

BODILY DIFFERENCE, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND TOXIC HALF-LIVES:
REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY IN D.W. GREGORY'S *DIRTY PICTURES*,
THE GOOD DAUGHTER, AND *RADIUM GIRLS*

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CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

Disability scholar Jim Ferris has argued that “a person with a disability often must struggle to be seen and treated as a full person, and not just as a disability or an object of pity.”¹ Attempting to address and understand these cultural oppressions, Disability Studies has emerged over the last few decades as a distinct and growing field of study. Disability as an embodied concept, meaning one that inhabits physical bodies in the real world, has been and is being theorized, deconstructed, and aestheticized in fashions similar to the more widely known critical fields of gender and race studies, queer theory, and post-colonialism. As the field grows, its application in interdisciplinary contexts is also becoming more prevalent. Histories and historiographies by Lennard Davis, Joseph Shapiro, Henri-Jacques Stiker, Kim Nielsen, and Douglas Baynton, for example, are challenging the way scholars have understood the past and how the notion of ‘normalcy’ fits within it.²

In literary and cultural fields, scholars have long noted the use of disability as a metaphor for oppressive power structures, and many playwrights have embraced this metaphoric quality.³ In literature, disability has historically been used as a symbol of otherness, typically either for the villain or the hero, as Victoria Ann Lewis describes in

¹ Jim Ferris, “Uncovery to Recovery: Reclaiming One Man’s Body on a Nude Photo Shoot,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 513.

² See bibliography.

³ Carrie Sandahl, “Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance.” *Theatre Topics* 9 no. 1 (1999): 11-30.

her collection *Beyond Victims and Villains*.⁴ Disability as a dramaturgical device is as old as western dramatic practice itself: Oedipus limps and blinds himself; Richard III has a hunchback; Tiny Tim and Laura Wingfield have physical impediments that emphasize their mythic qualities of innocence and goodness. This conventional approach to the dramaturgy of disability frames it as a metaphor for the outsider, a lack to be filled or overcome, and a challenge to non-disabled identities. To counter these traditional (and arguably oppressive) practices, many theatre practitioners and scholars are using applied theatre with persons with disabilities, focusing primarily on actors with disabilities and plays by disabled playwrights about disabilities. This theatre – by, for, and about people with disabilities – is commonly called “disability theatre.”⁵ For example, The DisAbility Project, a theatre program for people with disabilities founded in 1997, was created by theorists and practitioners of feminist theatre and has catalyzed the development of a “disability aesthetic” which is advancing our understanding of the complex relationships between theatre and disability.⁶ This aesthetic continues the work of troubling our

⁴ Victoria Ann Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁵ See, for example: Ann Fox and Joan Lipkin, “Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theatre Through Disability Theatre: Selections from The DisAbility Project,” *NWSA Journal* 14 no. 3 (Fall 2002): 77-98; Carrie Sandahl, “Why Disability Identity Matters: From Dramaturgy to Casting in John Belluso’s *Pyretown*,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28 nos. 1-2 (January-April 2008): 225-241.

⁶ For more on disability aesthetic, see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). For more on The DisAbility Project, see: Ann Fox and Joan Lipkin, “The Disability Project: Toward an Aesthetic of Access,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11.3-4 (2001): 119-36. “Feminist Theatre” in this context, is a kind of activist theatre written and performed by and about women on topics of sexual and gender equality, often with a bent towards social justice and overtly political content.

conceptions of bodily normalcy, yet a need remains for thoughtful study of the intersections of disability studies within contemporary western drama more widely.⁷

Dramatists have represented disability on stage for millennia, contributing to some problematic and oppressive modes of representation. However, a few contemporary artists like Lynn Nottage, David Lindsay-Abaire, Nina Raine, Bruce Norris, Suzan-Lori Parks, and D.W. Gregory are transforming the way that dramatists approach the representation of disability on stage.⁸ These playwrights do not self-identify as members of the disability community, yet they are incorporating differentiated bodies into their plays in ways that resist traditional metaphorical formulations of disability. I do not mean to imply that *Richard III* was written without regard to the lived realities of his physical impairment or that *Laura Wingfield* does not experience the world in a unique way. Both characters are from excellent plays, to be sure; but to what extent, for example, does *Laura Wingfield*'s representation contribute to a social understanding that the disabled are merely helpless victims? The contention is that traditional metaphoric representations begin with symbolic implications and use a character's disability to either tell someone else's story or illuminate a wider theme, thus becoming a prosthetic attachment or supplement to the narrative or a way to visibly mark a character as 'other.'⁹ But this

⁷ See Alan Roulstone, "RiDE themed issue – On Disability: Creative Tension in Applied Theatre: an extended review," *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 15 no. 3 (August 2010), 434; and Ann M. Fox, "Battles on the Body: Disability, Interpreting Dramatic Literature, and the Case of Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5 no. 1 (2011): 1.

⁸ See bibliography. For example: *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage; *Kimberly Akimbo* by David Lindsay-Abaire, *Tribes* by Nina Raine, *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris, and *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Chapter two of this project will discuss more thoroughly the history of dramatic representations of disability, with particular emphasis on American theatre.

⁹ See David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

narrative prosthesis is not the only way to represent people with disabilities; as disability rights activists have said, “We are not a metaphor.”¹⁰

These playwrights are creating new works that may present a character that can have cerebral palsy without it defining her as a victim or villain, as bitter cripple or heroic over-comer. Her bodily difference is simply a way of being in the world, albeit a way of being that has significant personal and social impact. The question “why was that character written to be disabled?” begins to break down dramaturgically and sound as facile as questions like “why is that character written to be a woman?” or “why does this character have a troubled childhood?” The answers to that question of disability are leaving the oppressive and metaphoric realm of “to represent his depraved soul” or “to symbolize the horrors of war” and entering the more inclusive and affirming realm of “because that is part of what makes her a unique person who experiences the world in a unique way, and that is interesting and valuable.”¹¹ Metaphor is not completely jettisoned as a dramatic device, to be sure. All great characters of drama do, in some way, serve as a metaphor for some larger theme. However, disability playwrights do not reject metaphor

¹⁰ Kathleen Tolan, “We Are Not a Metaphor: A Conversation about Representation,” *Theatre Communications Group*, 2006, accessed November 29, 2013. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/metaphor.cfm>. This essay is a conversation playwright Kathleen Tolan had (via conference call and in person) with Victoria Ann Lewis, five playwrights/performers (John Belluso, Cheryl Marie Wade, Mike Ervin, Lynn Manning, and Susan Nussbaum), two directors (Joan Lipkin and Rick Curry), and one theorist (Carrie Sandahl).

See also Christopher Shinn, “Disability is Not Just a Metaphor,” *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014.

¹¹ Questions of disability representation take on larger significance in performance, when non-disabled actors play disabled characters, or vice versa. As Carrie Sandahl said in her conversation with Kathleen Tolan, cited above, “When people with disabilities are performing, they challenge the way that a lot of these dramatic metaphors work, because a lot of these usual disability roles go to non-disabled actors. So it’s very easy to separate the metaphor from the person, because there is always some sort of distance; the signal that ‘I’m not really disabled’ always seems to leak through.” Playwright John Belluso takes a stronger response, noting that during a curtain call, “the actor will stand up out of the wheelchair and take a bow, and suddenly everything that has come before has just been erased. The audience is let off the hook. Suddenly this isn’t social history; this is just artifice.” These performative tensions are important to address, but are generally beyond the scope of this research project.

completely, but rather create new ones that are more in line with the lived realities of disability and use them as “a generative source of knowledge” that can unmask oppressive and unjust power structures.¹² Disability may be a metaphor for problems a character may be facing, but the disability does not carry the burden of being the primary problem that needs fixing in the narrative or the primary signifier of identity and how an audience should understand the character.¹³ A small but growing group of contemporary playwrights is beginning to grapple with these kinds of re-visions of disability on stage, carving new paths that incorporate disability into contemporary mainstream theatre in ways that transcend or defy convention and affirm the lived realities of disability and individuals with disabilities.

Within this fairly elite group of playwrights, the works of D.W. Gregory are noteworthy for their subtle and subversive complexity, particularly in regard to the intersection of multiple oppressive cultural hierarchies. Gregory is an active playwright, having currently written over twenty plays that have garnered considerable favorable critical attention – including a Pulitzer nomination – and are being widely produced. Her oeuvre is diverse, from short children’s plays to historical dramas and wacky sex farces. Her plays tend to have female protagonists with working-class, American roots, while also exploring and subverting myths of American self-determination. Most provocatively, Gregory’s plays wrestle with the portrayal of disability in her nuanced and multiply-configured characters in ways that challenge conventional representations and pave liberating new roads of which playwrights and literary scholars should take note.

¹² Sandahl, “Why Disability Identity Matters,” 228.

¹³ Ibid, 234.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, I will bring representative works of D.W. Gregory under scholarly analysis for the first time, establishing her plays as significant cultural and artistic works that carve new ground in the representation of diverse bodies on stage. In *Concerto for the Left Hand*, Michael Davidson analyzes the practices of cultural production and argues that accounting for disability changes how art is made. D.W. Gregory is one of the few theatre artists who are forging new modes of dramaturgy that account for disability beyond traditional overcoming narratives¹⁴ and explore the nuances brought forth by the lived realities of diverse forms of human embodiment. Although I am primarily interested in analyzing Gregory's representations of disability within the growing field of disability studies and its application in interdisciplinary fields, her work is also fertile ground for scholars interested in the intersectionality of multiple categories of identity, including class, gender, disability, and American nationalism.

A secondary purpose of this study is to demonstrate the value and significance of using disability as a primary theoretical lens for engaging with intersectional identities (e.g. class, gender, nationality) in dramatic criticism. Using various strands of disability studies as entry points for my analysis, I will analyze three of Gregory's plays – *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls* – within their cultural and literary contexts to uncover the nuances and implications of her dramatic representations of disability. These three plays all include representations of working-class American

¹⁴ An “overcoming” narrative is a story about a person with disabilities and struggles that they must overcome in order to succeed. These narratives are about characters who succeed “despite” their disabilities and who are about to “get past” their weaknesses in order to thrive and accomplish something in life. Disability in these cases serve as emotional signifiers of how brave and strong willed a character is, as if disability is something terrifying that has no positive aspects and only serves to keep people down, removing any social aspect of disability from the situations.

women with physical disabilities, allowing for explorations of the intersections of ability, gender, and class within a uniquely American perspective, providing significant insight into American culture and society. Gregory says of her work, “Even my most naturalistic plays are deceptively subversive, relying on a familiar frame to explore issues of misused power and unearned advantage, and ultimately, to challenge the cherished American myth of self-determination.”¹⁵ In the three plays selected for inclusion in this study, Gregory’s critique is particularly focused on how variations in human ability, within the contexts and lived realities¹⁶ of her characters, relate to this cherished and problematic American myth that is deeply embedded in notions of compulsory ablebodiedness.¹⁷

I chose to analyze *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls* in order to understand the implications of Gregory’s use of disability in dramatic characterization as both an embodied reality and a cultural construct, resisting traditional formulation as mere symbol or metaphor. Questions guiding my research include: How does D.W. Gregory portray disability in these three plays, and how do these portrayals of disability relate to traditional modes of dramatic representation? What are the cultural and/or aesthetic implications of such uses? How does the representation of disability impact questions of gender, class, sexuality, economics, and national identity? How do these questions of intersectionality illuminate larger questions of power and enfranchisement?

¹⁵ D.W. Gregory, “Notes from an Empty Mind,” accessed August 23, 2013, www.dwgregory.com.

¹⁶ By “lived realities” I am referring to the experiences one has in life and navigating the world in one’s particular body. The term serves to emphasize day-to-day nature of living with disability, challenging able-bodied readers to question the assumptions and recognize that disability does not just affect the way one walks or sees or hears (or insert some other impairment here), but it affects nearly every aspect of how one lives life in the real world.

¹⁷ “Compulsory ablebodiedness” is a term that will be more deeply explored later in this dissertation, but it was used by Robert McRuer to denote the cultural forces that mandate ablebodiedness as a fundamental component of “normalcy” and full participation in civic life. McRuer also notes how compulsory ablebodiedness is intrinsically linked with compulsory heteronormativity, and thus Crip theory and Queer theory are inherently related.

What new questions are generated by using disability as a paradigm for understanding performance texts and bodies in space? When examined through this lens of disability, with reliance on other relevant critical lenses from the fields of feminist, gender, and performance studies, Gregory's work is a particularly promising example for scholars, critics, and theatre practitioners to grapple with the representation of different forms of embodiment. This project will be of interest to scholars and artists in the intersecting fields of disability studies, dramatic literature, gender studies, American studies, class studies, performance studies, and theatre studies.

Justification

Disability and performance together have garnered a significant amount of scholarly attention by the likes of Petra Kuppers, Carrie Sandahl, Philip Auslander, and others.¹⁸ Victoria Ann Lewis's scholarship and practice are pioneering efforts to bring the work of disabled playwrights to wider attention.¹⁹ These scholars for the most part explore theatre/performance with respect to disabled performers and authors. Recently, however, a few scholars have begun to use disability as a theoretical lens for understanding contemporary drama that is not primarily for or from the disability community, most notably Ann Fox, who argued in 2011 that "interpreting dramatic literature from a Disability Studies perspective is essential for critics, readers, and audience members of all kinds."²⁰ Fox has published essays using disability studies as an

¹⁸ See, for example, Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, eds., *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Bruce Henderson and Noam Ostrander, eds, *Understanding Disability Studies and Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2010) .

¹⁹ See Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*.

²⁰ Fox, "Battles on the Body," 1.

analytic lens for understanding plays such as *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee.²¹ Yet this approach to dramatic interpretation is not without contention. In 2002, Thomas Fahy and Kimball King edited what is currently the only book-length published collection of essays on disability and mainstream theatre, *Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theatre*.²² Ann Fox's review of the book states that the volume "claims neither comprehensiveness in its treatment of disability in theatre nor exclusivity in its definition of disability theatre. The varying quality of the essays is frustrating but balanced by the volume's potential to invite readers to explore the history and theorization of disability in performance."²³ Scott Wallin has recently critiqued the award-winning musical *Next to Normal* from a disability studies perspective, arguing that the show fails to address the stigma of disability and perpetuates the medical model of understanding psychosocial disability.²⁴ Such critical work is growing but still relatively uncharted in the theatrical community. Approached with thoughtfulness and care, however, disability as a theoretical approach can do powerful and liberating work in the critical analysis of dramatic literature. It is my goal for this project to join the small but growing movement that engages in this critical task, demonstrate its power and effectiveness, and hopefully inspire others to do the same.

²¹ See bibliography.

²² Thomas Fahy and Kimball King, eds, *Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²³ Ann M. Fox, "(Review of) Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 56.2 (2004): 330.

²⁴ See Scott Wallin, "Next to Normal and the Persistence of Pathology in Performances of Psychosocial Disability," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33.1 (2013): n.p.

This burgeoning body of scholarship has thus far failed to recognize the contributions of D.W. Gregory, described by the *New York Times* as “a playwright with a talent to enlighten and provoke.”²⁵ Gregory, who does not self-identify as disabled, is nevertheless engaging with disability in ways that challenge mainstream representations and help to dislodge and redefine notions of normalcy and interdependence in relation to diverse bodies and minds. Artists like Gregory have the potential to begin changing the way culture understands and interacts with beauty, diversity, and the experience of being human, thus weakening the grasp of hegemonic ableism. As Margaret Shildrick, author of *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, might say, these are dangerous but important discourses that can have significant reverberations in culture, politics, and the lives of all kinds of individuals.²⁶

Gregory is a Washington D.C. based dramatist and teaching artist who earned a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 2003 for her play *The Good Daughter*, which premiered with New Jersey Rep.²⁷ Gregory is a resident playwright at New Jersey Repertory Co., a former national core member of the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, a member of the Dramatists Guild, and a founding member of The Playwrights’ Gymnasium, a process-oriented workshop based in Washington D.C.. She has also worked as a theatre critic for *The Washington Post* and recently interviewed Caridad Svitch for the 2013 anthology

²⁵ Alvin Klein, “Theatre Review; Bright Hopes, Bleak Futures from Real Life,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2000.

²⁶ I will explore Shildrick’s ideas in greater depth in chapter three.

²⁷ The author is currently seeking an appropriate publisher for *The Good Daughter*. This play is analyzed more thoroughly in chapter four.

called *24 Gun Control Plays*, published in partial response to the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School.²⁸

Gregory is actively engaged in playwriting and developing new work. To date, she has written over twenty plays, many of which have garnered numerous awards and have been produced throughout the world; one has been translated into Spanish and published abroad.²⁹ Notable premier productions include those at New Jersey Rep, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Theatre of the First Amendment, Playwrights Center of Minneapolis, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Co., Emerging Artists Theatre Company, and many others. She has had developmental workshops of her plays at the New Harmony Project, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Shenandoah International Playwrights Retreat, NYU's HotInk Festival, the Women's Project, and the Young Vic, among others. She has received grants and financial support for her plays from the National New Play Network, the Maryland Arts Council, Ensemble Studio Theatre, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Gregory's awards and acclaim include being a finalist for the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference on three occasions, a semi-finalist for the Hot City theatre Greenhouse Play festival, finalist for the New Harmony Project, finalist for the Bloomington Playwrights Project Woodward/Newman Award, Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Award for Best Student Work, the American Alliance for Theatre in Education (AATE) Playwrights in Our

²⁸ Caridad Svitch and Zac Kline, eds., *24 Gun Control Plays* (Washington, D.C: NoPassport Theatre Alliance and Press, 2013).

²⁹ *So Tell Me About This Guy* was published in Samuel French's *Ten Minute Plays: Volume 3 From Actors Theatre of Louisville* and has been translated and published in Spanish as well as being performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in Singapore, Peru, London, New York, Chicago, and elsewhere.

Schools Award, honorable mention for the Marilyn Hall Award, The George R. Kernodle One-Act Play Award, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination for *The Good Daughter* in 2003.³⁰

Gregory's plays are often set in rural America and draw upon her working class roots, described by Dramatic Publishing as "exploring the disconnect between the dream and the reality of working class America. [They] frequently present an unseen offstage character as well – the economic and political forces that shape the individuals on stage."³¹ Many of her plays, including the Pulitzer-nominated *The Good Daughter*, feature female protagonists with disabilities as diverse as polio, cerebral palsy, radiation poisoning, depression, and schizophrenia. Despite gathering numerous awards cited above and a considerable amount of critical and commercial success, however, her plays are yet to receive scholarly attention. In this project, I will critically analyze three plays of D.W. Gregory – *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls* – as case studies of contemporary playwriting featuring complex and progressive representations of disability.

The three plays I will analyze are both representative and exemplary among Gregory's work. *Dirty Pictures* is a bawdy comedy about four working-class lives in the throes of the Reagan-era recession that are turned upside down by the discovery of twenty-one shocking photographs. The protagonist, Judy, is a sexy, feisty bartender and short order cook who walks with a limp due to her cerebral palsy. *The Good Daughter*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2003, is a drama about love and defiance set

³⁰ For a more comprehensive list of Gregory's current work, including her plays, awards, publications, and premier productions, see Appendix A.

³¹ "Author Bio," *Dramatic Publishing*, accessed August 21, 2013, <http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/AuthorBio.php?titlelink=10106>.

in rural Missouri before and after World War I. Ned Owen's oldest daughter Esther has a limp from childhood polio, but it is the father's patriarchal choices and perspectives that oppress all three of his daughters and limit their options in life. Thirdly, Gregory's most well-known play, *Radium Girls*, has received nearly 300 productions around the world since its publication in 2003. The play and its central character of Grace Fryer are based on the true story of a dial painter with debilitating radium poisoning who battles with her former employer for justice.

These three plays represent a diversity of American experience in terms of geography and historical time periods, as well as a diversity of theatrical styles from realism to farce to epic theatre.³² They are also particularly potent for the intersection of identity categories that influence the world of the plays. Although I am primarily concerned with representations of physical disability in these works, I will also explore the impact of class, gender, and national identities on these representations, and how all of these identities are fluidly interweaving in people's lives. Gregory uses the intersections of disability with gender, class, and national identity to create powerful drama, political commentary, and subversive comedy deeply rooted in the human condition, and her work deserves more attention from scholars and producers.

Methodology

This study is a literary-critical analysis grounded in close readings of Gregory's three plays, *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls*. Following the

³² I have also chosen these three plays for their exploration of physical disability. Many of Gregory's other plays explore cognitive disabilities, a site of human diversity that is under-explored in the literature. I chose to focus on physical disabilities for the sake of consistency and simplicity. A fuller discussion of the representation of mental, developmental, sensory, cognitive, or other disabilities is thus beyond the scope of this project.

majority of disability studies scholarship, I will primarily use the social model of disability when unpacking how disability is constructed and how it functions within the worlds of the plays. Medical and moral models of disability, grounded in an understanding of rehabilitation described by Henri-Jacques Stiker, will also be used to help unpack some of the antagonistic perspectives of other characters.³³ As an entry point, these models, described in more detail below, will be foundational to exploring the nature and significance of these representations of disability. Each analytic chapter will use different aspects and branches of disability studies and disability theory, thus illuminating some of the scope of the field and the numerous avenues that are open to scholars and critics.

Surrounding these models of understanding disability is the related concept of ‘normalcy.’ Lennard Davis’ (1995) book *Enforcing Normalcy* exposes the cultural and historical foundations of the notion of the ‘normal’ as it was born and constructed over the last two hundred years. He argues that disability is "part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances,” especially the concept of normalcy.³⁴ Davis’ book, along with Stiker’s, marks some of the early significant theorizations of disability that deconstruct the medical model and develop a more social understanding of disability. Michel Foucault’s lectures on the “Abnormal” from 1975 do not explicitly address disability or disability studies, but he

³³ For more on the medical and moral models, see Victoria Ann Lewis, ed, *Beyond Victims and Villains*. Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, Translated by William Sayers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

³⁴ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 2.

explores the emergence of normalization as “a polemical and political concept.”³⁵ The historical and political forces invested in disability, rehabilitation, and the concept of ‘normal’ are crucial to understanding the wider cultural contexts that permeate the study of disability and how representations of disability function.

These three plays integrate disability within a broader field of identities like gender, class, and nationality. This intersectionality of multiple forms of identity and their associated oppressions is a particularly useful critical approach. Disability scholar Anna Mollow has said that “examining the converging effects of multiple forms of oppression can have profound implications for disability studies.”³⁶ She emphasizes that these intersections are not merely additive but rather interactive and synergistic in ways that resist forms of essentialism that tend to dogmatize and ossify some critical studies. In this project, I use an intersectional approach to my analysis by addressing the interactions of the protagonists’ multiply configured identities. By using disability to foreground an intersectional approach to identity in Gregory’s plays, I try to avoid a monolithic analysis and to explore the nuances that grow in the overlapping margins of multiple identities.

The three protagonists I analyze are all working-class, female Americans who have or are perceived as having disabilities. Within Disability Studies, two primary theoretical approaches have generally taken shape. One is the minority identity theory, supported by Tobin Siebers and others, whereby disability is a marker of minority status in as similar way to how gender or race can be markers of minority statuses. Another

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), xxi.

³⁶ Ann Mollow, “When Black Women Start Going on Prozac... The Politics of Race, Gender, and Emotional Distress in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah’s *Willow Weep for Me*,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 488.

approach is ‘Crip theory,’ described by Robert McRuer and others, whereby Crip – like queer – is an anti-normative and anti-establishment marker of outsider status. From this perspective, Crip is more about power dynamics than bodies. These approaches are analyzed in more detail in the literature review below, yet both are useful for close reading of these texts. Within the world of the plays, exploring the perspectives of the characters themselves and their interactions, Siebers’ minority identity approach is more useful to understanding the behavior and relationships of the characters. Yet when looking at these works from the outside, thematically, and in relation to other modes of representation, using Crip theory is beneficial in exposing how Gregory’s characterizations tend to defy conventions and deconstruct or “crip” normative paradigms of compulsory ablebodiedness.

