts needs to be considered in terms of accessibility—this expands the author’s responsibility. But the means of distribution and reproduction also need to be reconsidered in terms of accessibility. You’re printing a book? How much does it cost and how easy is it to read, for all possible readers? How freely do our ideas really move, and how difficult is it for some to access them and use them? Which bodies can take up texts and move (with) them? How does research get to those who have been excluded from the academy? If we understand rhetoric as the circulation of power and discourse through the body, then we need to ask how some of the “products” of academia do and do not move or circulate through a wide range of possible bodies. How could this conversation move through the widest range of possible bodies?

Lessons about inclusion and exclusion extend from the physical spaces of the university, to its virtual spaces and movements. When we think about access, we also need to understand that most of the scholarly conversation in academia is not at all accessible. Further, most of the web is not at all accessible. Just as one means of illustrating this, in 2007, Thompson et al., using fairly robust criteria, tested a huge sample of government and education websites from hundreds of countries, internationally, to try and assess their accessibility. In the United States, only 45 percent of these pages even used text equivalents to describe visual elements and images, only 50 percent followed HTML standards, and only 24 percent “passed” basic navigational criteria. The research is a bit old now—but the fact that there is very little knowledge or pro-active action about what is a huge problem, disenfranchising such a huge segment of the world population, speaks to how little most people ever think about accessibility, believing instead that the web is generally open and free and that is all that matters.

As just one example of this accessibility, the images in this book will be fully and carefully described and given alt text in their digital format. Too often, books and articles skip adding in these additional descriptions, making the images, charts, graphs, and figures that may be central to their argument inaccessible to many members of their audience. In fact, in this book, sometimes all I will offer is a thick visual description of an image, as a means of highlighting the rhetorical and translational value of doing this describing.
To end this introduction, I want to directly address a response that the book might well receive from many readers: for some reading right now, it may seem as though of course higher education is ableist. This could come in the form of a conscious response, or an unconscious feeling. Of course higher education is ableist.

In response, I want to argue that academic ableism faces specific forces of disguise and submersion. Because the sentiment that of course higher education is ableist is rarely coupled with a concern about this state of our institutions, and it is the job of this book to show how this ableism is a problem, and what can be done. But within academia, this feeling that there can be nothing done about the ableism of education, and that perhaps it is not even a problem, needs to be interrogated. What I would call “ableist apologia” describes a genre or category of statements and sentiments that distance the speaker from responsibility for the selective, stratifying forces within higher education, selecting and stratifying functions that depend upon ableism and disablism to make sure that privilege is portioned out only along traditional lines: to ensure that students who move, think, or express themselves outside of a narrow set of norms will not thrive or survive in college.

Apologia is a specific genre and has been understood by rhetoricians—as far back as Aristotle and likely much earlier than that—as speeches given in defense. Apologia are also, notably, connected to statements of regret. This description of an “affect” or emotion for apologia is particularly appropriate, as ableist apologies are often tinged with a sense of regret or fatigue, with the feeling that the apologizer is throwing their hands up in the air and saying: there’s nothing I can do. Or a feeling that this is the last thing the apologizer is willing to do—that they are asked to do so much, that they do so much, and now they are also being asked to do more, to be more diligent. Other times, the apology comes simply in the form of: I didn’t know. I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was being ableist; I didn’t know that was ableist. This claim of not-knowing is also, in a way, a claim that the ableism isn’t really happening, isn’t the case. This claim of not-knowing is also a claim to being a good person: separating the action or the implication from the individual. Because ableist apologia, as well, are rarely personal apologies—they are apologies for a state of affairs, not claims of individual responsibility. Too often, then, the emotion is not necessarily sincere and the apology is not exactly an apology at all.
Often, in the end, the apologies defend the apologizer and attempt to explain away their actions or inactions.