In order to unpack representations of gender in relation to disability, I use Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s approach, first described in *Extraordinary Bodies*, which puts disabilities into a humanities perspective as a minority identity linked with feminism.³⁷ In literature and in culture, both the disabled and the female body are seen as extra-ordinary objects. Related scholarship, such as Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, Judith Butler’s understanding of subjectification and the idealized norm, and Erving Goffman’s notion of stigma, illuminate the multiple gazes that impact these characters.³⁸ Using this approach to contextualize Gregory’s characters will help me to wrestle with questions of gender identity in relation to disability and culture within the worlds of the

³⁷ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1963).

plays, and to investigate the subversive and progressive nature of Gregory's representations.

Disability as it intersects with national identity in these three plays is a uniquely American phenomenon. Kim Nielsen, in her book *A Disability History of the United States*, emphasizes the fluidity of disability, noting that “which bodily and mental variabilities are considered inconsequential, which are charming, and which are stigmatized, changes over time – and that is the history of disability.”³⁹ Her stories reveal a hidden American history that is both familiar and radical as she probes the tough questions about fitness for participation in citizenship. Embedded within the notion of American identity – codified to an extent by James Truslow Adams' concept of the “American dream” – is the notion of self-determination which assumes compulsory able-bodiedness.⁴⁰ Like Nielsen, Douglas Baynton attempts historiographically to rethink and reshape our understanding of the past and how disability has been an integral part of that past in his article “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” Baynton notes that “disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”⁴¹ He argues that disability has historically been viewed from a kind of eugenic or curative perspective as the

³⁹ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xvii. See also Shapiro, *No Pity: How the Disability Rights Movement is Changing America* (New York: Times Books, 1993).

⁴⁰ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931). Adams describes the American dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his *ability* or achievement” (404, my emphasis). It has gone relatively unquestioned for decades that opportunity and the American dream have ‘ability’ as a prerequisite.

⁴¹ Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History*, edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 52.

fundamental cultural construction that justifies oppression in America (and elsewhere) under the auspices of the “aesthetics of normalcy.”⁴² These approaches to disability as it interacts with American identity (and vice versa) help with the interrogation of the cultural milieu of the plays and their subversive nature by exploring the ways Gregory’s representations interact with and supplant that American myth of self-determination. Gregory’s plays tend to deconstruct this myth, exposing the fallacy of independence and challenging the assumptions of able-bodied hegemony in relation to civic participation.

When disability manifests itself in drama, and even in life, there is often a reaction of anxiety from non-disabled participants. This anxiety is a powerful influencer of behavior and can have widespread reverberations from the individual all the way to legislative decisions. Margrit Shildrick, Ato Quayson, and Alison Kafer are among those who have begun to theorize this notion of anxiety in relation to disability.⁴³ By analyzing how anxiety functions as a response to disability in these plays, and how disabled characters respond in turn to this anxiety, I explore the different ways that Gregory challenges cultural perceptions and models new ways of incorporating disabled identities into dramatic literature.

Radium Girls is a historical drama based on true stories, so I also consult historical accounts including Claudia Clark’s *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial*

⁴² Ibid, 48.

⁴³ Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alison Kafer, “Debating Feminist Futures: Slippery Slopes, Cultural Anxiety, and the Case of the Deaf Lesbians,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Health Reform, 1910-1935, which Gregory used as research when writing the play.⁴⁴ The representation of historical figures and events is an important distinction when compared to the original stories created for other plays. In this way, the writing of *Radium Girls* was a kind of historiographic approach incorporating disability that falls in line with Nielsen's and Baynton's accounts. This kind of perspective helps illuminate the play in a much broader cultural context as it functions to give voice to an oppressed group of individuals. I have also conducted further informal interviews in person and via email with Gregory in order to gain additional information and insight into her authorial process and choices insofar as they relate to the primary task of the project, which is a literary-critical analysis.

Literature Review

Disability Studies as a contemporary scholarly field has grown out of the disability rights movement in the United States and Britain. As Deborah Marks argues, "any study of disability must be grounded within a specific historical context [...] The starting point for any critical understanding must be the notion of civil rights and disabled people's resistance to oppression."⁴⁵ Scholars such as Fleischer and Zames (2011), Barnartt and Scotch (2001), and Stroman (2000) have analyzed how the civil rights movements and the disability activists of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the beginnings of disability studies as an academic field.⁴⁶ These activists, and the social-

⁴⁴ Claudia Clark, *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1-2.

⁴⁶ Doris Z. Fleischer, and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Sharon Barnartt and Richard Scotch,

academic milieu that surrounded them, gave birth to the social model of disability – a reaction against the medical model – whereby disability is a product of social factors and institutional boundaries that prohibit or limit participation in social life for persons with certain impairments or attributes. This social model, taken in its most rigid form, separates disability (a social construct) from impairment (a physical or mental state of being), and concludes that no one is disabled until he or she comes in contact with social forces that disable them. This model is not without criticism (as discussed below), but it has been the dominant academic paradigm in understanding disability for the last forty years, although more pathologizing and medical understandings still permeate popular culture at large.

Paul Longmore (2003) explores the disability rights movement and contemporary issues in disability with a collection of essays that is an autobiographical blend of scholarship and advocacy with the goal to stimulate more work and examination. Longmore notes the difference between disability research (usually medical or social scientific in nature) and disability studies (an effort to bring attention to voice, authority, and agency in the study of people with disabilities).⁴⁷ His location as an academic and activist is a valuable critical model to avoid the armchair philosophizing and arrogant ignorance of the prejudicial influences in our thinking that, he maintains, permeates the academy. Taken from this perspective, any study of disability, even a literary analysis like the project I have undertaken, is engaging in advocacy, since disability studies is part

Disability Protests: Contentious Politics 1970-1999 (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2001); Duane F. Stroman, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Deinstitutionalization to Self-Determination* (New York: University Press of America, 2000).

⁴⁷ Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 7-12.

of the ongoing disability rights movement. Academic enterprises interact with historical realities and can have real-world significance beyond the ripple effect of shifts in a wider knowledge base. This project does not shy away from the cultural impact and implications of the activism of scholarship in relation to disability.

Longmore's quest for a kind of "usable past" has been taken up by disability historians and historiographers like Joseph Shapiro, whose 1993 text *No Pity* is foundational for understanding disability and disability rights. While Shapiro's book chronicles "the formation of the [disability] movement and the issues and identities that define it," he recognizes the diversity, fluidity, and composite nature of the movement as he weaves particular individual narratives into the larger scope of the progress of recent disability history.⁴⁸ His method personalizes the politicized movements and helps to give voice to the individuals whose lives and actions have moved the cause of social justice forward. This approach gives my current study more urgency, as the representation of disabled bodies and minds on stage is thus a politically charged act, regardless of the model being used or the method of representation.

Prior to the development of the social model of disability in the twentieth century, the two dominant ways of understanding disability (and representing disability in literature) have been identified as the moral model and the medical model. Henri-Jacques Stiker, in *A History of Disability*, traces the history of disability from the Bible through western antiquity into the birth of the rehabilitation movement, for the first time noting the evolving sociopolitical processes and events that gave rise to the various modes of understanding disability and rehabilitation in culture. The moral model, as Victoria Ann

⁴⁸ Shapiro, *No Pity*, 11.

Lewis describes it, espoused that “the physically different body is explained by an act of divine or demonic intervention.”⁴⁹ Disability was stigmatized and seen as divine retribution for sin or evidence of demonic possession. This understanding of disability is part of the foundation of the idea of the “freak” and the stigma associated with taboo or aberrant physiology. Scholars such as Fielder (1979), Bogdan (1988), Stephens (2005), and others have explored notions of the freak and the freak show throughout history as an oppressive and exploitative framework that actively marginalizes and marks individuals as an inferior ‘other.’⁵⁰ This mode of understanding disability as moral stigma gave rise to the disabled villain character type like the fearsome Captain Hook or the depraved Richard III, as well as the divinely ‘touched’ soothsayer Tiresias whose blindness gives him more truthful insight into those around him. This notion of the “freak show” is also the framework through which I enter my analysis of *Radium Girls* in chapter five.

With the post-enlightenment development of modern medicine, statistics, and capitalism, impaired bodies and minds were no longer seen as supernaturally marked, but rather as sick and in need of cure.⁵¹ This medical model situates disability within the individual as a lack to be filled or a flaw to be rehabilitated. Disabled bodies and minds, in this regard, are broken and in need of an able-bodied expert to intervene and repair or rehabilitate the damage and bring them back to ‘normal.’ Disability must be either charitably removed from society or cured, or at least ‘pass’ as being cured. These

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxi.

⁵⁰ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979); Elizabeth Stephens, “Twenty-First Century Freak Show: Recent Transformation in the Exhibition of Non-Normative Bodies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 25.3 (2005); Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵¹ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxi.

diagnostic understandings, Lewis points out, gave rise to the character types of the heroic over-comer and the heroic suicide who fight against their lack to achieve normalcy or, if that is not possible, alleviate society from the burden of their ‘abnormal’ and ‘deviant’ existence.⁵² These are the traditional modes of dramatic representation of disability that Gregory avoids in her plays, instead making use of more generative and constructive representations of disability.

Robert McRuer’s (2006) book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* marks an important juncture in the theorizing of disability. He understands Crip as a political critique of neoliberal capitalism that operates within a compulsory able-bodied and heteronormative framework. This compulsion is generative of disability, and as such, cultural norms need to be enforced to maintain social existence (cf. Lennard Davis’s *Enforcing Normalcy*). By claiming Crip, McRuer resituates disability away from the body and towards an understanding of power. Like the concept of queer, Crip is anti-normative, non-essentialist, and always in flux as a marker of outsider status. As such, McRuer contends, anyone can “come out Crip” regardless of their embodiment. He says, “Coming out Crip at times involves embracing and at times disidentifying with the most familiar kinds of identity politics.”⁵³ Crip is about transforming and challenging the compulsory systems more so than an individual or collective identity. In this sense, Crip (and queer) is more a verb than a noun, and it provides a valuable resource for analyzing how these works function within their broader theatrical contexts.

⁵² Ibid, xxii.

⁵³ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 57.

However, the late Tobin Siebers and other scholars and artists would argue that this anti-essentialist perspective fails to get at the lived realities of individuals and leaky bodies.⁵⁴ Two years after *Crip Theory* was published, the Siebers provided an alternative to McRuer's crippling of disability studies with the publication of *Disability Theory* in 2008. The title itself implies that Siebers thinks the notion of Crip is insufficient in relation to disability, bodies, and identity politics. In this work, Siebers is critical of a purely social construction of disability which fails to address the more corporeal issues of actual bodies. He would argue that McRuer's expansion of the criteria for what constitutes disability or disability theory focuses too much on the fluid power relationships and marginalizing processes of social constructionism while denying any kind of essential or bodily criteria for identifying as disabled or Crip. Siebers' book is an impassioned defense of identity politics, which he argues is "the most practical course of action by which to address social injustices against minority peoples."⁵⁵ Although he never cites *Crip Theory* directly, Siebers implies that approaches like McRuer's link identity with disability, and disability with suffering, and suffering with weakness, thereby reinforcing "the ideology of ability" and demonstrating "a profound misunderstanding of disability."⁵⁶ Perhaps this critique is due to the fact that McRuer's Crip theory is rooted in queer theory and as such is related to the politicizing of pleasure, thus inverting the reality of pain that so often accompanies disabled experience. Unlike

⁵⁴ See for example Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism, and (Bio)ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 15. Two years later, Siebers published *Disability Aesthetics*, which theorizes how disability as an identity concept can redefine notions of beauty in relation to modern and postmodern art.

⁵⁶ Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 13.

McRuer, Siebers' minority identity theory is grounded in the materiality of the body and embraces phenomenology as a meaningful and important way to engage with the world. Such a phenomenological perspective is perhaps more valuable to performance and theatre artists and scholars like Petra Kupperts and Victoria Lewis who explore disability 'on the ground' and work with embodied individuals, telling stories of particularized ways that individuals engage with their worlds.

After Siebers' (2008) defense of disability identity politics in response to McRuer's (2006) anti-normative unsettling of identity, the pendulum swings back again with the publication of *Sex and Disability* (2012), a collection of essays, edited by McRuer and Anna Mollow, which continues the project of queering disability studies. Mollow's essay in this collection, "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive," follows *Crip Theory* in a critique of liberal identity politics. For Mollow, "if we insist...on our personhood and pride [as identity politics does], we may risk contributing to an already pervasive cultural desexualization of disability."⁵⁷ She is insistent upon the refusal of identity politics as generally understood and calls for the embracing of a highly negative anti-normativity as an ethical imperative, with the goal to unsettle the assumptions that underlie political aims.⁵⁸ Mollow has critiqued Siebers (and others) directly for what she calls "excessive or insufficiently critical reliance upon identity within the field of disability studies."⁵⁹ Her argument admittedly creates a tension between theory and activism, disavowing constructions of disabled identities. While this

⁵⁷ Anna Mollow, "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive," in *Sex and Disability*, ed. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 302.

⁵⁸ Mollow, "Is Sex Disability?," 291.

⁵⁹ Anna Mollow, "Identity Politics and Disability Studies: A Critique of Recent Theory," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43 no. 2 (2004), 273.

questioning, fragmenting, and de-centering approach is crucial to their critique – and fundamental to any deconstructivist perspective – I do not find polemics such as Mollow’s “fuck the social order” to have sufficient practical applicability to make them a significantly useful perspective in understanding and navigating lived realities or representations of those realities.⁶⁰ The fracturing or elimination of identity politics carries the inherent risk of not just ignoring but possibly devaluing actual body-minds by marking social constructions as more significant than embodied existence. To use Eli Clare’s words from his (1999) memoir *Exile and Pride*, such a method “makes theoretical and political sense but misses important emotional realities.”⁶¹ Furthermore, Clare argues, “Our bodies are not merely blank slates upon which the powers-that-be write their lessons.”⁶² Social constructionism must also grapple with the realities of lived experience, of pain and struggle even outside social contexts or hierarchies.

Alison Kafer has argued that cultural anxiety and reproductive norms indicate a dystopic American view of disability as “an unredeemable difference with no place in visions of the future.”⁶³ This notion of the “reproduction of cultural anxiety” in relation to disability and reproductive politics is also a common trope in Margrit Shildrick’s (2009)

⁶⁰ Mollow, “Is Sex Disability?,” 288.

⁶¹ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999), 7. Clare’s quote, used here, is in reference to disability theorist Michael Oliver’s socially constructive definitions of impairment and disability in which disability has no material reality and is merely a social construct with no relation to the actual body.

⁶² Clare, 129. Clare also participates in a McRuer-like capitalist critique and pushes our understanding of identity politics beyond the individual. Yet his reformulation of identity politics does not abandon it altogether. Rather, he claims queer – and Crip – as part of personal and communal identity, while still recognizing the troublesome classism and urbanism that plagues cultural locations of queer identities. By celebrating differences, such “ugly words” can be and are being reclaimed as a source of pride by many members of marginalized communities (Clare, 93).

⁶³ Kafer, “Debating Feminist Futures,” 222.

book *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality*.⁶⁴ Shildrick argues that “anomalous embodiment” creates psycho-social anxiety, revealing the vulnerability inherent in all bodies.⁶⁵ This anxiety is most acute when disability is explored in the context of subjectivity and sexuality, a context that is particularly fruitful in my analysis of *Dirty Pictures*. Like Siebers, Shildrick emphasizes the material body and distances herself from pure social constructivism; like Petra Kuppers – a phenomenological performance artist/scholar – Shildrick simultaneously develops an ethics of communal, corporeal touch that “is the basis of our being (or becoming)-in-the-world.”⁶⁶ This intercorporeality, like Kuppers’ rhizomatic model (described below), is influenced by the theories of Deleuze and Guattari. Shildrick argues – like McRuer and Mollow – for a “queering of normative paradigms,” troubling the image of the body as stable and coherent.⁶⁷ Ultimately, her work aims to foreground disability among the (anxious and dangerous) discourses of the body alongside queer and feminist critiques, and in so doing, perhaps bridges some of the theoretical gap between McRuer and Siebers.

If McRuer and Mollow primarily focus on theoretical understandings of differential embodiment as compared to the more grounded and practical identity politics of Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, then perhaps one could compare the personal and intersectional memoir of Eli Clare with the more communally inclusive, intimate, and relational analyses of Sarah Smith Rainey in *Love, Sex, & Disability: the Pleasures of Care* (2011) and Kittay and Feder in *The Subject of Care: Feminist*

⁶⁴ Kafer, “Debating Feminist Futures,” 225.

⁶⁵ Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 26.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

Perspectives on Dependency (2002).⁶⁸ Both of these books explore the complexity of ways in which disability and care-giving relationships can be mutual, reciprocal, and beneficial. Rainey specifically explores cultural representations of disability, sexuality, and care relationships in popular media before contesting those representations and the negative assumptions that are imbedded within them. Although she does not sufficiently explore racial or queer sexual identities – a significant oversight – the couples in Rainey’s qualitative sociological study do experience the heteronormativity and able-bodied hegemony of love and sex in ways that echo McRuer’s analysis, demonstrating the realities of social power structures engaging with personal experiences of disability, dependency, and care giving. These analyses of care bring feminist theories to the foreground and suggest ways that notions and representations of disability may be configured more relationally and less monolithically.

Central to understanding the nature and function of cultural representation is an understanding of aesthetics. For Tobin Siebers, disability is fundamental to aesthetics as a whole because disability enlarges our understanding of human variation, which, generally speaking, is what Siebers believes art is about.⁶⁹ In *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), he argues for the revolutionary potential of disability to transform our understanding of what constitutes beauty, stating that disability is now “an aesthetic value in itself.”⁷⁰ Focusing specifically on modern art, his argument intrinsically links art to life and life to disability,

⁶⁸ Sarah Smith Rainey, *Love, Sex & Disability: The Pleasures of Care* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2011); and Eva F. Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, eds., *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002). I use the term “relational” in this context to highlight the way these authors emphasize the relationships inherent in care, pleasure, and disability.

⁶⁹ Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 139.

calling into question past artistic impulses towards a ‘perfection’ that are undergirded with notions of ablebodiedness. Siebers argues that beauty requires ugliness; and by extension, all notions of “normality” are undergirded by aesthetic values – take for example the American ‘ugly laws’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷¹ His work is bold and far-reaching in its attempt to reclaim beauty from notions of the ‘ideal’ form, but it relies on a somewhat narrow interpretation of art generally and modern art specifically as primarily visual and static creations. Expanding the scope of artistic production under analysis can provide wider and more fluid interpretive categories, perhaps destabilizing disability as a cohesive category itself. By changing the way we understand beauty and bodies, as I argue that D.W. Gregory does in these plays, we can quite literally change the way people view the world.

While Siebers, McRuer, Michael Davidson, and others examine representations of disability in visual arts, media, and music, they were building upon the first major critical study to examine literary and cultural representations of physical disability by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997). Using literary and cultural criticism, Garland-Thomson critiques liberal, capitalistic individualism and puts disability in a humanities context as a minority discourse rather than a medical one. Among her significant contributions, she puts disability studies into conversation with feminism and other critical studies, placing disability into the same realm of inquiry as otherness in race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Like Judith Butler’s understanding of the subjectification of bodies from the systemized power of the idealized norm, Garland-

⁷¹ Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: NYU Press, 2010). For example, Chicago passed a municipal law in 1881 that anyone who was diseased or deformed shall not be allowed to be in public view, essentially criminalizing being disabled in public. Such laws were common in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, and some were not repealed until the 1970s.

Thomson's work is a critical entry point to understanding how gender and disability intersect in the representations of extraordinary bodies.

As Garland-Thomson interrogates the very nature of American selfhood, her analysis provocatively embraces both strategic constructionism and strategic essentialism in understanding the nature of disability. Interestingly, she uses a similar approach in her more recent book *Staring: How We Look* (2009), in which she examines the physiological and psychological underpinnings of staring in an individual context before looking at it as a social and cultural phenomenon.⁷² Staring is related to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and Goffman's notion of stigma, all of which involve the marginalization of that which defies social norms. Staring, like disability, is a dialectical phenomenon that is both socially constructed and biologically founded as an unconditioned physiological response to unfamiliar stimuli.⁷³ Staring is also part of a uniquely American obsession with the media, independence, and self-determination, as will be discussed in the analysis of *Radium Girls* in chapter five.

Building upon the ideas in Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's (2000) work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* is one of the most influential resources in the field of literary

⁷² See also Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability" in Snyder, Brueggemann, and Garland-Thomson (2002). A similar version of this essay was published just one year earlier in 2001 as "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography" in *The New Disability History*, edited by Longmore and Umansky.

⁷³ This dialectic paradigm (putting social and medical models into conversation) is also seen in many of the historians discussed previously. See also, for example David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

disability studies.⁷⁴ Mitchell and Snyder use literary criticism to excavate the nearly ubiquitous cultural presence of disability in English literature, art, ideas, and the world. They argue that disability is the occasion for storytelling; wherever there is lack there needs a story to fill the gaps. In this sense, disability as a narrative prosthesis “calls stories into being” and makes narrative structures operational.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, narrative prosthesis is a theory of disability *in* narrative whereby disabled characters are radically and ubiquitously present, yet they do not have their own stories: they are the “materiality of metaphor.”⁷⁶ In this way, narrative prosthesis exposes within cultural representations the discriminatory attitudes towards disability that range from pity and scorn to eugenics and euthanasia. They more fully and explicitly theorize the way that literature uses disability as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” to support narrative structures, and they expose how this metaphoric use of disability affects the way people with disabilities live and understand themselves.⁷⁷ From this perspective, literary critics have a profoundly influential role that transcends theory and impacts individuals and how they understand their lived realities.

Narrative prosthesis as an interpretive paradigm also holds great promise in the arenas of theatre and performance studies. Mitchell and Snyder provocatively ask, “Why does the ‘visual’ spectacle of so many disabilities become a predominating trope in the

⁷⁴ The following year, in the 2001 *Enabling the Humanities* collection, David Mitchell published a follow-up essay entitled “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor” that expands upon the ideas he and Snyder set forth in this book.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

⁷⁷ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.

nonvisual textual mediums of literary narratives?”⁷⁸ This trope of ‘visual’ disability becomes exponentially complicated and important for critics and analysts of performance texts that include visual mediums. Although Mitchell and Snyder make brief reference to those “who share the stage with Oedipus,” they do not address the crucially important fact of the embodied nature of theatrical performance.⁷⁹ Though they discuss the plays *Richard III* and *Oedipus Rex*, they analyze them exclusively as literature, never addressing the fact that these texts were written to be performed in front of live audiences with live actors. Playwright and author Jeffrey Sweet states explicitly that “the playscript is by definition not a literary form.”⁸⁰ Because plays are composed and intended to be performed by actors in front of an audience, treating them exclusively or even primarily as literature misses important realities that are of critical importance for scholars of disability representation. It is one thing to speak of Oedipus’ clubbed foot and the materiality of its metaphoric qualities; it is quite another thing to bear witness to an actor playing Oedipus limping in front of you and lamenting his loss of sight. Such embodied experiences of disability representation can perhaps provide alternative ways to interpret Mitchell and Snyder’s “materiality of metaphor.” The physical and embodied representation of a disabled character by an actor (with or without disabilities) opens up important arenas for discourse that Mitchell and Snyder do not address, but scholars and critics of theatre and performance must.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 53.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 62. Mitchell and Snyder’s reference here is to those characters within the story and not to the physical bodies of performers, so their reference to sharing the stage is not entirely accurate if the work is considered a text intended for performance.

⁸⁰ Jeffrey Sweet, *The Dramatist’s Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), 1.

Mitchell and Snyder were the first to expose the ubiquity and substantially theorize the nature of disability as a literary device while also showing how such representations have important and often oppressive cultural functions. They may have exposed and explained disability as a metaphoric device, but it would take other artists and scholars to begin to deconstruct it and find alternatives to it. While scholars have given significant attention to disabled representation in film and media (Chivers and Markotić, 2010; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005; Smit and Elms, 2001), only a small, albeit growing, number of scholar/artists are focusing on disability scholarship in relation to drama and live theatre.⁸¹ Among them is theatre and disability scholar/artist Victoria Lewis who has collected a series of plays in her well-annotated anthology *Beyond Victims and Villains* (2006). This work is the first published collection of “disability drama” texts, written by artists with disabilities, that deal with disabled experiences. Her introduction and brief critical analyses – which should be required reading for any theatre scholar interested in identity politics – draw upon important works like Lennard Davis’ *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) and Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*, but Lewis expands and adapts these analyses to a uniquely theatrical (and embodied) perspective that incorporates the live-ness and collaborative nature of theatre. She calls for a reformulation of the theatrical canon to include works like these of the “new disability

⁸¹ See: Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić, eds., *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010); Martin Norden, *Cinema of Isolation: a History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Charles A. Riley II, *Disability and the Media: Prescriptions for Change* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005); Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Elms, eds. *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (New York: University of America Press, 2001).

Fahy and King edited the first anthology of scholarship on theatre and disability in their 2002 collection, *Peering Behind the Curtain*. Although the introduction (and, frustratingly, some of the essays) was generally not rigorous in its understanding and use of applicable theoretical lenses and did not adequately define important terms (the difference between disability and impairment, for example), the book is significant for being the first collection of its kind to focus on exploring the intersection of dramatic criticism and disability studies.

theatre.”⁸² Lewis’s earlier essay, “The Dramaturgy of Disability” (2000), explores this new disability theatre from a dramaturgical perspective, exposing the structural elements within the new genres that function to liberate disability from the prosthetic realm of metaphor in contemporary drama.⁸³ Although Lewis focuses exclusively on ‘disability theatre,’ her understanding of dramaturgy applies well to the works this study examines, and is a significant resource for my analysis of *Dirty Pictures*. The works included in *Beyond Victims and Villains* represent, as Michael Davidson might argue, a kind of avant-garde experimentation that challenges normative assumptions and compulsory ablebodiedness. Importantly, Lewis describes and exposes some of the significant resistance by producers and audiences to performing plays like these in “mainstream” theatres, and she is adamant that such exclusionary production practices need to be broken so that people with disabilities can be represented on stage as more than mere metaphors.⁸⁴

Some disabled performers like Petra Koppers and her Olimpias troupe have been able to create their own community performance opportunities and develop their own

⁸² Whether or not there should be a “canon” of theatrical texts at all is not explored, though it may not be the place of such an anthology to do so. The term “new disability theatre,” represented by the texts Lewis has selected, is meant to describe theatre by/for/about the disability community, as compared to mainstream or “traditional” plays written by/for/about what Charles Mee calls “intact people” (quoted in Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, 233).

⁸³ Victoria Ann Lewis, “The Dramaturgy of Disability” in *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture*, edited by Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 93-108.

⁸⁴ Lewis also importantly addresses “the casting question” that is inevitably raised as a reason not to produce plays such as those in her anthology. Chuck Ervin, author of *History of Bowling*, comments on the phenomenological importance of authentic embodiment on stage while remaining realistic about the prospects typically available to directors and producers: “There is no substitute for casting actors with disabilities. That doesn’t mean you’ll always be able to find one. You may be forced to punt and go with a walkie-talkie. But if you do, something will always be missing” (396). On a related note, Carrie Sandahl explores “The Tyranny of Neutral: Disability and Actor Training” in *Bodies in Commotion* (255-267). A deeper discussion and analysis of this performance dimension is beyond the scope of this project. For more about professional actors and disability, see also Christopher Shinn, “Disability is Not Just a Metaphor.”

phenomenological theories;⁸⁵ however, many disabled actors and writers (and directors, designers, dramaturgs, technicians, etc.) who are trying to build a career in theatre, film, and television still face significant challenges in order to simply make a living. Many of these cultural and economic obstacles are the vibrations of hegemonic ablebodiedness, entrenched by years of diagnostic interpretations and understanding of disability. Culture and cultural representations of disability have been both reflective and reinforcing of these oppressive hierarchies. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, recognition is the cornerstone of ethics and politics.⁸⁶ The cultural and literary critics, artists, and performance theorists discussed here have been and continue to be engaging in the process of bringing disability identity out of the margins of medicalized representation and towards the center of cultural thought and production.

The works and scholars discussed here provide important challenges and engage with difficult questions about disability and the body. However, such modes of discourse, not surprisingly, do not adequately explore or address the experiences of people with cognitive or other invisible disabilities. The notion of disability as something that tangibly marks the body is an important part of the conversation, but it excludes many who, for various reasons, do not experience the same visible markings but still endure cultural injustices and stigmatization. There is much room for the discussion to radiate further and engage more variations of disabled embodiment and ‘en-mindment’. In the final analysis, the current exploration of embodiment, sexuality, and disability is about

⁸⁵ See Petra Kupperts, *Disability and Contemporary Performance*; and Petra Kupperts, *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁸⁶ See Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*.

what Abby Wilkerson might call shifting the locus of the normate.⁸⁷ Much of this discussion engages in radical efforts to explode the concept of ‘normal’ rather than merely expanding the boundaries of what is considered ‘normal.’ In either case, notions and representations of normalcy permeate the cultural imagination in deeply (re)constituting ways. As such, I believe that engaging with cultural representations of disability is of primary importance to the task of shaping a more just society. Such representations are not merely reflective of cultural attitudes, but they also have potentially subversive and generative power to facilitate ‘life imitating art’ and changing the way cultural participants understand and engage with disability.

Organization

Chapter one introduces and justifies this project and outlines the methods and procedures, also providing a literature review of the relevant scholarship leading to the utilization of disability studies as an analytic tool for dramatic criticism.

Chapter two briefly contextualizes D.W. Gregory and her work within the history of the representation of disability in relation to the canon of dramatic literature, with particular emphasis on American theatre and drama. As an emerging voice that is carving new ways to represent variations in ability on stage, Gregory’s context and significance within the wider scope of dramatic literature is important to understand, especially with regard to plays with female protagonists.

Chapter three analyzes the bawdy comedy *Dirty Pictures* (2011) and the central character of Judy, focusing on her personal and empowering journey within oppressive

⁸⁷ See Abby Wilkerson, “Normate Sex and its Discontents,” in *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 183-207.

The term “normate” is intentionally unsettling, purposefully challenging the assumptions inherent in the word “normal” that so often are left unquestioned.

and intersecting cultural hierarchies. Judy is a sexy, independent, 1980s working-class bar tender who has a limp due to cerebral palsy. The play explores the interconnectedness of gender, class, sexuality, and disability all within the structure of a bawdy sex farce.

Chapter four analyzes the Pulitzer-nominated drama *The Good Daughter* (2003). Set in rural Missouri around the time of the First World War, this play portrays three daughters who experience the powerful potentials of pregnancy, prejudice, polio, and paternalism that prevent them from participating fully in life. The play explores the interconnectedness of gender, ability, class, and American identity, all housed within the tragic consequences of humanity's effort to bend nature to its own will.

Chapter five explores Gregory's most widely produced play, the episodic and Brechtian saga *Radium Girls* (2003), about the tragedy of the radium dial painters in 1920's New Jersey. Having received nearly three hundred productions worldwide since its premier, this play explores not only the physical debilitations caused by exposure to radium, but also the disabling cultural forces that operate upon the characters. This chapter uses the historical Freak Show as an analytic paradigm before turning to science studies and trans-corporeality to develop a new theory of debility and half-life.

Chapter six provides a summary and conclusion to the project, describing the wider implications of the study while offering opportunities for further research and study.

Appendix "A" contains a comprehensive list of Gregory's plays, awards, publications, significant productions, and current projects at the time of writing.

Appendix "B" contains a transcript of the email interviews that I have conducted with D.W. Gregory.

Appendix “C” offers a few additional thoughts, extending the discussion of these three plays outside the scope of a disability studies perspective, offering a few brief additional modes of inquiry that scholars may choose to take up as these works come under greater scholarly scrutiny in the future.

CHAPTER 2 – Whose Stage is it Anyway? Theatre and Disability Representation in Context from Captain Hook to Judy Knoll

While a full history of disability representation in theatre is a worthwhile task, it is too ambitious a task for any single study, given the quiet ubiquity of disabled characters in drama. One of the most profound aspects of disability studies is that once you become conscious of disability, you see it everywhere. This is vividly true in drama. At the time of this writing, Professor Ann Fox of Davidson University is working on a book titled *Fabulous Invalids: Disability and the American Stage from Melodrama to Millenium*.⁸⁸ This text will explore in considerable depth the representation of disability in American theatre across two centuries, and I will not attempt to duplicate her work in this project. However, a brief overview of Disability in mainstream American theatre and dramatic literature will be helpful to establish a sense of the dramatic context from which D.W. Gregory is emerging and to contextualize her significance within it. As an emerging dramatic voice that is developing new ways to represent variations in disability on stage, her relationship to the wider scope of such representation within dramatic literature is important to understand, especially with regard to plays featuring female protagonists.

Fox gets the title for her book from the 1938 play of the same title by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, “in which theatre is represented as an invalid who is down but never out, perhaps dying but not dead yet. [T]his is a potentially rich figure that we

⁸⁸ John Syme, “Professor’s *Fabulous Invalids* Asks, “Who Are You Calling Disabled?”” April 16, 2004, Davidson University News Archives, accessed November 5, 2014, <https://webapps.davidson.edu/NewsArchives/news00.aspx?newsid=2146>.

ignore at our own peril.”⁸⁹ The invalid figure itself was born from the mentality of cure or kill that gave rise to the great overcoming narrative that dominates so much of literature, especially in relation to disability. Her goal then is analytical in nature, not rejecting representations for being stereotypical, but “reclaiming those aspects of disability representation that do important aesthetic and political work.”⁹⁰ As historical re-visioning, Fox’s work is crucial and lays the groundwork for artists like D.W. Gregory to tell stories that, Gregory claims, “present disability as a fact of life – not as ‘issue’ but as an element.”⁹¹ Any attempt to grapple with disability and identity will of course fail to capture the entirety of the scope and significance of the concept, but grapple we must.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the predominant mode of understanding disability was moral. Disability often marks characters with a stigma of moral corruption, where misshapen bodies symbolized misshapen souls. J.M. Barry’s evil Captain Hook, Peter Pan’s nemesis, who first appeared on Broadway in 1904, is exemplary. Hook’s central identity is disabled (he is missing one hand) and depraved; he is pure villain, yet his obsession with “good form” is ironic to say the least. Eugene O’Neill’s *Warnings* in 1913 tells the story of a wireless operator on a ship who goes deaf, and since he cannot perform his duties, commits suicide. Though tragic, this figure is a hero for removing his burdensome self from society. In 1916, the short film *The Black Stork* was made into a play. The story was based on the eugenic doctor Henry Haiselden who advocated for the euthanizing of disabled infants. Susan Glaspell’s *Inheritors* premiered in 1921, portraying

⁸⁹ Ann Fox, “A Different Integration: Race and Disability in Early Twentieth-Century African American Drama by Women,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 30 no. 1 (2013): 151.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 151.

⁹¹ D.W. Gregory, in an email with the author, October 20, 2014.

Professor Holden's disabled wife as a burden and an object of pity and victimhood. *Porgy and Bess* by the Gershwin brothers and DuBose Heyward debuts on Broadway in 1935, linking the effects of slavery, racism, poverty, and disability together. John Steinbeck's masterpiece *Of Mice and Men*, in which Lennie's cognitive impairments make him a danger to society that must be put out of his misery, appears on Broadway in 1937. In these works, and many others like them, disability is a dramatic symbol of character flaw. It is a complex symbol, to be sure, but one which uses disability almost exclusively to stigmatize a character and increase the dramatic nature of the script without any honest recourse to the lived realities experienced by the individual characters. Though the construction of disability as a symbol of flaw may seem on the surface to be a harmless dramaturgical device that raises the stakes for the characters and increases the dramatic quality of the situation, lurking underneath is the eugenic belief that disability and difference are wrongs or freakish and pitiable accidents that should either be rectified or eliminated. And, of course, at this time in history, the Eugenics movement was in full swing and beginning to reach its zenith in Nazi Germany.

The symbolism of disability in many of these dramatic works functions as the narrative prosthesis described by Mitchell and Snyder. It is the mystery that must be solved or rectified. Tennessee Williams's 1945 *The Glass Menagerie* created one of the best known theatrical depictions of disability, Laura Wingfield. Part of the tragedy of the play is that Laura is the innocent victim and does not get to overcome her disability and marry the gentleman caller. Steinbeck's Lennie also plays this innocent victim role. The trope of heroic sufferer is seen in *Porgy and Bess* as well as in Dore Shary's 1958 bio-play *Sunrise at Campobello*. This play about Franklin Delano Roosevelt struggling to

overcome his paralysis and launch himself back into politics is one of the highest examples of the overcoming narrative. FDR was able to overcome his disability (usually by hiding it from the public), so he becomes the victorious hero. Conversely Lennie and Laura cannot overcome their disability, so they are tragic figures. *Sunrise at Campobello* was so inspiring that it won four Tony awards, including best play and best actor for Ralph Bellamy as FDR. In 1959, William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* catapults the life of Helen Keller into the public consciousness, also making use of the heroic overcomer trope to huge success.

In 1961, however, American National Standards, Inc. (ANSI) published their "Barrier Free Standard." This document, though not a piece of binding legislation, set standards of construction specifications for making new buildings accessible to people with physical disabilities. This document can be seen as representing a turning point in American culture, a public recognition that people with disabilities should have the right to participation in society and access to buildings. The following year, Ed Roberts, a quadriplegic due to polio, enrolled at UC Berkeley and soon became one of the famous "Rolling Quads" who were instigators of the modern disability rights movement.⁹² The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was still nearly thirty years away, but the turbulent 1960s paved way for many changes in politics, culture, and theatre. To be sure, the use of disability as stigma, stereotype, or prosthetic metaphor still continued and continues on stage. Peter Weiss's 1963 *Marat/Sade* uses cognitive disability as a symbol of human suffering and a catalyst for personal and social revolution. *Wait Until Dark*

⁹² Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxvii. As a college student, Ed Roberts required the use of an eight hundred pound iron lung to sleep at night, and since none of the dormitory floors were able to support its weight, he was forced to live in the student infirmary.

(1966) by Frederick Knott (the film version for which Audrey Hepburn received an Oscar nomination appeared in the following year) uses blindness as an amplifier of victimhood, helplessness, and ultimately terror. In 1972, Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigolds* uses epilepsy to highlight a theme of triumph over adversity and mirror a mother's dis-ability to have maternal relationships.⁹³ Lanford Wilson's 1978 *Fifth of July* uses Ken's paraplegia as a powerful metaphor for the disillusionment and brokenness in American culture in the wake of the Vietnam War. Brian Clark's 1979 piece *Whose Life is it Anyway?* was considered to be a touching piece about the difficulties of living with disability, but it actually frames the protagonist as a noble hero for committing suicide after becoming disabled, perpetuating the cure or kill mentality.⁹⁴ The examples are endless, and these types of stereotypical representations continue today, but the momentum began shifting in the 60s as some theatre artists began finding new and empowering ways to represent the lives of people with disabilities on stage.

The issue is not so much the use of disability as metaphor, for it is a powerful phenomenon that reverberates deeply within the contemporary cultural milieu. The issue is often the *exclusive* use of disability as metaphor or sign, without thoughtful consideration for the lived realities of people living with these differences, in service to conventional narrative tropes. Asking the question, "Why is this character disabled?" can serve as a rough litmus test for unmasking the ways in which disability is being utilized in the narrative. When answers come easily, such as "to mark her as helpless" or "to emphasize his outsider status" or "to make her victory more compelling" or "to

⁹³ Andy Kempe, *Drama, Disability, and Education: A Critical Exploration for Students and Practitioners* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25.

⁹⁴ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxiii and xxxiii.

symbolize the fractured nature of society,” often those works have appropriated disability in traditional modes that subtly tend to marginalize people who live with disabilities every day. And thus, “explaining” disability often becomes the only story for that particular character. When the answers are less firm, more ‘leaky,’ and when disability becomes more entwined with the narrative, changes are being made.

Daniel Keyes’ 1966 *Flowers For Algernon* tells a compelling story of a cognitively disabled man who undergoes surgery that temporarily makes him a genius before he returns to his previous state. Though this story embraces disability as a marker of outsider status and a tragic amplifier, the life of the neuro-typical world is not glorified and in many ways, the protagonist is hurt by the brief absence of disability. *Flowers For Algernon* inverts the overcoming narrative and reveals some of the dangers of the curative mentality. *Butterflies Are Free* (1969) by Leonard Gershe tells the story of a blind man trying to find love and escape from his hyper-controlling mother, offering a depiction of some of the concerns of the Independent Living movement of the 1970s and 80s. Bernard Pomerance’s 1977 *The Elephant Man* tells the iconic story of Joseph Merrick, a Victorian Era freak show attraction known for his extreme bodily differences. A limited engagement Broadway revival ran from December 7, 2014 until February 21, 2015 starring Bradley Cooper. Merrick’s story as a brilliant man who lives continuously under the gaze of either freak show patrons or the medical establishment reveals the complexity of life with extreme disability and the overlapping lines of medicine and freakery. In 1980, Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God* broke new ground, not only for the thoughtful representations of deafness on stage, but also professionally for actors with disabilities in that the performance agreement stipulates that the roles of Sarah, Orin,

and Lydia must be played by deaf or hearing impaired actors.⁹⁵ Each of these plays was critically praised, and each was filmed with equal success, garnering numerous awards. Only Medoff's story had actual actors with disabilities playing the disabled roles, however.

During this same time period, disability performance companies began forming across the country: The National Theatre of the Deaf in Connecticut, 1967; National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped in New York, 1977; Theatre by the Blind (Now Theatre Breaking Through Barriers) in New York, 1979; Dancing Wheels Company in Cleveland in 1980, Open Door Theatre in Massachusetts, 1980; Axis Dance Company in Oakland, 1987; Diversability Theatre in Michigan, 1989; That Uppity Theatre Company in St. Louis, 1989; and PHAMALY Theatre Company (the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League) in Denver, 1989. Arts advocacy groups also began developing: International Center on Deafness and the Arts in Illinois, 1973; VSA (Very Special Artists in Washington D.C., 1974 (now with the Kennedy Center); Theatre Development Fund's Accessibility Program (TAP) in New York, 1979 (which provided the first American Sign Language interpretation of a Broadway show for *The Elephant Man* in 1980); Other Voices Project in Los Angeles, 1982; and The Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) in New York in 1986. The 70s and 80s were certainly formative hot beds for development of disability and the arts in the United States.

Also developing during this time was the beginning of what is often called Disability Theatre, chronicled expertly by Victoria Lewis in her 2006 Anthology, *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights*. Her anthology

⁹⁵ Mark Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1980), 5.

includes plays written by disabled playwrights for disabled actors about the disabled experience. For example, David Freeman's *Creeps* in 1973 was a gritty, realistic portrayal of five men with cerebral palsy interacting in a dirty bathroom. Freeman presents "a variety of disabled character types [...] to theatricalize the lived experience of disability as a collective, social process, not an individual destiny."⁹⁶ The characters also have moments during which they express their rage and anger at their treatment, combating the "denial of anger" that Irving Zola has identified as "one of the major contributing factors to the invisibility of disabled people in the modern era."⁹⁷ Susan Nussbaum's *Staring Back*, a collection of skits about disability, was picked up by Second City E.T.C. in Chicago in 1983, and though Nussbaum confessed in an interview that probably no copy of the script exists today, the play nevertheless had some important influence on disability culture, not the least of which was the fact that it was professionally produced at Second City.⁹⁸ These plays and many others are part of a vibrant and growing movement within American theatre. As Victoria Lewis says,

These writers work not so much 'beyond conventional' roles as within, beneath, and beside the metaphors and familiar interpretations of the impaired body, giving voice to the moments of silence, shaping the excess of experience that is kept in check by the conventional narratives on the streets, in educational and medical institutions, and on the stage.⁹⁹

These works are not trying to transcend or overcome traditional oppressive representations, but to create radical new modes of representation that infiltrate conventional roles and release the truths that have been kept silent by conventions. These

⁹⁶ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxv.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Sam Worley, "Susan Nussbaum's Next Act," *The Chicago Reader*, May 30, 2013.

⁹⁹ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xv.

playwrights and their styles are as diverse as the range of their disabilities; and yet, their works tend to remain ignored by most professional theatres, perceived as too political or too unrelatable to conventional audiences. But the awareness of the ubiquity of disability in life, in drama, and in culture was growing, and mainstream theatre artists were beginning to take note. So were legislators.

In 1989, disability rights activists converged on Washington to stage the “Crawl on the Mall” where disability advocates literally crawled up the steps of the Capitol building, demanding that legislators take action to secure the civil rights of citizens with disabilities. The following year, their cry was answered and The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, formally codifying the Barrier Free Standard from nearly thirty years earlier.¹⁰⁰ Disability was now formally a public concern, and artists began responding by more centrally including disability in their work. Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer-winning play, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (1993), debuted the same year that President Clinton signed the Health Revitalization Act which prohibited any foreigner with AIDS from entering the country, echoing the previous century where so many potential immigrants were given snapshot diagnoses of disability or defect, marked in chalk on their backs, and sent back where they came from.¹⁰¹ Disease and disability were synonymous and both valid reasons for denying someone citizenship. Margaret Edson’s play *W;t*, which opened in 1995, tells the story of a brilliant woman dying of cancer. Suzan-Lori Parks’s (1996) *Venus* offers a new version

¹⁰⁰ Also in 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reactivated, securing access to appropriate education for people with disabilities in addition to access to civic and public engagement secured by the ADA.

¹⁰¹ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 104.

of the freak show in her staging of the story of Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus and put on display for her oversized and exoticized backside. Martin McDonagh's darkly comic *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1998) is a darkly twisted revisioning of the traditional overcoming narrative. These are just a few of the recent works that have begun taking up the subject of disability in new and provocative ways, though not all are doing so in a liberating or empowering manner. The cultural mindset that links disability to personal tragedy is deeply entrenched and difficult to shake.

The twenty-first century ushered in an explosion of disability representation in the arts. Disabled artists like John Belluso, Susan Nussbaum, and Charles L. Mee, Jr. continued their writing of disability theatre. Films like *King Gimp* (2001), *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *Ray* (2004), *Murderball* (2005), and *Tropic Thunder* (2008) make use of disability in their stories in a wide variety of ways that proved quite marketable, if not always sensitive.¹⁰² Television shows like TLC's *Little People, Big World*, Fox's *Glee*, AMC's *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, and Sundance Channel's *Push Girls* have brought disabled people and disabled characters to the small screen with critical praise, but mixed response from the disability community. Mainstream theatre artists are also using disabled characters more frequently and with less oppressively symbolic overtones, in plays like Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas* (2004), *Time Stands Still* by Donald Margulies (2009), *Tribes* by Nina Raine (2010), Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* (2010), *Good People* by David Lindsay-Abaire (2011), and Simon Stephens' *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012). These plays and others like them contain significant voices of people with disabilities, both on stage and off.

¹⁰² Both *Tropic Thunder* and *Million Dollar Baby* were protested by disability activists.