Ableist apologia happen when people say: yes, this building is inaccessible, but it’s an old building (access Titchkosky, Question). Professors might say that a building is old as though they don’t actively, currently teach and have an office with their name on it in that building. That one inhabits and uses a building every day means the building is alive. If it is an inaccessible building, it is alive and working to physically filter students out of the university every single day. It’s not solely an old building, it’s a living thing doing ableist work, and actively ignoring this allows it to do that work incredibly efficiently. Likewise, teachers apologize for ableism and refusals to accommodate by saying things like “I need to impose standards” or “I am preparing students for future classes” or even “I would be doing them a disservice if I didn’t prepare them for what will come.” But if stakeholders refuse to interrogate how these standards privilege particular bodies and minds, they help ableism disguise itself; they disguise it to themselves and to their students.

Yes, academia is ableist. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track educational system, with different tracks, in his words, for “the laboring and the learned” (in Tyack, 89). Scholarships would allow a very few of the laboring class to advance, Jefferson said, by “raking a few geniuses from the rubbish” (in Tyack, 89). We could visit other sources to find the roots of higher education, and their sentiments might be similarly ableist or discriminatory. But this ableist reality is not something educators are committed to reproducing, doomed to repeat.

Another angle of this apologia is the idea that, if indeed academia is ableist, then everyone involved in education is, also. While this may be true, this is not a truth that should shut down the work of teaching or learning, or the work of combating ableism itself. As Katie Aubrecht writes, summarizing Roy Moodley’s concept of “speaking within the sentence,” we can in fact see that perhaps especially because “biomedical language and neoliberal practices [as well as “disciplinary traditions”] constrict the possibilities” for students and teachers to create change, then academia is an ideal location to interrogate these forces, an ideal place to work against ableism (Moodley, 305; Aubrecht, 190).

Ableist apologia is also related to what Shelley Tremain calls ableist exceptionism: “the phenomenon whereby values, beliefs, principles, and so on that one holds in other domains of political consciousness are not transferred over to the domain of disability and ableism” (n.p.).
For example, the “use of ableist language about disability” is assumed to be “politically neutral and innocent,” defendable as just words, “despite the fact that [the speaker will] politicize virtually all other speech, identifying it as value laden and interested” (n.p.). Thus, very progressive teachers, researchers, and even activists will use words like moron or idiot even when critiquing racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive behavior, all the while refusing to admit or realize that they are channeling one form of bigotry to attack another. Their apologies tend to be particularly ironclad, as well, as their defensiveness about ableism can be protected simply by holding up the seemingly “higher” value of critiquing sexism or racism, even sometimes accusing anyone who critiques them of being racist or sexist themselves. In the end, even addressing this ableism is often impossible: it is exhausting, disheartening, deadening because one doesn’t at all want to diminish the goal of fighting racism or sexism; one doesn’t at all want to be accused of diminishing this fight. And yet the impact of this (defended) ableism ranges from wearying to extremely hurtful, compounded by the politics of calling it out. Sara Ahmed writes about the impact of being a “feminist killjoy”: “to be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. To be willing to cause unhappiness . . . to kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism” (“Feminist,” n.p.). There are similar affective dimensions, or emotional costs, to being willing to interject observations of ableism within progressive discourse, within any discourse, at any table, in any conversation. There are also powerful consequences to defending one’s ableism as though it is the last thing for the progressive to care about.

This exceptionism works in the other direction as well. Because when we suggest that disability is a sort of final frontier of identity politics, we risk making the very wrong and very dangerous assumption that racism or sexism or homophobia (for example) are well understood. For instance, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, commentators suggested that he was going to need to address the ableist comments he made about a reporter, as many Republican supporters of Trump found these comments offensive, and these people would need to be assuaged. In a famous speech at the Golden Globe Awards in early 2017, Meryl Streep repeated a variation of this story, suggesting that Trump’s mocking of reporter Serge Kovaleski was particularly revealing of his poor character. But none of these commentators made any real mention
of Trump’s incredibly racist and sexist comments throughout his campaign, failing to argue that he would need to address and apologize for those sentiments, or that they reveal his character.