Included in this list of significant contemporary playwrights is D.W. Gregory, whose work is also carving new ground in contemporary representations of disability in mainstream theatre. Gregory is the author of the three works I am analyzing in significant detail in this project. In chapter one, I detailed many of her awards, plays, and accomplishments, and now a brief biographical description of Gregory's life in relationship to her playwriting, specifically *Radium Girls*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Dirty Pictures*, will help to contextualize her authorial perspective and provide insight into her writing and thinking processes.¹⁰³

Dolores Whiskeyman Gregory, who usually goes by D.W., was born in Lancaster PA during the Eisenhower administration (that is as specific as she would get). Growing up, she says "I was a neurotic, anxiety ridden Roman Catholic girl in a crowded house."¹⁰⁴ She loved reading and writing, partly as an escape from the eight other children and the oppressive atmosphere of repressed aggression, blue collar pride, and an unhealthy dose of Catholic guilt. Her father was a WWII veteran and a child of the Great Depression, who constantly "impressed upon [her] that I had Never Suffered The Way My Parents Had Suffered." Gregory describes her father as:

a lesson in contradictions; a frustrated and resentful man who nevertheless lived up to his ideal of fatherly duty – pay the bills, put bread on the table, come home on time. When he was in a good mood he was a great storyteller, very humorous. He also drank too much and flew into violent alcoholic rages that he lived to regret. My most vivid early memory is of him storming about the house, threatening to walk out on us, go out the door and never come back. It was easy to forgive him once I grew up and

¹⁰³ Email to the author, October 20, 2014. Gregory has graciously given me permission to share some of her personal story in this project.

¹⁰⁴ All quotes by D.W. Gregory, unless otherwise noted, are from an email correspondence with the author from October 20, 2014. For a full transcript of this interview, see Appendix B.

realized how lonely he was in that marriage, how limited his opportunities were and how concrete he was in his thinking.

Her mother was equally enigmatic, another “enduring mystery” of her life. With nine children, she showed little interest in them and made it clear that she was not to be disturbed by her children. If the kids upset their mother, “this brought the wrath of the universe upon our heads.” Gregory goes on:

For years I believed her when she said she could not give us any attention because there were simply too many of us. I accepted it as the way things were; a natural thing. Then, when I was 20 years old I landed an internship on the local paper and my perspective changed radically. One of my assignments was to write a story about adoption. I interviewed a couple who had four children and adopted six more. They eagerly told me about their methods for managing the household and dealing with all the kids – how they allotted so much time each week to spend with each child, alone. Suddenly my mother’s excuses no longer held up; I realized that this couple had choices and so did she. It was her choice to neglect us; it was not a matter of fate.

Soon after, D.W. rejected her mother’s religion and her opinions, but still feels the struggle of the isolation and hopelessness that tormented her as a child.

One of the significant factors in the feelings of isolation and hopelessness that Gregory expressed, and the shadow that hangs over her still, was the experience of being systematically sexually abused by a family member and being forced to keep the secret for many years. These traumatic experiences, and the bitter denial by her family when she finally confronted the abuser, led to “an existential crisis” that nearly took her own life.

Thinking back on the events, she says:

What any of that has to do with writing plays I am not sure, except that I have always had an intense need to make sense of things. Growing up in that environment you learn to hide from yourself; writing plays for me is about diving into myself--figuring out how you feel, what you think, about one thing or another, rolling around with it—indulging emotion, diving into pain and living it with your characters. So perhaps there is a connection.

She connects these formative events with her play *Radium Girls*, which she says is “a story of denial – for me, the question of the play was not what happened, but why it happened – and why it keeps on happening.” This quest to make sense of the traumatic and the unjust, while “rolling around” with the emotion and the pain and the lived reality of the effects of these unjust events, is part of what brings *Radium Girls* to such vivid light on stage.

For many years, Gregory worked as a newspaper reporter. Her journalistic training is evident in her plays and the way she writes about herself (see Appendix B for an interview transcript and note the conciseness of the writing, the dramatic flair, and the short paragraph structure). This career path, along with her vivid imagination that supported her in her childhood, I believe, helped prepare her to become a playwright. Jeffrey Sweet, in his playwrighting text *The Dramatist’s Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright*, asserts that actors and journalists make the most successful playwrights, because of their understanding of the event and their ability to get at this central action succinctly and concretely. Gregory’s work as a journalist also brought her in contact with many different people she might not otherwise have met. She recounts this story:

Years later I was living in Rochester NY and working on a paper there. I was friends with – still am – with a woman who had spina bifida and was impaired because of it – she had short legs and difficulty walking, though she got along without a brace. She was also hysterically funny, attractive and [a] talented woman. We were theatre nuts together and went to see all the shows we could. One day my (ex) husband remarked to me how nice I was to be friends with her. I said “huh?” He said: oh wasn’t I kind to spend time with her. I could not believe my ears. I said “what the hell? You think I hang out with her out of pity?” He gave me this blank look like ‘duh, what else could it be?’ I said: ‘I am friends with her because I LIKE her.’ The shock of it was that he worked with her directly; he knew

her. And yet he could view her not as an interesting person but as a charity case.

People with disabilities, their lives, and the reaction of others in relation to their lives, may have had some unconscious impact on the kinds of characters Gregory likes to write about and how she writes about them. I asked her how she thinks that disability currently fits within today's world of playwrighting and professional theatre. She responded:

I don't know, really; I'm not a scholar and I don't keep up on what the trends are. I don't think disability is depicted much on stage except as an "issue." I think my work tries to present disability as a fact of life – not as "issue" but as an element; someone has a bum leg, someone is a depressive, someone can't see well – the play is not "about" disability but about something else and disability is not a metaphor, it's a part of life – so why not just show it? That was the idea behind *Dirty Pictures*.

Such a simple approach: "why not just show it?" without forcing disability into a prosthetic role as symbol or crisis to be overcome. Just a part of life; a messy, leaky, painful, sometimes outcast part of life that influences nearly every aspect of how someone interacts with the world, to be sure, but life nonetheless. The writing of *Dirty Pictures* came about after working with the actress who played Esther in the original production of *The Good Daughter* at New Jersey Rep. The actress had cerebral palsy that affected her lower body. As they became friends, Gregory asked her one day what kind of role she would like to play but never gets the chance to.

She said she wanted to play someone tough and sexy who gets the guy. So I set out to write that character for her.

The idea behind *Dirty Pictures* was to present a character with a disability as a complete person – with virtues and flaws and a sex drive – who, like a lot of other people I know, sometimes go to crazy extremes to get the guy.

Apparently this is so radical that no one wants to touch it, so I have not been able to get the play produced. Or maybe it's just not a very good play; I don't know.

Gregory's modesty betrays her "talent to enlighten and provoke" perceived by *New York Times* critic Alvin Klein. Outside of the remarkably talented artists within Disability Theatre, very few mainstream playwrights are taking on the challenge to 'get real with disability', to wallow in the messiness of life, to tell stories of/with disability because those stories are valuable, dramatic, touching, hilarious, and can resonate with all kinds of audiences regardless of their disability or lack thereof.

CHAPTER 3 – Sexuality, Disability, and Subjectivity in *Dirty Pictures*

Lights rise ...on Dan's bar... Judy alone, at the bar, examines her makeup in a compact. She is dressed for a night out--hair done, wearing earrings and a low-cut, silky top over black slacks ... Elsewhere in the bar, a framed photo of Ronald Reagan smiles benignly. ... A song plays on the jukebox and Judy joins in.

JUDY: (*joining in, but exaggerated*) I wanna get physical, physical - Let me hear your body talk, body talk! Nah Nah Nah. Nah nah nah nah. (*laughing*) Gawd, I hate that song. *The jukebox burps and dies.*

JUDY: Well don't take it personally. *She crosses to the jukebox. For the first time, we see her labored, lurching gait--and realize she has cerebral palsy. Judy hits the jukebox. It finishes the song.*

JUDY: (*noticing the picture*) What's that smirk for, Ronnie? Too much tit for you? Or too little? I know what my mother would say. You look like a tramp! If only. But whadda you know about boobs, huh? We all know you're a leg man, Ron.
-- D.W. Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*¹⁰⁵

These opening moments of *Dirty Pictures* set the stage for a kind of sexuality that rarely gets portrayed on stage. The work portrays a series of hilarious and heartbreaking events in the life of Judy, a young woman dealing with life, love, and disability in late twentieth-century America. Disability scholar Jim Ferris has argued that “a person with a disability often must struggle to be seen and treated as a full person, and not just as a disability or an object of pity.”¹⁰⁶ This play vividly dramatizes that argument. The cultural gaze upon non-normative embodiment strips away the full humanity of a disabled individual by means of an anxious and oppressive power matrix. Though as yet

¹⁰⁵ D.W. Gregory, *Dirty Pictures* (unpublished PDF manuscript, 2011), 91. Quoted with permission from the author.

¹⁰⁶ Jim Ferris, “Uncovery to Recovery,” 513.

unproduced and unpublished, *Dirty Pictures* received an industry reading in New York City in April of 2011 under the direction of Broadway veteran Holly-Anne Ruggiero (*Jersey Boys*). This provocative and very funny play takes a daring and subversive approach to the dramaturgy and portrayal of disability that warrants more attention from scholars and producers alike. It is one of Gregory's most challenging and overt representations of disability and how disability intersects with gender, sexuality, and class as a cultural and personal force. This chapter uses contemporary disability studies, as well as contemporary gender and performance theories, to explore how Gregory represents a disabled, female character navigating her life under an able-bodied cultural gaze that permeates the performance of her identity and her sexuality.

Written in 2011, *Dirty Pictures* is a screwball comedy about four people in a Colorado roadhouse in the middle of a Reagan-era recession whose lives are turned upside-down by twenty-one erotic photographs. The play "explores the idea that most ordinary things may not seem special at first, but you never know what you will discover when something, or someone, is stripped down."¹⁰⁷ In *Dirty Pictures*, the four characters are navigating a kind of love quadrangle: Chet likes Judy, Judy likes Dan, Dan likes Bonnie, and Bonnie likes being liked. Judy Knoll, the central character who is a bartender and shortorder cook, is described by the author as:

an attractive woman, early 30s, whose hard edge covers her own uncertainty. She has diplegia cerebral palsy, which affects her walk and frequently means she is overlooked and underrated, particularly by men. Nevertheless, Judy expects no special treatment and resents it when offered.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Gans, "Dirty Pictures Reading to Feature Chris Hoch, Ben Crawford," Playbill News, April 11, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/149719>.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, unnumbered page.

The first act begins with Judy behind the bar, putting on her makeup, and otherwise preparing a performance of heteronormative femininity on a date with her boss and friend, the bar owner Dan, to celebrate ten years of working together, but hoping for more than just friendship. By all indications, Judy fits nicely into the socially constructed norms of early 1980s America, even singing along with Olivia Newton John's popular song *Physical*: "Let me hear your body talk."¹⁰⁹ It is only when she walks over to the juke box that the physical effect of her diplegia cerebral palsy is revealed to the audience. Disability activist Bill Shannon speaks of the phenomenon of "the condition arriving" wherein one's disability arrives before a person can present a wider persona.¹¹⁰ In this socially constructed sense, one is disabled first and person second. However, Gregory reverses that dynamic in these opening moments of her play. The audience initially receives a feminine and socially normative Judy who wants to "get physical." She is a vibrant, vivacious, funny, and sexual woman first of all, and only secondarily is she revealed to have "anomalous embodiment."¹¹¹ Gregory further places Judy within an ableist and sexist culture when Judy addresses the photograph of Ronald Reagan sitting on the bar. She says to the picture, "What's that smirk for, Ronnie? Too much tit for you? Or too little? [...] But whadda you know about boobs, huh? We all know you're a leg man, Ron."¹¹² Judy accuses Reagan's patriarchal attitudes and the ableist society in which

¹⁰⁹ The song's famous music video also features overtly ableist images of idealized physical "fitness" and its relation to sexual desirability.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Roulstone, 436.

¹¹¹ Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 2.

¹¹² Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 1.

she lives of being more interested in normative lower appendages than any other parts that may be nearer to her heart or mind. Judy has the “epistemic privilege” of experiencing the real and lived effects of socially constructed identity within her cultural power matrix.¹¹³

Within the disabled community, numerous contemporary theatres and playwrights are creating new work by, for and about disabled persons, but many are still facing challenges for acceptance from “mainstream” theatre circles.¹¹⁴ Disability scholar Carrie Sandahl terms this movement “new disability theatre” and describes how it explores “the lived experience of disability” from the perspective of disabled persons.¹¹⁵ While “new disability theatre” is a vital artistic movement in raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and empowering and employing disabled actors and artists, the mainstream anxiety surrounding their reception is deeply problematic and hinders both production and reception. As Victoria Lewis and others have reported, many regional professional

¹¹³ For a study that uses a post-positive realist lens to analyze dramaturgical practices of disability in theatre, see Sandahl, *Why Disability Identity Matters*. When I speak of the lived realities and lived experiences of people with disabilities, I am referring to the phenomenological experiences of having a disability while navigating the world and one’s relationships. My point with this language is to emphasize the significance of one’s unique experiences and not just a theoretical appropriation and application of terms and concepts.

¹¹⁴ Victoria Ann Lewis, “The Dramaturgy of Disability,” 537-38. This casting dilemma is an important topic in the entertainment industry. Disabled actors are often difficult to find, so what does it mean when an able bodied actor is cast as disabled character? Is the reverse even possible? Popular media like the television show *Glee* have very public images and characters with disabilities. What work are these portrayals doing for the disability community when casting agents pass over disabled actors? This discussion is vital, but beyond the scope of this project. For more about this discussion, see Victoria Ann Lewis, “Disability and Access: A Manifesto for Actor Training,” in *The Politics of American Actor Training* edited by Elen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renard, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 177-197.

¹¹⁵ Sandahl, “Why Disability Identity Matters,” 226. A growing number of new disability theatre projects are forming from within the disability community, including The DisAbility Project, That Uppity Theatre Company in St. Louis, PHAMALY in Denver, The Dramatically Able program of Wild Swan Theatre in Michigan, and others. See www.uppityco.com for more information about That Uppity Theatre Company. See www.phamaly.org for more information about PHAMALY. See www.wildswantheater.org for more information about the Dramatically Able project. Playwrights with disabilities like Susan Nussbaum, John Belluso, and others are developing a new canon of dramatic work that explores the world from disabled perspectives and avoids stereotyping or the use of traditional metaphoric dramaturgies.

theatres have demonstrated their anxiety towards disability by refusing to produce plays about disabled culture, claiming that they are too “agenda-driven” and fearing that they might make audiences squeamish.¹¹⁶ They frame their resistance as questions such as: Will plays about disability be accessible to traditional theatre-going audiences? Will they make people uncomfortable? What about performers: can we cast able-bodied actors as disabled characters? In all these cases, the concern and resistance rests squarely on the firm shoulders of a perceived able-bodied audience and production team, and usually results in more familiar and able-bodied choices. Gregory currently identifies as a non-disabled playwright, and *Dirty Pictures* is not thematically based on disability itself but rather on showing, as the press notes describe the play, how what seems ordinary can become extraordinary upon closer inspection.¹¹⁷ As a result, *Dirty Pictures* does not fit within the Disability Theatre categories here described, but it does contain many elements that would allow it to “steal past those watchful dragons” that resist the overt inclusion of disability into mainstream theatre seasons.¹¹⁸

In *Dirty Pictures*, Gregory is perhaps able to circumvent some of this production anxiety by presenting a traditionally structured, realistic play that appears, on the surface, to be about mainstream, middle-American values and seems not to upset the apple cart too seriously. Carrie Sandahl believes this approach has limited usefulness. She argues

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Lewis, “Beyond Victims and Villains”; Sandahl, “Why Disability Identity Matters”; and Lewis, “Disability and Access.”

¹¹⁷ <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/149719> accessed April 6, 2012.

¹¹⁸ This famous quote by C.S. Lewis is in reference to his use of fantasy stories like *The Chronicles of Narnia* to get past the inhibitions and stifling reverence of talking about religion. *Dirty Pictures* is similarly subversive, using a well known if unexpected frame to explore deeper meanings that might have otherwise been resisted. See Walter Hooper, *Past Watchful Dragons: The Narnian Chronicles of C.S. Lewis* (London: Macmillian, 1979).

that remaining text-based and simply offering alternative narratives to challenge traditional narratives can only take the disabled community so far. She holds that “As long as disabled people attempt to conform to established theatrical forms, I believe that we will always be considered “problems” to be dealt with rather than as an artistic constituency with unique offerings.”¹¹⁹ In this way, Sandahl urges disability artists to usher in a radical transformation of ideology by transforming theatrical forms and theatrical spaces. Such a revolutionary thrust is an important part of many artists’ work within Disability Theater and the disability community.

The tremors of new change may also contribute in some ways to the production anxiety experienced by mainstream theatres and producers, preventing this artistic constituency from being heard, and hindering the integration of a disability aesthetic into contemporary theatre. While integration may not always be the goal of activists and artists, it is certainly a worthwhile goal to broaden the horizons of what is considered acceptable and accessible to mainstream audiences. This notion of integration and awareness is where playwrights like Gregory have the most potential for facilitating subtle shifts in ideology. By using familiar packaging, Gregory subversively softens the audience towards the reception of Judy as a disabled woman who is a subjective agent, defying stereotypes and living her life in the best way she knows how. Judy demonstrates how extraordinary bodies still live ordinary lives with struggles, desires, and problems that don’t seem so “foreign” to non-disabled audiences. Gregory, however, neither hides nor sidesteps Judy’s disability, or the oppressive manner in which her friends respond to her:

¹¹⁹ Carrie Sandahl, “Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology’s Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 16 no.2 (2002): 21.

Judy struggles to pull the mop and bucket into the bathroom.
CHET: Need a hand with that, Jude?
JUDY: (*as she exits*) When I want help--I'll ask for it.
BONNIE: Word of advice, Chet? Don't offer Judy no hand. To her, it's an insult.
CHET: I didn't mean to offend her.¹²⁰

In this case, Bonnie, another waitress at the bar and Dan's girlfriend, goes so far as to blame Judy for the way people view her, saying, "What's she expect, nobody's gonna notice she don't get around so good? Pff!"¹²¹ Chet, their good friend and a bar regular, thinks he is being helpful; but his attitude, rather than being helpful, implies an assumption that Judy is less than capable on her own. Chet's attitudes also frame Judy as a "damsel in distress," further complicating the intersections of gender and disability. These oppressive ableist (and sexist) attitudes are a pervasive reality that Judy must endure; she's just trying to get by as best she can. The strength of Gregory's characterization of Judy is that she does not allow disability to become an all-encompassing character trait that merely paints Judy as either bitter or heroic. Ann Fox makes a similar claim when analyzing Lynn Nottage's play *Ruined* from a disability studies perspective: "Disability in drama need not remain understood by playwrights or critics as a default position of innocence or infamy."¹²² In short, by using disability as a dramaturgical device rather than a mere metaphor, a stereotype, or an all-encompassing world-view, Gregory has made the play and Judy's disability more accessible and approachable to wider audiences without diminishing the reality of disabled life for Judy.

¹²⁰ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 17-18.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 17-18.

¹²² Fox, "Battles on the Body," 2.

Victoria Lewis describes some of the dramaturgical practices of “disability theatre,” including the use of parallel constructions of intersectional oppressions to “demythologize” disability, aiming “at exposing the constructedness of the disability identity in order to eliminate it.”¹²³ Though Lewis limits the scope of her analysis to new disability theatre, Gregory demonstrates that these dramaturgical devices can be applied more widely to contemporary western dramatic practice in general. In *Dirty Pictures*, the intersectionality of gender, class, and disability in Judy’s character intensifies the subversive nature of the play. Gregory places Judy at the intersection of multiple oppressive cultural hierarchies: she is female in a patriarchal culture; she is working class in the middle of a recession; she is disabled in an environment that is still eight years away from the Americans with Disabilities Act and whatever cultural awareness of disability it might bring. This dramaturgical device lifts the representation of disability above the realm of mere metaphor, emphasizing rather than erasing the particularities of her lived experience.

In the years since Lewis’ article, these dramaturgical devices have begun to be used outside the disability community and within more mainstream theatre in plays like *Dirty Pictures*. As Michael Davidson has pointed out, the framing of disability in the arts as either a metaphor for social stigma or a tool for social activism can limit disability aesthetics to largely thematic matters, leaving its larger significance unrecognized.¹²⁴ Representing disability onstage must go beyond mere metaphor to explore the lived experience of disabled bodies and minds. Carrie Sandahl has identified two of the most

¹²³ Lewis, “The Dramaturgy of Disability,” 527-534.

¹²⁴ Michael Davidson, *Concert for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

dominant cultural and literary stereotypes of the disabled person in western literature: the bitter cripple and the heroic sufferer.¹²⁵ In these terms, disability is a plague upon a person who can either rise above their suffering or succumb to the pressures and become bitter. In either case, the disability is seen as a problem that detracts from one's humanity rather than an important or defining component of one's identity. In *Dirty Pictures*, Judy is neither; though the other characters often see her as one of the two stereotypes, she resists these traditional literary roles for a disabled character while striving to reclaim her own agency and subjectivity. Early in the play, Judy tries to convince Bonnie to leave Dan after they have a fight:

BONNIE: Dan is a pig-headed crazy man.

JUDY: So break up with him already.

BONNIE: I -- uh. It ain't that easy.

JUDY: Sure it is. You just say: "Dan. You are a pig-headed crazy man. Goodbye."

BONNIE: You know Judy. There's days I feel sorry for you.

JUDY: And then, if you really need some // space --

BONNIE: (*on //*) It's sad really...

JUDY: ---you can move to another state.¹²⁶

Even as Judy attempts to help Bonnie stand up for herself and her independence, Bonnie dismisses her as an object to be pitied, a dismissal that Judy will not accept. Judy's character defies both stereotype and metaphor for her disability. The song played in the opening sequence is Olivia Newton John's 1981 anthem *Physical*, an overt commentary on the able-bodied privilege of sexuality in late twentieth century American culture. Reagan is a leg man, after all. Yet Judy rejects this all-too-real construct, saying, "Gawd,

¹²⁵ Carrie Sandahl, "Ahhhh Freak Out!," 11-30.

¹²⁶ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 23.

I hate that song,” thus rejecting the social glorification of the “fit” body as an object.¹²⁷ By resisting dichotomized stereotypes and oversimplified metaphors, Gregory is emphasizing Judy’s agency and re-presenting her disability in a way that challenges an able-bodied aesthetic. Thus Gregory uses Judy’s disability to dramaturgically perform, as Margrit Shildrick would say, a “queering of normative paradigms,”¹²⁸ particularly in terms of her subjectivity and sexuality.

This taboo against both disability and sexuality together is particularly pernicious. As sociologist Shaun Best writes, “The social construction of femininity is particularly harmful to women with disabilities. The discourses that construct the female beauty myth define the body of a woman with disability as unfeminine, unappealing and asexual.”¹²⁹ Judy begins the play trying to fit into this mainstream construct of beauty, yet her extraordinary body defies this category. Dan, the bar owner for whom Judy has romantic feelings, continuously ignores her femininity and sexuality. The other male character, a bar regular and Judy’s good friend, Chet, admits that he has feelings for Judy, going against cultural anxiety, yet still assumes that “Judy won’t never be innerested in me.”¹³⁰ However, is Chet commenting on his own lack of appeal or subconsciously assuming Judy’s non-sexuality? If Chet is thought of as representing a particular western cultural gaze upon disability, perhaps both are true: the gaze is both de-sexualizing and

¹²⁷ The well known music video of “Physical” features a young, fit, sexualized Olivia Newton John exercising in tight-fitting leotard, encouraging several larger bodies to continue their exercise routines, ostensibly so that their bodies can become more like hers.

¹²⁸ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 5. Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis, using a queer lens could thus be a fruitful approach to continuing the conversation of disability, theatre, and identity.

¹²⁹ Shaun Best, *Understanding Social Divisions* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 113.

¹³⁰ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 75.

unappealing to disabled persons. As a result of this denaturing gaze, when Judy overtly and aggressively asserts her sexuality towards Dan (who is dating the waitress Bonnie) at the beginning of Act Three, the resulting performance (discussed below) is telling.

Margrit Shildrick has argued, “There is an extraordinary reluctance to acknowledge that disabled people have any sexuality at all, with the result that their sexual expression is highly regulated, if not invalidated or silenced completely.”¹³¹ The Euro-American cultural imagination has so marginalized the differently embodied that their sexual agency has been essentially neutered. The idea of disabled sexuality can elicit as much cultural anxiety as the thought of elderly sexuality or child sexuality. This able-bodied cultural disavowal of sexuality for the disabled is deeply entrenched.¹³² In *Dirty Pictures*, we see this anxiety played out by Dan at the beginning of the third act. Just before intermission, an intoxicated Dan and Judy share a “kiss with great fervor” for which Dan immediately apologizes.¹³³ In kissing her, he is accepting and encouraging what he perceives to be her non-normative sexuality, which generates much cognitive dissonance for him. Dan reveals that he has had feelings for Judy for a long time, but has suppressed them because he didn’t know if she felt the same way, if she was even capable of feeling that way. Judy assures Dan that her feelings of desire and her sexual capacity are not impaired: “I feel it too, Dan. I feel it all over.”¹³⁴ Dan, however, is unable to allow his desire for her, and hers for him, to be physically expressed. By denying

¹³¹ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 11.

¹³² For a deeper discussion of sexuality, disability, and discourse, see Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, chapter 4.

¹³³ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 50-51.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 51.

Judy's sexuality, Dan has also invalidated his own desires and as such has repressed the possibilities of sexual expression for both of them. And by extension, the de-sexualizing, able-bodied gaze upon the disabled can diminish the capacity for sexual expression in persons with any type of embodiment.

The third act resumes after intermission with Dan and Judy "groping and slobbering each other with kisses. Dan is handling Judy with a bit more care than she would like, as he's nervous about her disability."¹³⁵ Judy wants to go wild, but Dan cannot give in to his desires because of his anxiety. Judy's sexual expression is aggressive: she tells him to "rip my clothes off – run your tongue all over my body – make me scream!"¹³⁶ The more Judy engages in actively sexual behavior, the more hesitant Dan becomes: he even asks her to stop using aggressive sexual language. What seems like a stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy, when coupled with Judy's disability, becomes a source of acute anxiety for Dan that prevents sexual expression for either of them. When Dan tries to blame Judy for his developing performance anxiety, she retorts by raising the sexual ante and giving him an ultimatum:

DAN: But you sound like it's not comin' natural. Like – you gotta really think about it. To get excited.

JUDY: Dan. I guarantee ya. I don't have to think about it. I just feel it, okay? And I am here ... to screw your brains out. Now.

She squirts her collar bone with whipped cream.

JUDY: You can either take advantage a that – or not.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 53.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 53.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

By drawing a line of whipped cream on her chest, she figuratively draws a line in the sand, challenging Dan's able-ist assumptions. If he continues to deny her sexual agency, he will also be invalidating his own sexual agency. Human beings in dominant social groups (e.g. male, straight, white, etc.) cannot strip the agency from other individuals and still hope to maintain their own agency. Thus the agency and subjectivity of everyone, disabled and non-disabled, are connected to our fundamental interdependence on each other. For *any* human to have full subjectivity and agency, we must *all* be allowed to have full subjectivity and agency, regardless of compliance with socially constructed norms.

Dan gives it another try, but his anxiety, rooted in able-bodied masculine privilege, now manifests itself as performance anxiety: "I think I lost it. [...] You know. It."¹³⁸ At this point, Judy has had enough; she stops trying to perform normative sexuality and simply – and effectively – demands what she wants:

JUDY: Now you listen to me, you miserable weasel. You said you wanted a cure. And here it is: You are gonna do it. With me. Right here. Right now.

She grabs his belt from the floor and snaps it like a whip.

JUDY (cont'd): I don't care who is in the other room. You promised me. And if you think I'm gonna let you WIMP OUT now, then you have got to be the LIMPEST DICK I ever met!

DAN: Whoa Judy! Nobody ever said stuff like that.

He slides to his knees.

DAN (Cont'd): Snap that again?

*Judy looks at the belt in her hand.*¹³⁹

Judy is not, as Dan might think, soliciting a kind of non-traditional, sadomasochistic sexual behavior. She is expressing her frustration with his inability to see beyond his own

¹³⁸ Ibid, 60.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 62.

myopic perspective and demanding that she gets what she wants and they both desire. Dan interprets her whipping of the belt to be a sadomasochistic cue, thus hypersexualizing her demand for equal treatment. Dan's interpretation of her whip action is problematic, perhaps embodying what Shildrick describes as "a very common complaint that public representations [of disability] veer between the asexual and the hypersexual."¹⁴⁰ For Dan, Judy's actions are hypersexual and sadomasochistic (which seems to be one of his turn-ons). Gregory, however, is not necessarily portraying Judy as hypersexual or sadomasochistic; Judy is simply demanding to be treated as a sexual agent. On the contrary, Dan's response identifies *him* as problematically unable to perform without certain atypical sexual expressions. The result, though brief and contingent, is a noisy and mutually satisfying sexual encounter that embraces sexual agency for both parties. On one hand, this exchange is still dependent upon traditional heteronormative assumptions of sexual intercourse and the necessity of a male erection to make sex possible. However, Gregory's portrayal is still somewhat subversive to normative sexual attitudes by avoiding a tidy romanticized conclusion of a new and empowering relationship between Judy and Dan. A moment of mutual, interdependent agency cannot negate all socially constructed oppressions. Even though Dan is momentarily "able" to have intercourse with Judy, briefly expanding his sphere of normative constructs to include her anomalous embodiment, his world view still considers Judy and her disability to be marginal. Their relationship does not progress beyond this one-night-stand. By avoiding the traditional happy ending trope for Dan and Judy, Gregory emphasizes the reality that Judy's struggle for agency and acceptance will continue. Yet these brief moments of mutuality and interdependence – however

¹⁴⁰ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 86.

unfulfilling they may be – still offer a glimmer of hope for future systemic change as they challenge the anxious intersections of disability and sexuality.

To help address this anxiety surrounding the discourse of disability and sexuality, several groups are publicly exploring this dynamic through performance. *Sins Invalid* is a San Francisco-based performance project focusing “on disability and sexuality that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities.”¹⁴¹ Co-founder and artistic director Patty Berne said in a 2011 interview, “Mainstream images of the disabled body are ridiculously patronizing and to actually have images of people with disabilities being proud of our bodies and who we are as sexual beings – well, it’s hot, it’s really compelling.”¹⁴² Gregory portrays Judy as a sexual agent who proudly accepts her body and openly expresses her sexuality. In this manner, *Dirty Pictures* is both “hot” and “really compelling.”

The trope of photography referenced in the play’s title is a particularly potent metaphor when exploring themes of disability. As Ferris has mentioned, photographs, particularly in the media, play an important role in defining and perpetuating a cultural notion of what bodies “should” be or look like.¹⁴³ Eli Clare discusses the role of medical text book images in how he was taught to understand his own body.¹⁴⁴ In *Dirty Pictures*, the photographs in question have a complex relationship to the play and to Judy’s experiences as a disabled woman. The pictures are taken of Bonnie, the traditionally

¹⁴¹ Sins Invalid, home page description, accessed April 29, 2015, www.sinsinvalid.org.

¹⁴² Quoted in “Dreaming Sins, Crippling Sex: Talking Sins Invalid,” accessed April 25, 2012. <http://cregs.sfsu.edu/>.

¹⁴³ Ferris, “Uncovery to Recovery,” 516.

¹⁴⁴ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*.

beautiful and “shapely” waitress who works with Judy. Gregory describes Bonnie as “ill-educated but ambitious, she is no bimbo, but is well aware of her assets and knows how to use them. Bonnie is nevertheless as much a victim of her appearance – or assumptions about her based on her appearance – as Judy.”¹⁴⁵ Bonnie wants to audition for *Playboy* magazine with these pictures to get out of her dead end job and make a career for herself, following the footsteps of many American female celebrities. Trying to keep Dan from discovering the existence of the pictures – and the fact that their friend Chet was the photographer – proves to be a tipping point for the fragile personalities in the play. Judy steals the photos and uses them to get even with Bonnie for years of her attention-stealing behavior; but these photos, perhaps, are not the only ones referenced by the play’s title.

At the conclusion of the play, once the dust settles after Dan finds out about the pictures and unleashes a full-on bar room brawl, Judy and Chet are left alone on stage. She opens up to him and reveals her frustrations with society’s treatment of her and her desire to be seen as beautiful, sexy, and possessing her own agency. The play closes with the possibility of a budding relationship between Chet and Judy with these visual images:

Lights fade to dark, then rise on a series of photographs. All of Judy. The first we recognize from earlier – Judy alone in the bar. But as the photos click by, we see the image of Judy transform a study in loneliness to a portrait of determination and grit, a woman of good humor, and sensuality – until finally we see her in a way we haven’t seen before, relaxed, happy – feeling sexy – totally free and lovely. Lights fade. End of play.¹⁴⁶

Could these photos also be considered “dirty” simply because of the cultural stigmas attached to their subject? I interpret this label in terms of the cultural anxiety towards

¹⁴⁵ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, unnumbered page.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

disability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has put it, “Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior,” excluding them from full participation in cultural life.¹⁴⁷ They are doubly taboo and doubly subversive to cultural norms of beauty. In this act of posing, Judy reifies her agency and takes control of how culture gazes upon her. The implication is that this series of photographs will follow the trajectory of becoming more and more revealing of Judy’s physical body and psychophysical being, embracing her own unique beauty. For disability scholar Jim Ferris, who also posed nude for a photographic series, exposing his congenitally shortened leg, “taking my clothes off and posing [...] and choosing to display and discuss some of the photos [...] has given me some control over the looking.”¹⁴⁸ In this manner, Judy takes control of her own agency and refuses to submit to the cultural stares, instead displaying her body as a full subject, aesthetically pleasing, and unashamed.¹⁴⁹

Throughout the play, Gregory employs the liberating power of humor as a dramaturgical device. As Victoria Ann Lewis points out, “Mikhail Bakhtin, himself disabled, reminds us [...] of the essential relationship between laughter and freedom.”¹⁵⁰ Laughter can be a powerful weapon against the oppressive and anxiety-filled gaze of a society that doesn’t know what to do with an empowered, vivacious, sexually charged,

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Sandahl, “Ahhhh Freak Out!” 12.

¹⁴⁸ Ferris, “Uncovery to Recovery,” 513.

¹⁴⁹ The composition of the shots is important to consider. The script does not dictate how the images are to be composed, but for this reading to hold true in performance, the images should not hide or relocate Judy’s disability. See Eli Clare’s discussion of Ellen Stohl’s Playboy photo shoot in *Exile and Pride*, 119-135.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, “The Dramaturgy of Disability,” 531. Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician. His 1965 treatise, *Rabelais and His World*, explored the concepts of carnivalesque and the grotesque, as well as exploring the nature of humor and laughter as a therapeutic and liberating force. At the age of twenty-eight, Bakhtin was diagnosed with osteomyelitis, which led to the amputation of his leg fifteen years later.

disabled woman. For example, when Dan and Judy decide to “get physical,” Judy says, “I’ve always wanted to do it on the jukebox.”¹⁵¹ The sounds of sexual ecstasy between Dan and Judy are mirrored and masked by simultaneous grunts and groans of Chet trying to pry open the door and keep Bonnie from walking in on the tryst. Earlier in the play, Judy speaks to Chet about her frustrations with trying to deal with Dan and Bonnie’s off-again/on-again relationship:

JUDY: (*smoldering*) The last time they did this, I told him: Dan-- wake up. There are better people in this world. They'd never jerk ya around like this! They'd have too much feeling for you. Too much respect. And your life would be so different. If you only had a calm, comforting, tender ... true companion ...

CHET: What'd he say?

JUDY: Nothin'. (*quick beat*) He was passed out in the back seat.¹⁵²

The humor does not come from a false sense of deflective self-deprecation, but rather a frank admission of the realities of her lived experiences as a woman. Nor does the laughter come from any slap-stick shtick that exploits her limited mobility. In a scene following Judy and Dan’s sexual escapade, Dan tries to escape the bar while keeping Judy from revealing their activities to Bonnie in the next room. Dan takes Judy with him out the window, attempting to quiet her by covering her mouth, but is ultimately unable to over-power her. Through this bumbling physical humor, silently acted outside the window, he embodies his own anxiety towards her, as during the romantic encounter, by again being over-protective of her leg and as a result he loses the struggle once they get to the parking lot. The physical humor is not in any way due to Judy’s disability, but rather from Dan’s awkward and condescending attempts to continually treat Judy as

¹⁵¹ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 51.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 28.

fragile or incapable. The audience's laughter is thus subversively directed at the cultural (re: Dan's) anxiety and insecurity about Judy's disability. We laugh at Dan's (and perhaps the able-bodied culture's) inability to handle – literally and figuratively – disability. This subversive humor can challenge cultural assumptions and pave roads of discourse about disability, sexuality, and subjectivity.

Margrit Shildrick has suggested that a dangerous and unsettling discourse surrounds disability, indicating the depth of public anxiety elicited by engagement with disability. I presented a very early version of this research at an interdisciplinary graduate student conference on feminism and gender studies. The reaction from the participants, surprisingly, corroborated Shildrick's argument. I expected a room full of activist and feminist scholars to be open and curious about these liberating and empowering practices, but they seemed anxious and unsure of how to respond. They seemed somewhat uncomfortable, shifting in their seats, avoiding eye contact. I thought perhaps it was just me and my presentation, but the questions they asked following the presentation avoided the topic of disability altogether and seemed to indicate it was the topic and not the presenter or presentation that made them uncomfortable. This apparent anxiety towards disability is a pernicious hindrance to the much-needed dialogue about disability in contemporary western culture, and it is particularly prevalent in regard to sexuality. For Shildrick, "There is an extraordinary reluctance to acknowledge that disabled people have any sexuality at all, with the result that their sexual expression is highly regulated, if not invalidated or silenced completely."¹⁵³ The anomalous embodiment of disabled persons represents a threat to the cultural norms of sexuality. Sexuality itself is often considered a

¹⁵³ Ibid, 11.

cultural taboo in western cultures, and when coupled with physical disability,¹⁵⁴ it generates an unsettling anxiety that hinders engagement in dialogue and the progression of culture to better understand and accept the realities of disabled existence. Political scientist Harlan Hahn argues that this aesthetic anxiety is “reflected in a propensity to shun or at least discriminate against those with ‘unattractive’ bodily attributes.”¹⁵⁵ This, perhaps, is where the immediacy and corporeality of theatre can be of particular use to the cause of provoking uncertainty, confronting anxiety, and encouraging a reappraisal of considerations and cultural perceptions surrounding disability. As Chet says to Judy in the final line of the play: “That’s art, Jude. Not what you see. How you see.”¹⁵⁶

In *Dirty Pictures*, Gregory challenges traditional literary uses of disability as mere metaphor without resorting to the absorption of the “message play” mentality. Throughout the play, Judy rejects victimization and seeks personal empowerment, not trying to “overcome” her disability, but rather to see herself as having full agency, and by doing so perhaps to make others see her the same way. Gregory shows that theatre from any community, mainstream or disabled, can do liberating work in reclaiming subjectivity from a denaturing cultural gaze. The discourse surrounding disability is fraught with dangers and obstacles, as this study has shown, and yet Gregory’s *Dirty Pictures* provides an accessible, humorous, encouraging, and subversive entry into that discourse. The embodied work of theatre and performance is a potent vehicle for political change, and the work of disability studies can find a strong ally on the stage. This

¹⁵⁴ Shildrick acknowledges that not all disability is “written on the body” (*Dangerous Discourses*, 82) and that there is room for discourse surrounding all types of disability (and sexuality).

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Ferris, “Uncovery to Recovery,” 518.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 95.

exploration need not remain within the small – yet growing and important – circles of new disability theatre, but should be encouraged in more mainstream venues as well. As *Dirty Pictures* demonstrates, the task of subverting cultural anxiety towards disabilities does not have to be didactically politicized and is not to be applied simply to or by the marginalized; but rather it must embrace everyone, both Dan and Judy, oppressor and oppressed, and bring us all into the dangerous discourse together. Near the conclusion of the play, Judy expresses her frustration to Chet:

JUDY. Look, Chet. The way I walk? It don't make me heroic, okay? It don't make me brave or strong or noble – or any a that crap. It's a freakin' pain in the ass, and it just makes it twice as hard for me to get laid.

CHET. Din't stop you last night.

JUDY. Exception to the rule.¹⁵⁷

Perhaps, together, we can all be exceptions to the rule, engage in this dangerous discourse, and maybe some day change the rules altogether.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 91.

CHAPTER 4 – American In(ter)dependence, Disability, and *The Good Daughter*

From 1892 until 1954, Ellis Island was the gateway for immigrants seeking American citizenship. Over twelve million individuals passed through the federal immigration station, underwent rushed and haphazard examinations, and eventually entered the country. Many had their names changed and ethnicities homogenized. But many thousands more were rejected for various reasons, including the likelihood that an individual would become a public charge. Historian Kim Neilsen has argued that this clause “clearly assumed that bodies considered defective rendered them unable to perform wage-earning labor.”¹⁵⁸ Physical or cognitive differences were literally marked on people’s backs as they passed by the inspectors, and markings such as PH (physically handicapped), X (possible mental illness), and S (senility) were grounds for rejection and deportation.¹⁵⁹ Strong, able bodies capable of working independently and earning wages were crucial criteria for American citizenship. Such assumptions of ability and dependency in relation to American identity have permeated American culture and artistic cultural representations. In D.W. Gregory’s *The Good Daughter*, the subversion of this American myth of self-determination is a recurring theme that is made all the more prevalent by understanding how variations in human ability interact with the contexts and lived realities of the characters.

¹⁵⁸ Kim E. Neilsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 108.

¹⁵⁹ Neilsen, 104.

Gregory's 2003 play *The Good Daughter*, originally produced by New Jersey Rep and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, is a story of love and rebellion set in rural Missouri between 1916 and 1924. Critic Bob Rendell described the world premier as "a multifaceted, thought provoking traditional American play which stirs echoes of Eugene O'Neill"; others have noted similarities to William Inge's *Picnic*.¹⁶⁰ The play also echoes *King Lear* as it tells "the story of Ned Owen, a pious Missouri farmer whose only hope is to see his daughters settled and his farm pass to the capable hands of one of their sons."¹⁶¹ Ned is a widower with three daughters, aged fourteen, nineteen, and twenty-one at the start of the play. The eldest daughter, Esther, survived childhood polio but now walks with a limp. The youngest daughter, Rachel, is fourteen at the beginning of the play and is a gentle peacemaker at heart. Rudy Bird, a shy neighboring farmer, comes to the Owen estate to propose to Cassie, the beautiful middle daughter who has just fallen for Matt McCall, the dashing and worldly merchant trying to convince the locals to buy into a government-funded levee project to prevent floods in the Missouri River. Over the course of eight years and a great war, daughters leave home, shun suitors, get married and get pregnant, yet nothing happens the way Ned wants it to. Highlighted with Brechtian super-titles, peppered with bible verses, and bookended by torrential floods, *The Good Daughter* is an epic yet intimate family tale of "a part of the country where change comes slowly, and at great price."¹⁶² Ned's desire for "capable" male heirs becomes a dominant trope in the play that influences how Ned treats his three daughters, their suitors, and the

¹⁶⁰ Bob Rendell, "A Very *Good Daughter* World Premier at New Jersey Repertory," accessed May 8, 2013, www.talkinbroadway.com; and Robert L. Daniels, "Legit Review: The Good Daughter," *Daily Variety Gotham*, November 12, 2003.

¹⁶¹ D.W. Gregory, "The Plays," accessed April 27, 2015, <http://dwgregory.com/plays>.

¹⁶² D.W. Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, iii.

land itself, and also how those objects respond to their treatment and find new expressions of agency. This chapter analyzes how D.W. Gregory defies traditional notions of independence and the American Dream by subverting traditional dramatic representations of disability in *The Good Daughter*, exploring the intersections of gender, dependency, disability, and the environment.

The notion of an American identity was perhaps first articulated in the Declaration of Independence. This was the first formal, public statement about who Americans are as a collective people: we are independent.¹⁶³ As such, the notion of dependency has been anathema to American identity since the arrival of the pilgrims. Through the years, this sense of American independence grew in the public imagination and was typified in Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches characters, who earned their reward by hard work and determination, not by asking for help. Yet 'dependency' itself, some would argue, is an ideological term that shapes social perspectives just as much as describing them.¹⁶⁴ Some political conservatives argue that government entitlement programs are equivalent to hand-outs and lead to a dependency that is detrimental and contrary to the spirit of America.¹⁶⁵ Historian and political scholar Rickie Solinger claims that dependency, as epitomized by welfare programs, "is the dirtiest word in the United

¹⁶³ I use the first person pronoun "we" not to be exclusionary, patriotic, or culturally ego-centric, but simply because I happen to be an American citizen and I am writing from my own perspective. Using third person descriptions of Americans seems inauthentic and unnecessarily distancing from my lived experience.

¹⁶⁴ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of *Dependency*: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 15.

¹⁶⁵ David B. Muhlhausen and Patrick Tyrrell, "The 2013 Index of Dependence on Government," *The Heritage Foundation*, accessed July 7, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/11/the-2013-index-of-dependence-on-government>.

States today.”¹⁶⁶ To be dependent on another person for survival or day-to-day functioning is a social embarrassment and a cultural flaw that needs to be eradicated, or at least hidden away from public sight.¹⁶⁷ Independent American thinking holds that dependent people have no need to be educated, either, since they have no chance of success in American life, so it is no surprise that people with disabilities generally received no education, were hidden from view (if the family was able to afford such institutionalization), and if they could not be medically “cured,” then they were kicked out and forced to be beggars. The result was a great cultural anxiety towards public disability. Disability scholar Alison Kafer explores some of these cultural anxieties surrounding disability in American culture, suggesting that disability (especially when coupled with female-ness) is viewed in the U.S. as “an unredeemable difference with no place in visions of the future.”¹⁶⁸ Until the late twentieth century, most American women were relegated to the home and were “dependent” upon men for financial stability. As a result, being a woman at that time was viewed in many of the same ways as being disabled, and thus neither fully American nor even fully human.¹⁶⁹ To be disabled, and especially to be a disabled woman, was to be disqualified from the American dream and

¹⁶⁶ Rickie Solinger, “Dependency and Choice: The Two Faces of Eve,” in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 61. Solinger argues that “dependency” is coupled with “choice” in ways that continue to keep women vulnerable to control and censure.

¹⁶⁷ For more perspectives, analysis and unpacking of notions of dependency, care, and disability, see Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, eds., *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

¹⁶⁸ Alison Kafer, “Debating Feminist Futures: Slippery Slopes, Cultural Anxiety, and the Case of the Deaf Lesbians,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 222.

¹⁶⁹ The andro-centric use of “man” or “mankind” as a term for humanity is perhaps even more pernicious when viewed from this perspective.

its notions of progress, independence, and ability. This worldview was especially powerful during the early twentieth century, the age of immigration, and the time in which D.W. Gregory set her play.

In *The Good Daughter*, Ned Owen's obsession with hard work, moral purity, and traditional family hierarchy is representative of an American conservatism that relocates the American Dream into a more personalized vision of happiness and home. When James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "the American dream" in 1931, he explained it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his *ability* or achievement."¹⁷⁰ This notion of physical and mental ability as prerequisite for opportunity also assumed maleness and whiteness and was, for the most part, unquestioned throughout most of American history. Douglas Baynton has observed how this primacy of ability has been central to the justification of inequality in American history. Accusations that women were incapable of being educated or that racial minorities had smaller, defective brains are based upon the assumption that the white, able-bodied, heterosexual male was both "normal" and ideal.¹⁷¹ In most cases, Baynton explains, the defense against these injustices was to argue, for example, that women *are* strong enough to be educated or that racial diversity is *not* correlative with deficient brains. However, neither the oppressor nor the oppressed ever questioned the assumption that *lack of disability* is prerequisite for participation in

¹⁷⁰ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931), 404 (my emphasis). For a fascinating and nuanced analysis of the American Dream in relation to dramatic criticism, see Cheryl Black, "'Three Variations on a National Theme': George O'Neil's *American Dream*, 1933," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 22 no. 3 (2010), 69-91.