Of course, for commentators like Van Jones, the “whitelash” of the vote was in the forefront of their mind, and the election was all about race. But perhaps because disability discrimination is, in some conversations, somehow depoliticized it can be held up as a line not to cross, even while other lines are being destroyed. That is, the charitable, pitying, infantilizing view of disability somehow sensitizes people to forms of disablism or disability discrimination, while race and gender are issues of “political correctness” that are to be left untouched. But making disabled people pitiable is not somehow politically neutral; using disability as an ethical test does nothing to help us understand the connections between ableism and other forms of oppression. Ableism is never alone with itself.

So ableist exceptionism works in many directions: it could be that ableism is the only thing we won’t admit is a problem; it could be that ableism is the only problem we’re willing to talk about. But both reactions are of utmost importance to this book and the reactions you—as the reader—may have to it. As well as the uses you—as the reader—might make of it.

Whether any of this “talking about ableism” leads to action is another issue entirely. Because people say that “of course the university is ableist”—and this form of apologia is particularly nuanced in that it releases the person who says it from doing anything at all about this ableism. There is a shift to admitting that at the very least the university is an elitist space, but it comes joined with dismissing responsibility for doing anything about this elitism, or even interrogating its fairness. So what makes it so hard for people to both admit that the university is ableist, and to admit that this is a bad thing? What would encourage people to read a book like this without simply saying “of course there is ableism in academia” and dismissing this entire inquiry? There are certainly academics and other stakeholders who would say “of course the university is racist” and leave it at that, but it is understood that this is a response that reinforces the racism. Making this racism the center of a conversation means taking responsibility for it and committing to change. Of course it is hugely problematic to make a “like race” comparison here—but we can and should (cautiously) understand disability in a “with but not in place of race” discourse, simply because we know that ableism on college campuses is deeply racialized, as racist attitudes and practices are
also ableist. Work like the landmark *Presumed Incompetent* undertakes to understand the intersecting roles of race, gender, and class in the working lives of women faculty of color. Ableism can and should often be seen as an intersecting force as well—not more than, not in place of, but always in a layered and complicated relationship with these other forms of structural discrimination.

Universities are not, for instance, less racist than they are ableist. Instead, the two forces work together, and must be addressed together. This means never forgetting or downplaying how these forces work together. This means never excusing or downplaying the ableism or the racism of the academy.

The point is to find ways to get the stakeholders in higher education to engage with, understand, and take action to address racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and other structural inequalities, biases, and the range of harmful practices they allow. Saying “of course the university is ableist” is a first step that necessitates further action. It should not be a disaffected claim that releases one from responsibility.

Academic ableism is a difficult thing to consider. Coming to terms with ableism in higher education means questioning, as well, our own privilege, the very system that rewards professors and administrators and placed us at the top of a set of steep stairs. So let’s pay attention to how ableism occurs, and when, and to whom, and to what effect, and let’s pay attention to how we might resist and refuse ableism, and what else ableism is connected to in history, in theory, in practice, and through teaching and research and service. Saying “of course the university is ableist” does not defuse academic ableism. Instead, it often subtly excuses it, subconsciously submerges its roots and branches, and ends a conversation that needs to be just a beginning. This attitude of fatigue around ableism hides it under the disguise of elitism, which is viewed as a neutral or even a positive value, an excusable problem or a byproduct of the culture of universities. A kind of polite attitude about elitism is one of the most pervasive disguises for ableism. In the chapters that follow, I will provide a variety of forms of evidence, and a variety of ways to clearly think through the ableism of the university. The goal is to work straight through the resistance one might feel about ableism, to address the politeness of elitism, and to question the ways stakeholders may subconsciously protect their own privilege on their paths up and down the steep steps of academia.