¹⁷¹ Douglas C. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" in *The New Disability History*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 33-57.

civic life. The question was only who was or was not able enough to have social and political rights. Until the disability rights movements of the late twentieth century, lack of disability was always considered part and parcel to full citizenship in America. It is not surprising, then, that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was almost never seen publicly in his wheelchair. As Paul Longmore describes it, “The capacity to function as a true American, an independent moral agent, is predicated upon physical and economic self-sufficiency.”¹⁷² The disabled were not invited. Although we still have much room to grow, Americans have come a long way in terms of who gets to participate in civic life, but it is within this pre-civil rights cultural understanding of disability that Gregory sets her play.

Painted on the “rich canvas of our [American] history,” Gregory’s characterizations in *The Good Daughter* have been described by critics as both complex and compelling.¹⁷³ Since losing his wife during the birth of their third daughter, Ned Owen stayed focused on his biblical Christian faith, tending his farm, and protecting his daughters the best way he knows how. He is a deeply flawed but loving man; he is no villain. Although Ned fits rather neatly into classical tragic constructions, his eldest daughter Esther, disabled by childhood polio, does not. Victoria Ann Lewis and other scholars have noted the use of disability in drama and literature as a character trait that immediately identifies a disabled character as either victim or villain.¹⁷⁴ These portrayals

¹⁷² Paul K. Longmore, “Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleansing and Renewal,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 137.

¹⁷³ Rendell, “A Very *Good Daughter* World Premier at New Jersey Repertory.”

¹⁷⁴ See Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*. The portrayal of disability in cinema is more well documented than in theatre. See, for example, Smit and Elms, *Screening Disability*; Norden, *Cinema of Isolation*; and Chivers and Markotić, *The Problem Body*.

of disability stem from a medicalized understanding whereby disability is a flaw to be cured, overcome, or eliminated. This use of disability as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” affects the way that people living with disability live and understand their lives.¹⁷⁵ Metaphorical representations of disability affirm and shape discriminatory attitudes from pity to euthanasia. According to Lewis, “the metaphor of disability has been so successful in the imaginative arena that it now functions as real.”¹⁷⁶ The modern cultural imagination now perceives disability in life the way it has been depicted in literature, that people with disabilities can either be heroic sufferers or bitter cripples, or perhaps objects of inspiration when they overcome their disability to succeed in life. While Esther’s polio has given her a limp, it has not reduced her to a metaphor within the play.

In act one, during a dinner scene, Ned is overly protective of Esther, the oldest daughter, age twenty-one at the start of the play. Though Esther has prepared the meal on her own for the family with no assistance, Ned orders Cassie, the rebellious middle daughter, to fetch him and Esther a “cuppa water” so as not to over exert her older sister.¹⁷⁷ Though Cassie makes backhanded comments suggesting that everyone in the family is more than able to get their own beverage or take care of their own business, Ned insists that Cassie rehearse her domestic activities, including ostensibly taking care of the weak, since Cassie is shortly to become engaged. The subtle protectiveness towards Esther is a sign that Ned perceives her as weak and in need of special care, or rather, in

¹⁷⁵ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxi.

¹⁷⁷ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 19.

need of his pity towards her. Scholars and historians like Paul Longmore and Joseph Shapiro have thoroughly described the role that pity has played in the charity-driven marginalization of people with disabilities.¹⁷⁸ Since Ned thinks Rachel is too young and Esther too crippled, he treats Cassie the toughest since he sees her as the most able to perform her role as a woman: marry and have children. Ned's special treatment of Esther could be perceived as favoritism or privilege of the elder or favorite child, but eventually it becomes clear that Gregory is crafting his patriarchal, ableist behavior as motivated by fear and pity not only towards Esther's disability, but also to all three of his daughters.

In act two, seven years later, there is a similar dinner scene, but the relationships have shifted significantly. Esther is still living at home and tending the house, but she also holds down a part time job in a local store. Rachel, the youngest daughter, now twenty-one years old, is married and very pregnant. Ned now behaves in an overly protective manner towards his pregnant daughter rather than Esther. Since Cassie ran away seven years ago at the end of the first act, and Esther is still unfit for marriage in his opinion, Rachel is his last hope at fulfilling his American dream and having someone (male) to pass his farm on to when he dies. Yet it is not just an effort at protecting the unborn child. Rachel's mother died in childbirth – a loss Ned has mourned for over twenty years – and he recognizes how potentially deadly a pregnancy can be. Gregory makes the subtle connection between Esther's and Rachel's disability in a brief exchange among all three sisters. Cassie comments to Rachel:

CASSIE: Such a change in your life, havin' a baby. Someone dependin' on you for everythin'. And what if you ain't fit for it?

RACHEL: Who says I ain't fit for it?

CASSIE: I didn't mean –

¹⁷⁸ Longmore, "Conspicuous Contribution;" and Shapiro, *No Pity*.

ESTHER (*cutting her off*) Rachel is as fit as anybody I know.¹⁷⁹

Esther recognizes the perception that both she and her pregnant sister are unfit for independent living and quickly cuts off the accusation. The infantilization and pity inherent in dependency is part of the American perception towards disability as weakness and flaw. There is even some contemporary debate and controversy about the consideration that pregnancy might be considered a temporary disability for purposes of insurance claims, discrimination practices, and/or parking places.¹⁸⁰ In any case, whether or not pregnancy is legally or socially considered a disability, Rachel eventually lashes out at the all-consuming nature of the pregnancy: “The baby, the baby, that’s all I ever hear is the baby.”¹⁸¹ She feels as if her life has become the condition itself. Ned considers the pregnant Rachel to be unable to care adequately for herself, and therefore he believes she is in need of his charitable protection. Ned is exhibiting what Lewis calls a kind of “colonial missionary attitude toward the disabled subject” that is reflective of a “larger social pattern in which the non-disabled expert [...] controls the life options of the disabled person.”¹⁸² Ned feels that he knows best and must control the actions and behaviors of all three of his daughters for their own good, since he sees them as impaired and unable to do so themselves. This behavior stems from the terrifying prospect raised by disability that humans might not be in control of their own destinies. As Longmore

¹⁷⁹ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 76.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Shawn Dean, “Accessible Parking for Pregnancy? Count Me Out,” EasyStand blog, www.blog.easystand.com, April 11, 2011, accessed May 8, 2013; and Stacie Lewis, “Do You Consider Pregnancy a Disability?” Baby Center Blog, www.blog.babycenter.com, January 10, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013.

¹⁸¹ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 92.

¹⁸² Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xvii.

puts it, “Disability imperils the American myth of the sovereignty of the self.”¹⁸³ If the story stopped there, if the daughters capitulated to their father’s demands, Ned’s victimizing behavior would simply be another portrayal of ableist American colonialism and the use of disability as narrative metaphor to justify oppression masked as benevolence. But Gregory does not stop there. Cassie returns from her self-imposed exile and Rachel offers her some tea, but Ned objects, saying, “‘Rachel. Let Esther do that. Rachel.’ *Rachel ignores him and brings the tea tray.*”¹⁸⁴ In this brief act of defiance, Rachel momentarily reclaims her own subjectivity. It is a very subtle move, but in doing so Rachel defies the able-bodied expert, the doctors and telethon hosts who think they know what is best for disabled people and how to cure or protect them. However, a glass of tea does not a cultural revolution make, and the sexism of Ned expecting a woman to serve him tea still remains relatively unchallenged. These small acts of subjectivity, of asserting that being disabled is not the same as being useless, incapable, unfit, helpless, or voiceless, of claiming “nothing about us without us,” these small acts are the shifting of stones that can eventually lead to moving mountains.¹⁸⁵

In *The Good Daughter*, Ned believes deeply that independent capability (read ability) is at the heart of a bible-based American life. He quotes liberally from the Christian Bible throughout the play and never strays from his able-bodied valuations of home, hearth, and hard work. Ned soon discovers that these abelist assumptions are not fully ingrained in his three daughters. Esther has taken over many of the homemaking

¹⁸³ Longmore, “Conspicuous Contribution,” 153.

¹⁸⁴ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 65. Ned’s notion here that polio is less disabling than pregnancy is quite provocative, but probably due to his experience of having lost his wife in childbirth. Esther may have a limp, but her condition is no longer potentially fatal, like he thinks Rachel’s pregnancy could be.

¹⁸⁵ “Nothing about us without us” was another rally cry during the disability rights movement.

responsibilities since her mother died fourteen years earlier. Though she has a mild flirtation with Rudy Bird, the neighboring tenant farmer rejected earlier by Cassie, Ned assumes that Esther's disability essentially renders her unfit for marriage or her own family:

NED: Esther ain't never gonna marry. You know that.

CASSIE: She ain't so bad lookin' if she'd just smile once in a while.

NED: No man gonna marry a crippled girl. Man wants a girl can give him a family.

CASSIE: Not every man.

NED: Any man worth havin'. Now, that's a painful thing for her to accept. But it's a hard, sad fact of this world. Just like it's a hard, sad fact of this world that a girl who puts off settlin' on one fella or another pretty soon ends up with no fella at all.¹⁸⁶

Cassie, the rebellious middle daughter, does not perceive Esther's limp as a disqualifier for marriage, nor does Cassie think that marriage and childbearing are the only viable life options for a woman in the new century, but Ned takes the assumption that Disability historian Paul Longmore has critiqued, "that disability corrupts one's capacity for responsible choices."¹⁸⁷ Solinger agrees and argues that dependency, especially in women, is seen as "inconsistent with sensible choices."¹⁸⁸ In this way, disability is a marker of moral failure, and vice versa. Ned sees Cassie's rebelliousness as a sign or symptom of a hidden moral failure. And since disability (real or perceived), particularly female disability, renders someone incapable of making rational choices, Ned believes must make the correct choices for his daughters. Ned wants grandchildren and is insistent on instilling his patriarchal version of common sense and teaching what he thinks are the

¹⁸⁶ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 24.

¹⁸⁷ Longmore, "Conspicuous Contribution," 152.

¹⁸⁸ Solinger, "Dependency and Choice," 75.

truths of life: that every woman needs a man, and crippled girls can't produce a family. Thus Cassie needs to settle down and start a family – since Esther cannot do so and the youngest daughter, Rachel, is still too young at this early part of the play – so that Ned's version of the American dream can be fulfilled and passed on to an able-bodied, male heir. Later in the play, Cassie's rebelliousness leads to her running away from home, and Ned perceives this as a total loss of sensibility, and her moral failures has thus fully infiltrated her life, rendering her incapable of fulfilling Ned's version of the Dream for him. Thus Rachel eventually becomes his last hope, even though he sees pregnancy itself as a potentially fatal disability. In this powerfully ironic twist, female disability is the *only* means of achieving Ned's American Dream.

Ned's views and behavior represent the way ableist attitudes can be establish and reinforce barriers that are disabling. This social model of disability – that regardless of impairments or physical difference, one only becomes disabled when social constructions or physical barriers (such as lack of curb cuts or accessible transportation) prevent one from equal participation – is a socially significant mode of understanding disability, one that provides an important corrective to more oppressive and problematic medical models. The social model serves to implicate society in the nature of disability, calling for reasonable accommodations so that everyone can engage with society independently regardless of differential embodiment. Many scholars, including Tobin Siebers, are critical of a purely social model, arguing that it does not pay enough attention to the lived realities of different bodies.¹⁸⁹ In *The Good Daughter*, the behavior of Ned's daughters critiques a purely conceived social model (as well as moral or medical models) by

¹⁸⁹ See Siebers, *Disability Theory*.

bringing more attention to the reality of their interdependence without ignoring the power of ableist expectations to impede social agency. In this way, Gregory is perhaps resignifying independence in ways similar to Ed Roberts and the early disability rights activists of the 1970s, changing the definition of independence to mean what is possible for you with the right assistance. Gregory's representations and explorations of disability in *The Good Daughter* can thus influence how we understand the nature of independence itself by challenging Ned's ideology of ability.

Ned's assumption that disability makes Esther incapable of bearing children and having a family represents the desexualization of disability that is prominent in American culture. Many scholars have noted and explored the way people with disabilities have been desexualized throughout American history.¹⁹⁰ From the forced sterilization of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities and the eugenics movements of the early twentieth century to assumptions that a young woman paralyzed in a car crash will no longer need her birth control pills (since what "normal" guy would want to have sex with a paraplegic?), the relationship between sex and disability has been anxiously ignored at best and surgically outlawed at worst.¹⁹¹ As recent as 2010, a young couple was married in New York state, but because they are living in a state-sanctioned group home and have mental disabilities, they are not allowed to share a bedroom (lawsuits by the couple's parents are still pending).¹⁹² Abby Wilkerson notes how "a group's sexual

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Margarit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*; Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*.

¹⁹¹ See Abby Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

¹⁹² Frank Eltman, "Disabled Rights: Couple Fights for Right to Live Together at Group Home," Associated Press, www.huffingtonpost.com, May 7, 2013. Accessed May 9, 2013.

status tends to reflect and reinforce its broader political and social status.”¹⁹³ Sexual agency is thus correlative with political agency and respectable social standing. In Ned’s perspective, Esther’s body has been physically and culturally pathologized by her polio. In the eyes of her father (who serves as a representative of American culture), her marked body is inherently flawed and no longer fit for sexual participation in marriage, or, by extension, any subjective participation in American culture outside the protective enclave of her father’s home.

Since Esther is viewed as unable to marry and have children, she also cannot fulfill what Ned believes is God’s plan for her gender. Ned’s deep faith contributes to his fears that his middle daughter, Cassie, might also become lost in the same stigmatized state of childlessness, so he forces her to read a Bible passage from 1 Timothy 2:14-15. “Adam was not deceived. But the woman bein’ deceived was in the transgression [...] Notwithstandin’, she shall be saved by childbearin’, if they continue in faith, charity and holiness with sobriety.”¹⁹⁴ Cassie is hesitant as she reads, yet she still submits to her father’s patriarchy at this early point in the play. This bible verse is Ned’s warning to Cassie that in order to avoid Esther’s tragic condition, Cassie must fall in line and submit to male authority, marry, and have children. Otherwise she cannot be saved, just like a desexualized and physically disabled Esther cannot be saved. Ned’s ableism has not only desexualized and pathologized Esther’s body, but it has also damned her to hell. In this regard, disability is both socially and morally constructed, and Ned sees Cassie’s rebelliousness and desire to reject marriage as equally disruptive as Esther’s polio. He

¹⁹³ Abby Wilkerson, 195.

¹⁹⁴ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 25.

couldn't save Esther from her polio, but perhaps he can save Cassie from herself. This patriarchal and charity-driven attempt at control simultaneously desexualizes and strips agency from his daughters.

Ned's world, dominated by fear, patriarchal conservatism, and able-bodied privilege, is girded by an extremely oppressive power matrix in which his three daughters and their suitors must navigate. However, Gregory is not content to simply portray or exploit oppressive power structures in her play. She works subtly through her female characters and the ecological environment to explode these power structures from within. Esther could remain single and lonely and become a tragic or heroic sufferer, a common type for disabled characters throughout literature. She could be rescued by a charitable man, like the neighbor Rudy Bird or the idealistic merchant Matt McCall, and try to fulfill her God-given calling as a procreative woman. These would be the traditional paths that disabled dramatic characters might follow. Gregory leads us down that path before radically reorienting our perception. At the end of act one, Ned has arranged for Rudy Bird to marry Cassie, whom he deeply loves, but Cassie is in love with Matt McCall. When she asks Matt to run away with her, he reveals that he is going off to fight in the war, so she runs away by herself. Seven years later, in act two, Rudy has married Rachel, Cassie comes home to help Rachel with the end of her pregnancy, and Matt is now courting Esther. When Cassie reappears, however, Matt is still not fully over his heartbreak until (or perhaps even though) she brings him closure face to face and encourages him to do right by Esther. At dinner the next evening, after Matt and Esther have some alone time, everyone assumes Matt was going to propose to Esther, but when she returns alone, she begins to cry:

NED: I knew it!
RACHEL: Esther. What happened?
NED (*to Rachel*): I'll tell you what happened... He let her go! That's what!
CASSIE: He didn't ask?
NED: I knew he'd never ask.
CASSIE: I thought sure he'd ask!
ESTHER: HE DID ASK! He did ask! (*a beat*) I said no.
CASSIE: You turned him down?
RACHEL: Esther. What in the world. Why?
ESTHER: I ain't gonna be the one who's settled on. I will not have a man who'd marry me out of duty. Or pity [...] I ain't gonna be no man's second choice.¹⁹⁵

As Cassie says to Rudy early in the play, Esther says “no.” She has the opportunity to be ‘rescued,’ to get the happy ending and ‘overcome’ her disability through marriage where she can become a wife and perhaps mother and therefore pass as ‘normal’ in her American culture. But she says no. She rejects pity. She defies her father’s assumptions about her, and she defies an American culture that defines her agency in terms of her womb and the symmetry of her appendages. In her cry of ‘no pity,’ Esther makes a powerful and political action that asserts her own subjectivity in terms that she defines for herself.

Ned’s reaction to Esther’s rejection of Matt’s proposal is particularly telling, especially if he is viewed as a representative of the ableist American cultural milieu. First, when Esther cries, he claims he knew that Matt would never propose, reiterating his previous claim that “no man gonna marry a crippled girl.”¹⁹⁶ Then, he shifts and adopts an ‘I told you so’ attitude to try to spin the situation back towards his culturally normate

¹⁹⁵ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 89-90.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

corner. Ned tries to regain control of the situation and solidify the dominance of his perspective, but Esther will have none of it:

NED: Maybe this is for the best, Rachel. I worried how Esther'd take to marriage.

RACHEL: She'd take just fine, Pa.

NED: Marriage is a strain on a woman. Esther's frail.

ESTHER: Frail?

NED: I know it's a painful thing to accept, but Esther, maybe you ain't really fit for marriage.

ESTHER: Ain't fit? I do a full day of work. Never ask nobody to do nothin' for me. Every spring I put in that garden by myself. Clean this house top to bottom, carry half the furniture out into the yard. Don't you tell me I'm too frail. Don't you tell me I ain't fit. Nobody knows what they's fit for till they try it.¹⁹⁷

Ned tries to reshape the event to fit his previous explanation of reality, that Esther is dependent and thus unfit and unable to have cultural agency. Yet Esther claims she has never asked for help or needed help. In this moment, it appears as if Gregory is simply writing Esther to reject her own disability, to claim traditional independence, and to accept the vilification of dependency as anathema to American identity. This exchange could be a highly problematic character twist and would indicate that Ned's ableism has permeated deeper into Esther's worldview than originally thought. But yet again, Gregory craftily subverts this easy and oppressive plot device. But this time, she uses an Act of God.

Ned's fears are part of a carefully constructed house of cards that Gregory has structured in the play. Ned is afraid of God's punishment; he is afraid that his daughters will not produce an heir to his estate; he is afraid that Cassie will run off and abandon her womanly obligations; he is afraid Rachel might have the same pregnancy problems that took his wife; and he is afraid of the technological progress that is happening in the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 91.

agricultural community within the play. Abby Wilkerson has said, “Beneath the moral stigmas attached to pathologized bodies lies fear: the fear of bodily alteration, and even death itself – and to the extent that the singular human body represents the body politic, the fear of social upheaval and chaos, the loss of all social order.”¹⁹⁸ This fear undergirds Ned’s – and perhaps by extension, America’s – ableist attitudes and behaviors. Ability is understood as part of the American status quo; it is prerequisite for, and part of, stability. Gregory imagines this chaos and loss of social order through visions of the natural world, the farms, and the ecology of the Missouri river. Critic Bob Rendell describes, “The entire play has a backdrop of drought, flood, the mechanization of agriculture and a growing ability to bend nature to our will.”¹⁹⁹ Matt McCall’s job is to convince the local farmers to support the construction of new levees to rein in flood waters. The biblical images of floods and rain are prominent constructions in the play which highlight notions of complete human impotence and complete ecological destruction. However, the relationship of these images to disability is somewhat less obvious.

The notion of disability as personal catastrophe is a common trope in literature and drama, as well as in social situations. A person’s disability is seen as either something to be heroically overcome, or something that consumes her with bitterness, hence the victim and villain tropes described by Lewis and discussed earlier. Disability is seen as a personal tragedy, or perhaps, a kind of natural disaster that could befall a person. This problematic understanding of disability as a kind of natural disaster permeates traditional dramatic literature, much contemporary thought, and Ned Owen’s

¹⁹⁸ Abby Wilkerson, 193.

¹⁹⁹ Bob Rendell, “A Very Good Daughter.”

world view. But Gregory subverts this traditional calamitous mode of understanding disability by juxtaposing it against literal images of natural disasters. For farmers like Ned, the Missouri river is the giver of life and the bringer of destruction. Independent human efforts to control it are unable to rein in its mighty power. The river can give, and the river can take away. And when the river floods, it becomes a natural disaster – like Ned’s view of disability – that can wash away all efforts of forging the American Dream. This is how Gregory depicts Ned’s world view. He clings to his own power to outlast the flood by refusing help from his family to get to higher ground. If he accepts their help, he believes, he acknowledges his lack of independence and his unworthiness to have the American Dream, which for Ned is a bigger disaster than a deadly flood. The understanding of disability as natural disaster is related to the moral or religious model of disability depiction, “in which the physically different body is explained by an act of divine or demonic intervention.”²⁰⁰ But in *The Good Daughter*, the divine intervention serves not to explain disability and by extension dependency, but rather the Act of God purges the rejection of disability and dependency, in a way that disavows the whole notion of independence itself as a fallacy.

In the torrential floods that bookend the play, Ned comes face to face with a kind of *natura ex machina* that is the great equalizer to the exaltation of independence. As the waters rise, Ned stays put in the barn, refusing to accept the help of his family. As Longmore describes the denial of dependency in relation to disability, “Americans cling to visions of absolute personal autonomy and unlimited individual possibility while, it seems to many of them, their power over their individual lives evaporates like a

²⁰⁰ Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains*, xxi.

mirage.”²⁰¹ Ned has survived many floods before, on his own, and he believes he will survive this one just the same. But in fact, the only way to survive is to accept his interdependence with those loved ones trying to help him make it to safety before the levees break. Esther realizes the value, necessity, and ubiquity of interdependence and makes it to safety with her family. Ultimately Esther is able to resist Ned’s world view. As he clings to his notions of independent moral superiority, the lights fade on Ned and the flood waters rise. With this Act of God, Gregory turns the tide on the myth of independence and claims the necessity of interdependence in life and in death.

Feminist disability scholar Eva Feder Kittay acknowledges not only that independence is a fallacy, but it is contrary to the human condition, and refusing to acknowledge this fact is unjust and has damaging effects on people and relationships. She says:

Independence, except in some particular actions and functions, is a fiction, regardless of our abilities or disabilities, and the pernicious effects of this fiction are encouraged when we hide the ways in which our needs are met in relations of dependencies. On the other hand, this fiction turns those whose dependence cannot be masked into pariahs, or makes them objects of disdain or pity. It causes us to refuse assistance when it is needed. It encourages us either to deny that assistance to others when they require it or to be givers of care because we fear having to receive care ourselves. In acknowledging dependency we respect the fact that as individuals our dependency relations are constitutive of who we are and that, as a society, we are inextricably dependent on one another.²⁰²

We are all inextricably interdependent, and the notion that dependency is grounds for marginalization and evidence of loss of subjectivity is not only a fallacy, but a rejection of the reality of the human condition and a pernicious perspective that can hurt everyone.

²⁰¹ Longmore, “Conspicuous Contribution,” 154.

²⁰² Eva Feder Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring: Justice and Mental Retardation,” *Public Culture* 13 no. 3 (2001), 570.

In *The Good Daughter*, Ned clings to his notions of independence that have splintered his family as the flood waters crash around him. His death is not tragic because he never has a realization or change of heart. But his death becomes heartbreaking because Cassie and her unborn child stay with him, refusing to accept the help of their family. In one sense, Cassie's death could be read as a kind of self-sacrificial womanhood, refusing to let her father die alone, affirming our interdependence in life and in death. But it is also possible to read Cassie's actions as being just as pitiable as Ned's, in that they both are so attached to traditional notions of independence that they reject the possibility of life (however messy and difficult it may be) in an interdependent community with their family.

Just before the calamitous resolution of the play, Cassie and Rudy have a heart to heart about why she left and where their true feelings lie. Cassie confesses that her journey was one of self-discovery:

CASSIE: I just had to see what was out there.

RUDY: See where the river took you.

CASSIE: This is as far as it went.

RUDY: River took us all places we didn't expect.²⁰³

Her quest took her back home, back to her father, and she sits with him in the final moments, ready to die tragically with her father and her unborn child because she failed to find what she had been taught was true independence. Her quest for independence teaches us that the ecology of our American Dreams defy expectations. The disability rights movement has gone a long way in changing cultural perceptions of ability and redefining independence to include *interdependence*, but these cultural notions were decades away from being brought to the public eye during the time in which *The Good Daughter* was set. For Ned Owen, the perception of disability in his family – Esther's

²⁰³ Gregory, *The Good Daughter*, 96-97.

limp, Cassie's rebellion, Rachel's pregnancy – became a damaging metaphor that caused him to doubt his own future and his own version of the American dream. However, Gregory ultimately reverses this paradigm and explodes Ned's American dream from the inside out, exposing the fallacy of independence and reclaiming notions of interdependent subjectivity that are inherent and positive aspects of disability. Esther initially appears to be cast as the innocent victim, but she is not. She is a caretaker in the family as well as a care-receiver, she chastises her sisters for their misbehavior, and speaks up against her own mistreatment. Though her circumstances may conspire against her subjectivity, her quest for agency within her oppressive and pitying father's worldview serves not as a metaphor but rather to embrace the lived realities of her culturally situated experiences with disability. Gregory's subversion of literary tropes and dramatic constructions of disability are demonstrative of a subtle but tectonic shift that is happening in mainstream dramatic representations of disability, exploding the myth of independence within cultural ecologies of American identity.

CHAPTER 5 – This In-Between Life: Enfreakment, Toxic Actors, and Half-Life in *Radium Girls*

D. W. Gregory's most famous and most produced play is *Radium Girls* (2003), which dramatizes the well-known story of several young women from Orange, NJ who developed radium poisoning as a result of their employment with the U.S. Radium Corporation during the late 1910s and early 1920s. The girls were dial painters, whose delicate fingers were required to paint watch dials with radium-laced, glow-in-the-dark paint. The story was the subject of Claudia Clark's 1997 book, *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health reform, 1910-1935*, which provided Gregory with much of the historical context for her play.²⁰⁴ The dial painters' fight for justice was one of the first instances in the United States of corporations being held legally responsible for the safety and well-being of their employees.

Gregory's play focuses on the experiences of Grace Fryer, one of the original dial painters and a key plaintiff in the case against U.S. Radium Corporation. The play takes place between 1918 and 1928, encompassing the time from when the girls began getting ill to the settlement of the case. The radium poisoning suffered by the girls resulted in bone loss, debilitating pain, loss of physical mobility, and eventually death. At the start of the play, Grace is a plucky fifteen year old girl working as a dial painter. As her friends begin getting sick and dying, the girls' quest to uncover the truth of the mysterious illness, and the corporation's quest to hide the truth, slam against each other in a

²⁰⁴ Claudia Clark, *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial health reform, 1910-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

“cinematic, briskly-paced,” highly theatrical style.²⁰⁵ The play utilizes many facets of Brecht’s Epic theatre, beginning with historicization, and including the juxtaposition of comic, presentational scenes with more serious, naturalistic ones, simultaneously calling attention to the politicized nature of the content while emphasizing the theatricality and performative nature of the play itself.²⁰⁶ By analyzing this play through a variety of theoretical perspectives that foreground disability – such as the Freak Show, disability and labor, charity, queer/crip, and toxicity – this chapter unpacks the critical work that Gregory does with *Radium Girls* and also calls attention to the potent analytical and critical tools that disability theories can offer to dramatic criticism and theatre studies. An analysis of Gregory’s *Radium Girls* that foregrounds disability can open up new possibilities for understanding bodies, performance, and the nature of life itself.

Enfreakment

One of the most prominent features of *Radium Girls* is the representation of the media and circus-like atmosphere that focuses attention on the girls in ways parallel to the historical Freak Show. Most popular and profitable from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the Freak Show is an institution where “the odd, bizarre, erotic, and savage was highlighted.”²⁰⁷ Persons who had some kind of biological or cultural rarity were put on display for entertainment and profit. Robert Bogdan, however,

²⁰⁵ D.W. Gregory, *Radium Girls* (Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2005), 8.

²⁰⁶ Despite the authorial instructions for this kind of stylized simplicity, the play is often over-produced with elaborate theatrical sets and costumes, larger casts, and attempts at historical realism that run counter to the playwright’s intended stylistic choices. I have seen a production where this happened, and the pace slows down significantly, resulting in a much more grim and tedious performance that loses the “descriptive simplicity and graphic candor” noted by a *Variety* reviewer of the original production.

²⁰⁷ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 29.

separates the institution from the individual by arguing that being a “freak” is not about human variation, but rather it “is a way of thinking about and presenting people – a frame of mind and a set of practices.”²⁰⁸ In this sense, people are *enfreaked* (or made to become freaks) by “the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation.”²⁰⁹ This enfreakment was often forced upon these physically diverse performers by the Freak Show promoters and other persons of power. In *Radium Girls*, Gregory portrays the young women from New Jersey as being enfreaked by virtually everyone around them.

The opening scene of the play is a patchwork of various times, locations, and individuals involved in the trial, highlighting the beginning and the end of the story, the innocence, ignorance, and negligence that lead to the debilitation and death of these young girls. This opening moment gives the audience some context for the perspectives that will be explored. Immediately following this brief and stylized juxtaposition of time and perspective, Gregory introduces a carnivalesque atmosphere ushered in by two representatives of the news media industry, the Reporter and the Sob Sister.

SOB SISTER: May 17, 1921. Nancy Jane Harlan here – for the New York Graphic! The New York Graphic’s only girl reporter!

REPORTER: Jack Youngwood for the Newark Ledger! Newark’s first source for news!

*(The scene transforms to a street scene of excitement with band music, carnival atmosphere.)*²¹⁰

This invocation of the carnival presents the reporter and sob sister as carnival barkers, recalling images of the freak show barker standing out in front of the exhibit shouting, “Step right up and see the amazing living dead girls!” These fast-paced news scenes recur

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 24.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 35.

²¹⁰ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 16.

many times throughout the play and serve as Gregory's representation of the media frenzy that surrounded the case. By choosing to use a circus-like image for the media's obsession with the story, Gregory invokes the voyeuristic and exploitative spirit of the Freak Show and all of the ghosts that haunt it, calling attention to how these girls are being put on display for the public, often against their will, and usually for profit. Choosing to represent these circus images using a presentational and Brechtian style calls attention to the intentionality and political ramifications of these behaviors, allowing the audience more reflective distance that might be lost within the tragic pathos associated with more naturalistic or representational theatrical styles. The way Gregory represents the historical media circus surrounding the events poses a subtle ideological critique of the ways in which a culture of capitalism contributes to the objectification (and thus de-subjectification) of non-normative bodies through voyeuristic tendencies.

Bogdan notes how the historical Freak Show is primarily concerned with “the manufacture and management of disability images for profit.”²¹¹ Though radium poisoning is a debilitating illness, leaving bones broken and decaying and rendering its victims unable to walk or even lift their arms, the girls being displayed initially possess the cultural trappings of beauty and youth. Their first scene in the play is a seemingly innocent giggle-fest of girls painting their faces to play a practical joke on the floor manager. It is by means of this contrast that the media can capitalize on the ‘tragedy’ of their plight, that their youth and vitality have been taken away from them. This contrast is

²¹¹ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 34.

particularly interesting given the fact that pity was largely absent from the Freak Show in its historical manifestations.²¹² As Eli Clare puts it,

At the time of the freak show, disabled people were [...] extraordinary creatures, not entirely human, about whom everyone – “professional” people and the general public alike – was curious. [...] Disability was not yet inextricably linked to pathology, and without pathology, pity and tragedy did not shadow disability to the same extent they do today.²¹³

The historical Freak Show did not feed upon pity and personal tragedy, but instead relied on curiosity and voyeurism. *Radium girls*, however, integrates both perspectives, but does so with a kind of Brechtian self-reflection that calls attention to interpretive assumptions rather than relying on disability symbology to communicate with an audience.

In *Radium Girls*, the media’s performance of enfreakment almost always combines wonder and fascination with notions of pity and personal tragedy. The choice of naming a character “sob sister,” meaning a female journalist that over-sentimentalizes her stories, is revealing. The media performance being dramatized here demands pathos, encouraging readers to feel pity at the compellingly tragic story of the girls. By itself, these feelings of pity are contrary to the historical Freak Show which capitalized on an ethos of wonder and fascination, not pity. Though it could be argued that the girls are also portrayed as objects of admiration and fascination, particularly in terms of an ‘overcoming’ narrative or in terms of the public response and letter-writing campaign, it is perhaps more compelling to argue for a new form of enfreakment that relies on media-produced compulsion for stories that invoke a sympathetic pathos. Eli Clare discusses a

²¹² Ibid, 34.

²¹³ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999), 82.

new kind of enfreakment in terms of the way disability transitioned “from freak show to doctor’s office, from curiosity to pity, from entertainment to pathology.”²¹⁴ The common ground in this transition is voyeurism and watching. Disability displayed in medical textbooks or in surgical theatres is still being put on display; the change is that the gawkers now wear white coats. The medicalized view is sterile, emotionless, fact-filled and biological, lacking the messy leakiness of social interaction and sideways glances on the street. In this way, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts it, during the time of the Freak Show, disability was transitioning from “wonder to error.”²¹⁵ If enfreakment is not about bodies, as Bogdan claims, but rather “a way of thinking about and presenting people – a frame of mind and a set of practices,” then the Radium Girls’ media frenzy is thus a new kind of liminal enfreakment that lives in-between wonder and error.²¹⁶

Gregory locates this stylized Freak Show performance in a historically and metaphorically liminal moment of transition. The early twentieth century was a time of great scientific and technological discovery, from the discovery of radioactivity to the invention of the automobile to advances in modern medicine. This historical transition within the setting of the play is partnered with an ideological transition in terms of how disability is widely understood. As scientific advancements were growing, understanding of disability began to be associated with pathology. Mitchell and Snyder have likewise noted that “while on a historical level the meaning of disability shifted from a supernatural and cultural to an individual and medical symbology, literary narratives

²¹⁴ Ibid, 87.

²¹⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 3.

²¹⁶ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 24.

persisted in integrating both interpretive possibilities into their story lines.”²¹⁷ Their point is that the presence of disability (as wonder and/or error) in literature is for interpretive purposes, so that audiences would better understand the nature of the characters and themes in the story due to the existence and interpretation of disability. The girls portrayed in the play never actually experience the transition from wonder to error. On the contrary, they exist more liminally in-between the boundaries of the two, living within the wonder *of* error, that is to say, where others marvel at the ‘incorrectness’ their bodies have become. *Radium Girls*, however, creates an interesting dynamic by portraying representations of these interpretive biases in a curious blend of curiosity and pity, of wonder and error, which begs the questions: Who are the rubes and who is gawking in this mediatized Freak Show? Who is in control of the staring? Who benefits (financially or otherwise) from letting people watch?

This in-between kind of blending of pity and wonder in *Radium Girls* is not an anachronistic case of historiographic revisioning that merely attempts to villainize the media for their exploitation of the women and arouse more dramatic sympathy in the audience for the obstacles facing the protagonists (although it certainly does both). Gregory is also bringing the medical industrial system into the mix. In the play, Dr. Knief, a local dentist who treats some of the girls for their symptoms, initially encourages them to have expensive treatments. “Put off the surgery and you will develop a septic condition. It could be fatal.”²¹⁸ The actual medical necessity of these surgeries is problematized in act two when he visits the board of the U.S. Radium Corporation to

²¹⁷ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 61.

²¹⁸ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 47.

work out a deal. Knef proposes, “I’d examine them for radium necrosis, and then I would come up with a favorable diagnosis for you – pyorrhea, say, or something else. Quite a few cases will just die a natural death anyway – and the rest we can put off for a while until the statute of limitations kicks in and it’s too late to sue.”²¹⁹ For Knef, the girls’ debility is an opportunity for profit. More than just his corruption, the medicalized gaze that Knef brings to this board meeting is made physical in that he brings a bone fragment and an x-ray image, demonstrating the biological finitude of the girls’ disabling conditions. The disability images still must be displayed, but now it is a doctor who must display them. By exploring both sides of “the transition from freak show to doctor’s office, from curiosity to pity, from entertainment to pathology,”²²⁰ Gregory exposes how voyeuristic tendencies are still very much associated with disability and medical anomaly, and how these tendencies contribute to an ableist and capitalist worldview that continues to marginalize and minimize people with disabilities.

Labor

The “peculiarly American obsessions with health, wealth, and the commercialization of science” – whether it’s the girls wanting compensation and treatment for their illness, their dentist extorting funds from the company and the girls, or the marketing exploits of various entrepreneurs portrayed in the play – is a central theme of the play.²²¹ This obsession is intrinsically related to notions of capital and labor, and *Radium Girls* provides an interesting exploration of pre-Social Security ideas regarding

²¹⁹ Ibid, 70.

²²⁰ Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 87.

²²¹ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, n.p.

disability and the wage-labor system. Even though the Social Security Administration was not founded until 1935, seven years after the events of the play end, disability was not added as an insured contingency to the social security program until the 1950s.²²² In her book *The Disabled State*, Deborah Stone asserts that the idea of a ‘welfare state’ is founded on “the principle that certain characteristics – youth, old age, widowhood, and sickness – render people automatically incapable of participating in the wage-labor system.”²²³ Though welfare programs were common in other industrialized nations around the world, the United States had not adopted any such program during the time of the Radium Girls scandal. The idea that there were any “categorical exemptions from the labor market” had not yet taken popular hold in the American psyche.²²⁴ The beginning of act two provides an interesting perspective on these notions of labor and fitness.

REPORTER: December 4, 1927! Jack Youngwood reporting for the Newark Ledger.

SOB SISTER: Nancy Jane Harland for the New York Graphic!

REPORTER: On the strange case of the Radium Girls.

SOB SISTER: Who claim they were poisoned at the hands of their employer.

REPORTER: And now seek their day in court!

SHOPGIRL: Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

SOB SISTER: That’s the price tag on their suffering!

MALE SHOPPER: Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!

STORE OWNER: Ask me, it’s all a sham!

CUSTOMER: What do you mean? Those girls are very sick!

STORE OWNER: Sicka workin’, sure!

REPORTER: Doctors say... the Radium Girls have only a year to live!²²⁵

²²² Deborah Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 68.

²²³ *Ibid*, 21.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

²²⁵ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 59.

Here Gregory presents the Store Owner, the lone representative of hard work and entrepreneurship in a sea of consumers flanked by media representatives, questioning the validity of the girls' claims. He thinks they just want a handout; therefore they must be lying. Stone notes how disability has so often been historically associated with deception, and therefore the very concept of disability is predicated on the need to prove its validity.²²⁶ For the Freak Shows, that expertise was doled out by the hawking 'professors' and 'anthropologists' guaranteeing that the exhibits were indeed authentic. Now, it is the medical doctor alone who can validate 'legitimate disability.' Disability has become a clinical concept.²²⁷ In this scene, the Reporter trumps the entire debate about the 'validity of the invalids' by invoking the claims of the almighty "doctors." The liminal transition from wonder to error continues.

Gregory, however, is not content merely to portray this shift in perspective towards the medical model of understanding disability in *Radium Girls*. On the contrary, she carefully chips away at the hegemony of the medical industrial complex by challenging this assumed authority. The character of Dr. Knef not only represents corruption and the medical gaze that continues to enfreak people with disabilities, but also represents the capitalistic gaze that permeates the play. Even though characters like Dr. Knef explore the darker side of medical politics and quid pro quo, it is the character of Grace and her unwillingness to accept the status quo that is most challenging to hegemonic authority. Early in the play, when news reaches the dial painters that the death

²²⁶ Stone, *The Disabled State*, 23.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

of their friend Amelia Maggia was attributed to complications from syphilis, Grace challenges the decree, and Kathryn hesitantly follows suit.

GRACE: But Amelia was ever so nice.

IRENE: Guess she got around more than we knew.

GRACE: Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe the doctor got it wrong.

IRENE: Come on.

GRACE: He coulda got it wrong. Doctors are wrong sometimes.

KATHRYN: That's true. Doctor was wrong about Aunt Ivy.

IRENE: What's Mama got to do with it?

KATHRYN: Irene, don't you remember? Up to the day she died, doctor said Aunt Ivy would be fine. Said take a cup a tea, get a good night's rest. And two days later we was taking her to Rosedale cemetery.²²⁸

The girls beginning to question the infallibility of 'doctor's orders' is part of what prepared them to take a stand against the company and file suit at the end of act one. However, when Kathryn also takes ill and is waiting for surgery in the hospital, her resolve fails. When she is faced with her own acquired toxic debility, she turns back to the doctors for refuge from her fears and loses resolve in the legal battle, leaving Grace the lone soldier in her quest for justice.

KATHRYN: (*abruptly*). What if we don't win?

GRACE: 'Course we'll win.

KATHRYN: But what if we don't? My father will lose his house. We'll be on the street. You'll be on the street, too. Yer father must owe thousands. And you and Tom, You won't never get married. How can ya stand it, Grace—

GRACE: Kathryn, please!

KATHRYN: (*more agitated*). How can Tom stand it? Don't ya ever wonder, Grace? I don't never hear him complain—

GRACE: Kathryn! As soon as the judge hears our testimony, he's gonna rule for us. All they gotta do is take one look at us. It'll be over in a day."

KATHRYN: Think so?²²⁹

²²⁸ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 24.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 65.

Soon thereafter, the Sob Sister joins them in the hospital room offering them a cash deal for exclusive rights to tell their story. Kathryn's last words alive in the play are, "Grace, maybe we should do it."²³⁰ Everyone is abandoning Grace in her fight for justice and encouraging her to give up and get on with what little she has left. The notion that disability will inevitably lead to homelessness, poverty, and solitude is deeply entrenched, and, perhaps like an early disability rights activist, Grace seems to be the only one willing to fight.

The historical importance of this case is made more profound in light of the fact that the girls' fight for recognition, compensation, and prevention of radium poisoning was so challenging, the temptations to quit were so prevalent, and the quest permeated society and social institutions to such a great extent. The heart of the story is Industrial Health reform, but it goes much deeper. Claudia Clark's account of the Radium Girls and their plight reports how:

Industrial health bridges the history of labor and the social history of workers, the history of medicine and the social history of health and the environment, the traditional history of politics and the social history of politics. In the case of the dialpainters, we may also study the history of women.²³¹

Even the radium poisoning itself was not so much a discovery made at that time as it is "a social product born of political negotiation."²³² The radium girls are more than just a case study; they were a catalyst for recognition and reform of the impact of industrialization and corporatism on individuals and society. Industrialization had gripped much of the

²³⁰ Ibid, 68.

²³¹ Clark, *Radium Girls*, 5.

²³² Ibid, 3.

world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the tangled relationship between factory, worker, business, and government was only beginning to be uncovered. The case of the Radium Girls was the first instance of industrial health reform to gain public recognition and to begin to turn the tide of reckless business practices. Changes have been slow, particularly for women in the workforce, and industrial health is still a significant concern. Even today, approximately 100,000 Americans die each year from occupational diseases.²³³ The battle continues. For the Radium Girls, it was not just a fight for justice, but also for recognition and acceptance in the face of powerful men publicly denying their claims. Many lost heart. Many lost their lives. When D.W. Gregory portrays Grace's solitary battle in *Radium Girls*, she emphasizes the poignant fragility of life in these crucial historical events, how progress often exacts a steep and lonely price, often at the expense of the disabled.

Grace's aloneness is made all the more palpable in the final scene of the play during which Grace sits at Kathryn's grave, spreading flowers and talking of watercolor paints. The scene at the grave recalls images from the previous scene with Kathryn in the hospital, with Grace sitting at her side and offering comfort. Grace is nearing the end of her own life and at this point is most likely unable to walk. She does not move from this position in the final scene. It is a scene that powerfully reveals how truly lonely the battle for justice is, with many casualties left along the way. And yet, this final moment also raises an important question about why Gregory chose not to highlight Grace's physical condition. We know it is near the end of Grace's life, and we know the physical toll that radium poisoning takes on bodies, so why leave Grace motionless on the ground without

²³³ Ibid, 11.

any other visible acknowledgement of a wheel chair or impaired mobility or any sense of physical debilities? It is possible to read this image as an authorial oversight or a problematic marginalization of disabled bodies being whitewashed and minimized. On the contrary, these final moments, I believe, demonstrate that the lack of “visible disability” being marked on Grace’s body is a manifestation of a cultural able-bodied gaze represented by US Radium Corp. President Arthur Roeder. Roeder has returned to the grave site with his now-grown daughter, some fifteen years after the case was settled. He and Grace exist in the same space in different times when he finally has his moment of realization in the last line of the play. “Try as I might, Harriet, try as I might – I cannot remember their faces. (*The irony strikes him.*) I never saw their faces.”²³⁴ He could not bring himself to look at the girls in the court room, when their marked bodies were placed on full display before him and the law, and now he cannot remember the faces that continue to haunt him. Roeder’s realization that persons with disabilities have their own lives and subjectivities comes too late for the girls in the play and is a potent reminder of the power of collective cultural denial that de-humanizes individuals with disabilities, rendering them invisible.

Though the battle for justice is lonely, the war is filled with onlookers and opportunists looking to make a buck. While Gregory represents Grace’s lonely challenge to the medical hegemony on the interpretation and ‘care’ of bodies, she visibly spotlights the speculators and Johnny-come-latelys that try to capitalize on the hype and sensation of the story. The newspapers are not the only ones trying to make a buck riding upon the girls’ crumbling backs; many people and institutions can capitalize on what Jasbir K.

²³⁴ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 110.

Puar calls the “profitability of debility.”²³⁵ During the frenetic opening of act two, with the public prattling on about the case and what they would do with the money, Grace Fryer makes her first public appearance, mediated by the news media, as a plaintiff in the case for the explicit purpose of stirring up public sympathy.

(Grace appears, walking with a cane.)

GRACE. I’d use it to pay my medical bills. *(Reaction from CROWD.)* And pay off the second mortgage on our house. The one my father took out to pay for my last operation. *(Reactions of sympathy.)*

SOB SISTER. Pretty Grace Fryer sits at home.

REPORTER. ...suffering bravely through this entire ordeal.

SOB SISTER. ...struggling valiantly to keep up her flagging spirits—

REPORTER. ...for the sake of her family and her friends.

GRACE. It hurts to smile. But I try to smile. I know if I don’t smile—I’ll go crazy. *(Approval from the CROWD.)*²³⁶

This sequence appears at first glance to be a problematic appropriation of disability images to evoke public sympathy. What makes this exchange remarkable is that the audience gets to see the “behind the scenes” moments that take place before and after this public interchange, revealing that it is in fact a rehearsed and planned performance. At the very end of act one, Grace agrees to fight publically to shame the company into giving in to the girls’ demands for compensation and justice. Wiley claims, here and elsewhere in the play, that “public sympathy” is both their strongest weapon for justice and the engine of social reform.²³⁷ The moment after Grace’s first public appearance, Gregory utilizes a crucial stage direction signifying that “Wiley congratulates Grace” as the crowds disperse, giving approval for the stylized performance of being pitiful and marking it as a performance. Even Grace’s allies are now putting her and her disability on

²³⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, “The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18 no.1 (2011): 153.

²³⁶ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 60.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, 63.

stylized display with a cane, enfreaking her even more, towards the goal of social justice. Alison Kafer, in her discussion of disability images on billboards, notes that “We need to recognize and challenge this strategic deployment of disability, acknowledging that rhetorics of disability acceptance and inclusion can be used to decidedly un-crip ends.”²³⁸ Is Grace’s performance of tragic pathos an example of Wiley’s exploitation of disability for the benefit of social reform? Like the models for medical textbook photographs, Grace is not being paid for her performance, at least not monetarily and in the present. Is it a necessary ruse for the greater good? Who pays the price of progress? Though Wiley genuinely wants to help Grace and hold the U.S. Radium Corporation accountable for their negligence, her methods seem to implicitly condone the exploitation of disabled bodies. To think in contemporary terms, if Wiley had hired an actor to play the same part that Grace played in this public presentation, that actor would have been paid. When using actual people with actual disabilities for a media campaign on their behalf, the same performance is not compensated or seen as labor. The irony is profound: if one of the goals is to help you, then you do not get paid; if you have nothing to do with the campaign, you would get paid.²³⁹

At this point it may be pertinent to explore the extent to which the Radium Girls should be considered disabled subjects. Does chronic illness fall under the umbrella of Disability? Do they start out sick and then become disabled at a certain point? Is disability itself just a social construct that is more about institutions and obstacles than bodies and capacities? Though such an important debate about the nature and

²³⁸ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 97.

²³⁹ While beyond the scope of this project, exploring and exposing such ironies is a critical task in the larger worlds of disability employment, performance, and the media.

significance of disability and chronic illness is beyond the scope of this essay, many scholars are thoughtfully engaging in how to adequately and appropriately theorize and understand disability and what it means in an evolving contemporary world.²⁴⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, it is helpful to resituate notions of disability away from the binary of disabled vs. non-disabled or able-bodied vs. disabled. Jasbir K. Puar reframes disability more as a spectrum or “an interdependent relationship between bodily capacity and bodily debility.”²⁴¹ She uses the concept of “slow death” in a robust theorization of debility and queer sexuality that exposes the capitalist ramifications of non-normative bodies in a contemporary context:

Capacity and debility are seeming opposites generated by increasingly demanding neoliberal formulations of health, agency, and choice [that generate] population aggregates. Those “folded” into life are seen as more capacious or on the side of capacity, while those targeted for premature or slow death are figured as debility. Such an analysis re-poses the questions: which bodies are made to pay for “progress”? Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot?²⁴²

From this perspective, the ramifications for the Radium Girls are significant. Are their lives and bodies the cost of scientific progress and knowledge? Can their decaying bodies be made useful to society? Their “slow death” is certainly useful to the media industry that is always intervening to get exclusive rights and sell papers. Debility can be very profitable to capitalism, and so is the demand to “recover” from or overcome it.²⁴³ It is no coincidence that Ms. Wiley, who helps spearhead Grace’s public campaign, is the executive director of the New Jersey Consumer’s League. She says in her speech near the

²⁴⁰ For more on this debate, see the literature review in Chapter 1.

²⁴¹ Puar, “Getting Better,” 149.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 154.

end of the first act, “We do not have to accept injustice. We can use our powers as consumers to influence the practices of those who would wish to profit from our patronage.”²⁴⁴ In *Radium Girls*, this slow death and the desire to recover from it are closely related to ideas of sympathy, consumerism, conspicuous contribution, and charity.

Charity

The use of sympathy in the public sphere has a troubling history with regard to disability. Disability historian and activist Paul Longmore critiques the uniquely American institution of the charity telethon to expose the problematic and marginalizing foundations that support this ritual. Using the example of the Muscular Dystrophy Association’s annual Labor Day telethon hosted by Jerry Lewis, Longmore argues that the values of American capitalistic individualism are deeply entrenched in the telethon. The relentless efforts of the telethon to fix (or fund the fixing of) disabled individuals serves to stigmatize and objectify people with disabilities as being less than fully American citizens. “Stigmatizing disabled people has been a means of avoidance for the American majority whose identities and status and validity have been built on the myth of personal autonomy.”²⁴⁵ The cost of social aid thus becomes social invalidation.

Like the telethons, Grace’s public appearances are “dramatizing compassion towards those socially invalidated by disability or disease.”²⁴⁶ For charity or any form of social aid to function in or for American society, it must be public and it must be

²⁴⁴ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 54.

²⁴⁵ Paul Longmore, “Conspicuous Contribution,” 153.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

conspicuous, what Longmore calls conspicuous contribution.²⁴⁷ However, to elicit generosity and conspicuous giving from tight-fisted benefactors, their wallets must be wooed open with public sympathy, showing off pathetic images of “less fortunate ones” to arouse pity. Recall Grace’s first public appearance with the cane, after which she is congratulated by Wiley for her sympathy-inducing performance. Likewise, people with disabilities are infantilized and treated as props to help raise funds in this new kind of enfreakment. In this process, non-disabled Americans use the telethon as a ritual to reassure its individual and collective self of “its moral health” by avoiding materialistic narcissism.²⁴⁸ Conspicuous giving to the disadvantaged outsider is an antidote to personal and cultural feelings of selfishness in the able-bodied onlooker. The irony is that the act of charity turns the ‘less fortunate’ (in this case, the disabled) into “status enhancing commodities,” so that conspicuous giving not only counters consumerism but also serves as a conspicuous consumptive status.²⁴⁹ Public charity is the purchasing of social status by proving how humble and generous one is, all at the expense of infantilizing and marginalizing the disabled objects of this pity/charity. This same double-mindedness of public charity is happening in *Radium Girls*, though with much less humanitarian ends, begging the question: to what extent is Ms. Wiley’s work with Grace an act of conspicuous charity that serves as a purgative of the consumerist excesses of the New Jersey Consumer’s League?

²⁴⁷ Longmore contrasts “conspicuous contribution” with “conspicuous consumption,” the public display of wealth and consumerism that dominates so much of American culture and media. Despite its widespread appeal, conspicuous consumption is laden with the chains of greed and selfishness, so conspicuous contribution (charity) is needed to reaffirm that Americans are still good people and reify the social order.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 136.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 151.

While Grace's public campaign for justice is run by Ms. Wiley and the Consumer's League, the commercialism that is intertwined with conspicuous giving is also revealed by the public's response to the sick girls. As a result of Wiley's sympathy campaign, Grace and the other girls begin getting letters from all over the country. Gregory portrays three of these letters as isolated monologues. The first comes from an Elderly Widow who is "so sorry for your plight."²⁵⁰ Yet the widow, a believer in Christian Science, is really using her pity as an opportunity to proselytize. Next is a Venecine Salesman who offers the girls a life-time supply of his "wonder tonic made from all natural ingredients" in exchange for "the *exclusive rights* to use your pictures in our advertisements."²⁵¹ Finally, a Lovesick Cowboy sends his picture along with a marriage proposal, since "a girl like you has suffered so much—don't you think you deserve a few fleeting hours of happiness?"²⁵² It is telling that his letter is addressed to "Dear Girl" rather than to a specific name, as if the identity of the girl doesn't matter to him; any single and desperately debilitated female will do for a companion. The underlying theme is that we'll help you out as long as we get our beaks wet in the deal, too. Charity is always tinged with pity and these public, humanitarian gestures always have a catch: the giver needs to get something out of the deal as well, whether it is exclusive photo rights, a doting and grateful companion, or converts to one's faith.

The character of Arthur Roeder also has a complex relationship with charity that is much more closely related to the wage-labor system than the previous consumerist

²⁵⁰ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 63.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 64, emphasis in original.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 64.

examples. In a conversation with his wife, the Roeders discuss a man who is a “hard-luck case” that Arthur’s father had brought up in a previous conversation.

MRS. ROEDER: Four children at home. All under the age of six.

ROEDER: Let me guess—wife in the hospital with cancer.

MRS. ROEDER: Yes.

ROEDER: And the husband’s been laid off from, let’s see—the brickyard.

MRS. ROEDER: Yes!

ROEDER: Through no fault of his own.²⁵³

Roeder has clearly heard this “sob story” before. The conversation continues as they discuss ways they might help this man and how glad they are to be in their current economic situation and not his. Roeder reveals that the company is making record profits.

Then the conversation shifts.

ROEDER: Nothing to tell. Really. This is going to be our best year ever.

MRS. ROEDER: So it’s the prospect of success that you find so disheartening.

ROEDER: I’ll get my checkbook.

MRS. ROEDER: What for?

ROEDER: Your bricklayer.

MRS. ROEDER: Artie! He needs a job, not charity. What is it your father says? A working man needs to work. It wears—

ROEDER: (*overlapping*) It wears on his soul not to work. Well. If it’s a matter of his soul. That’s different. All right. I’ll have him talk to Dan.²⁵⁴

When Roeder realizes how conspicuous his success has become (or will become), he reaches for his checkbook to prove his moral wealth by giving this man a conspicuous charitable hand out. But Mrs. Roeder shifts the dynamic from charity to work. The focus on the “soul” and the need to work also draws on notions of capitalism and labor that permeate the play. Earlier in the play, Roeder is having a conversation in the board room

²⁵³ Ibid, 44.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 45-46.

about the company's hiring practices when they discover the news that girls are getting sick.

LEE: And some of them were sick when they got here. One girl you hired was a complete cripple. Couldn't even climb the stairs. Her father carried her up to the studio every morning.

ROEDER: It didn't make any difference to me how she got up the stairs – she was a fast worker and a very sweet little girl.

LEE: But she was in poor health.

ROEDER: She needed the work. [...] And not just for the money. To feel productive. To have a purpose. That's what work does, Charlie. It gives us a purpose. I don't see any reason why we should stop hiring girls like that.

LEE: When they get sick and try to blame us for it – you might want to reconsider that policy.²⁵⁵

Part of the “American Dream” is to have a good job, to work on your own and support yourself independently of any charity or government welfare. One's personal value, even one's very soul, is dependent upon the *ability* to work and contribute to a wage-labor economy. Such values impact deeply on people with disabilities, who are statistically one of the most underemployed populations in the country. According to an economic news release by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics on June 11, 2014, only 17.6% of persons with disabilities were employed in 2013.²⁵⁶ On one level, this exchange between Lee and Roeder might be read as a demonstration that Roeder is a kind and just man who is willing to diversify the workforce in a time when workplace accessibility was decades away from entering the public imagination. However, considering this exchange in the fuller context of the characterizations that Gregory has drawn in the play, it works to trouble notions of “compassion” and capacity within American economic politics. Is Roeder compassionate or condescending? Principled or unscrupulous? Idealistic or

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 34.

²⁵⁶ U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>.

ignorant? The boundaries are murky. On one hand, Roeder represents the oppressive powers of American capitalism; but on the other hand, he represents a family man who deeply values the “American Dream,” even if he can’t see its flaws and inherent ableism. Why does Roeder offer work to a girl who is a “complete cripple” and a down-on-his-luck bricklayer, but not to the Radium Girls after they have left the factory due to their worsening illness? Gregory does not leave audiences with easy answers about who we are within the system, and yet, she continues to problematize notions of the system itself.

Queer/Crip

It is worth noting that none of the letters mentioned earlier or acts of ‘charity’ towards the girls were offers of work. The girls had quit their jobs at the radium plant by this time, but there is no assumption that a woman would find any fulfillment in the labor force, which was seen as a man’s world. Roeder thinks his bricklayer is losing his soul without a job, but girls in the work force are merely helpers in the war effort, or perhaps a subtle sign of defiance of the social order. In his essay “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Experience,” Robert McRuer considers what might be gained by understanding Adrienne Rich’s critique of compulsory heterosexuality as a key concept in disability studies.²⁵⁷ McRuer discusses how able-bodiedness and heteronormativity are both always and already interwoven as they are being culturally enforced as compulsory. “Able-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are linked in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility.”²⁵⁸ In *Radium Girls*, Gregory also explores the

²⁵⁷ Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 383.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 386.

interrelatedness of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity, particularly in the relationships of Grace Fryer and her fiancé Tom Kreider.

When the loving couple is first introduced, Gregory reveals a typical heteronormative relationship with typical dreams of the future. When Grace playfully asks, “Wouldn’t ya rather have a girlfriend who works in a bank?” Tom replies, hoping for a kiss, “Not as much as I’d like to have a wife who don’t work anywhere.”²⁵⁹ Tom expects the stereotypical husband-wife relationship in which the woman stays home to raise children and manage the house. Yet Gregory provides a very subtle pushback against the heteronormativity in Grace’s desire to paint. Grace even goes so far as to question whether Tom would allow her the pleasure of painting.

GRACE: Wait’ll you come home some night all wore out [...] all cranky and late besides. Hungry—wantin’ yer dinner. And there I am, with my easel set up in the kitchen, and a drop cloth on the floor, my paints all over the table. And yer dinner nowhere in sight. What would ya say then?”

TOM: Better be a picture of me yer paintin’.

GRACE: I know what ya’d say. Where’s my dinner? That’s what ya’d say! Where’s my dinner.

TOM: Well, sure. But I’d still admire the paintin’. Just want to look at it on a full stomach is all. (*he gets his arms around her.*)²⁶⁰

Taken alone, Grace’s subtle challenge to the compulsion of Tom’s patriarchy and heteronormativity could hardly be taken as a queer critique, yet Gregory uses this moment as a launching point to explore not only Grace’s resistance to the status quo but also the way this heteronormative vision of the American Dream is deeply entangled with able-bodied privilege. At this point, Grace has left her job at the factory and is now working at a bank for less pay, although she has not yet begun experiencing the

²⁵⁹ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 29.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

symptoms of radium poisoning. She appears as fully able-bodied as a woman at this cultural moment can appear. But when Tom finally gets his kiss at the end of the scene, her mouth begins to show signs of pain. “The dentist wants to pull another tooth. In the back,” she says. “Well. What’s a tooth?” he replies.²⁶¹ The moment pain enters the equation, when Grace’s able-bodied potency experiences its first small challenge, Tom dismisses it completely. “What’s a tooth?” he says. He refuses to acknowledge that pain or non-conformity to the able-bodied ideal can be a part of the heterosexual equation, no matter how small.²⁶² Yet this subtle dismissal will grow to become more forceful as Grace’s disability grows throughout the course of the play.

In their first scene together, Tom is eager for a kiss from Grace, but he is still patient with her. Since her physical capacities are still robust, he is confident in their heteronormative future. However, as her health declines, Tom begins to engage in what McRuer calls “a panicked consolidation of hegemonic identities.”²⁶³ In the second act, as Grace is publically engaged in the legal battle, guided by Ms. Wiley, she is also now using a cane and a back brace. Her body is now visibly marked with disability. When Grace is visiting Kathryn in the hospital, the Sob Sister enters with a financial offer for exclusive photographic rights. At the height of her pitch, the Sob Sister says, “Everybody can sympathize with the plight of some poor sick girl facing certain death—with no hope of fulfillment in motherhood.” Gregory writes in the stage direction, “her words are like a

²⁶¹ Ibid, 32.

²⁶² Tom’s remark also has an air of misogyny to it, perhaps implying that Grace is being some form of “hysterical” rather than ill or in real pain.

²⁶³ McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness,” 387.

slap across the face.”²⁶⁴ The Sob Sister’s offer emphasizes what she sees as the inextricable relationship between ability and sexuality, that disability disqualifies a woman from motherhood. She also assumes that motherhood itself is a kind of universal fulfillment machine for all women. Michel Desjardins, in an essay about disability and forced sterilization, calls childlessness a “nonstandard sexual destiny.”²⁶⁵ The Sob Sister’s statement, which would probably sound at home on some contemporary telethon, reveals the way her cultural perspective both infantilizes and queers disabled identity, assuming the connection of disability to barrenness, poverty, and asexuality in one fell swoop. Since Grace is sick and disabled, the Sob Sister argues, she can no longer be associated with “standard” sexuality and the heteronormative practices of marriage and motherhood, thus she has become queer. Grace immediately asks her to leave; but interestingly, the following line is from Tom. “Grace. At least think about it.”²⁶⁶

Analyzing this exchange with a queer/disabled perspective, what does Tom want her to think about? Merely taking the money? Or the possibility that her growing disability has a queering force that is disenfranchising her from the culturally safe boundaries of heteronormativity? Is Tom being supportive or perhaps in some way threatening her to accept the compulsory nature of ablebodiedness and heteronormativity? The audience is left to ponder.

Late in the play, Tom becomes more insistent that Grace settle with the company, give up the fight, and get back to her life with him. In a scene where Grace is looking at

²⁶⁴ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 68.

²⁶⁵ Michel Desjardins, “The Sexualized Body of the Child: Parents and the Politics of Voluntary Sterilization of People Labeled Intellectually Disabled,” in *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 81.

²⁶⁶ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 69.

dresses, a symbol of traditional femininity, she and Tom begin to argue over how the litigation is progressing. Grace begins venting her anger towards the proceedings and the difficulties she is having when Tom finally steps in and speaks his mind.

TOM: I thought the idea was ya'd get some money to settle your debts—
get a better doctor—and we'd get on with things.

GRACE: Get on with things.

TOM: You're still wearin' my ring. (*His words yank her out of her tirade.*)²⁶⁷

As her disability becomes more public, Tom feels more and more need to enforce their heteronormative relationship, and “get on with things.” Grace’s mother also tries to force her to settle, going as far as to bringing the corporate lawyer over with a contract for Grace to sign. It is as if when Grace gets more involved in the case, her self-identification with disability grows and the need to stop her queerness increases: quit acting so nonstandard and queer, drop the case, get married, and be “normal.” In both cases (Tom and her mother), Grace refuses. When Tom points out that she’s still wearing his ring, she tries to return it to him. On one level, this gesture could be read as a problematic acceptance of the confluence of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness: since Grace is disabled, they can never have a ‘real’ or ‘normal’ marriage, so she will set him free to find a more suitable match. Yet this reading fails to account for Tom’s persistent denial of the reality of Grace’s disability. He says to her:

TOM: Grace. I can't think about that. I just want for us to be together now. I want to come home to you at night. To my wife—my home. I'm too old to be living like this—this, in-between life. I promise, Grace. I'll do whatever it takes to make it easy for you. (*A silence. Grace takes off her ring and holds it out to him.*)²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 85.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 86.

Tom is clear that this situation is only about what he wants: *his* wife, *his* home, *he'll* make things easy for her. When reading this exchange from a disability studies perspective, Grace is rejecting Tom for his denial of her disabled “in-between life.” His desire for marriage has become a “panicked consolidation” of his own identity, an attempt to shore up his own heteronormative masculinity by denying the queerness of her physical condition. Disability is thus a queer threat to the institution of marriage and the neoliberal commercialism – paying for the wedding, buying a house, paying bills, raising children (all discussed by Tom and Grace throughout the play) – encompassed therein. And yet, the pervasive power of American commercialism in *Radium Girls* is not limited to the enforcement of heteronormative and able-bodied relationships, nor is it limited to biological bodies and human capacities; but rather it also extends more widely into the material interactions of matter, bodies, and environment.

Toxic Actors

Historically, in the early twentieth century, radium was seen as a miracle cure-all. In the play, Madame Curie claims, “Yes, yes. Cure for ze cancer! Zat is so. It has already cured all kinds of ze cancer.”²⁶⁹ After its discovery, radium was commercially popularized and was used in hundreds of quack remedies and natural tonics from radioactive water to cigarettes to suppositories and bath salts.²⁷⁰ A notable example of these quack cures receives some prominent product placement in the play. Radithor was a famous patent medicine that was manufactured in Orange, NJ at the same time as the

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 17.

²⁷⁰ For more about radium quack cures, consult the Oak Ridge Associated Universities’ Quack Cures Collection at <http://www.ornl.gov/ptp/collection/quackcures/quackcures.htm> and Radium Historical Items catalogue at <http://pbadupws.nrc.gov/docs/ML1008/ML100840118.pdf> (accessed 4-30-2014). See also Paul Frame’s “Radioactive Curative Devices and Spas.”

events of the play. Its inventor, William J. A. Bailey, makes an appearance in the play giving out free samples and basking in the media attention of his business successes that comes off to contemporary audiences more like an infomercial than a news reel.

BAILEY: Radioactivity is one of the most remarkable agents in medical science. I drink Radithor myself and I can vouch for its power.

MARTLAND: A bottle a day?

REPORTER: At a dollar a bottle?

MRS. MICHAELS: Worth every penny! [...]

BAILEY: Radithor! It is perpetual sunshine!

REPORTER: And a perpetual money machine for its inventor.

SOB SISTER: Is there no end to what science can do?²⁷¹

The character of Dr. Martland is the county medical examiner who gets caught up in the spiraling frenzy of the marketing machine, and the character Mrs. Michaels gives her testimonial as to the potency of this miracle elixir. In the play, Gregory spotlights the marketing frenzies, not just the media frenzy, that surrounded radium as well as the trial and the radium girls. As noted above, Bailey calls the radium “one of the most remarkable agents in medical science.” This idea of the agency of the radium itself can provide an interesting avenue to explore within the play and within the wider fields of science studies and disability studies.

Radithor famously contributed to the death of the wealthy, New England socialite Eben Byers in 1932. Ron Winslow’s headline for his article recounting the event in the August 1, 1990 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* was “The Radium Water Worked Fine Until His Jaw Came Off.” In the play, even the antagonist Arthur Roeder, president of U.S. Radium Corporation, is convinced of the healing powers of radium, and he unquestioningly consumes Radithor daily with his wife. “Diane! I have documents—I have articles—People with tumors the size of baseballs. Radium therapy—the tumors

²⁷¹ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 37-38.

disappear. Diane. [...] We save lives. We make lives better—mild radium therapy—invigorates. You can't really think I'm a liar."²⁷² Roeder's trust and naïveté, shared by the real life Eben Byers, a wealthy New England socialite who died from ingestion of radium tonic, is symptomatic of a world view that relegates physical matter to mere objects, without agency or action, a product to be manufactured, sold, exploited, and utilized. But radium will not remain a passive object to be manipulated. Radium is an actor that responds.

In Mel Chen's groundbreaking 2012 book, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, she re-theorizes notions of animacy as an "often racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, whether in language, rhetoric, or imagery."²⁷³ Chen's work brings notions of agency and sentience to nonlife as well as life. "Animacy is built on the recognition that abstract concepts, inanimate objects, and things in between can be queered and racialized without human bodies present, quite beyond questions of personification."²⁷⁴ From this perspective, inanimate atoms are both actants and actors with which human beings must reckon.

In this way, radium itself becomes an actor in the play. The opening scene of the young girls giggling and painting their teeth and faces with radioactive paint takes on new meaning if one considers the radium-laced paint to have its own animacy. As a joke, the girls turn off the lights to scare their supervisor, and "their faces [glow] like jack-o'-

²⁷² Ibid, 78.

²⁷³ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

²⁷⁴ Mel Y. Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2-3 (2011): 265.

lanterns in the dark. A scream, laughter, and the lights go up again.”²⁷⁵ No longer just a childish school girl prank, the scene takes a much more sinister tone. Many audiences are probably already primed for this response, if they have any knowledge of the story or the nature of radioactive material. In a sense, Gregory is already capitalizing on the theatricality of animacy. In the theatre, objects and bodies tend to be endowed with meaning and action that always have a forward motion. The opening scene with the painted faces not only characterizes the girls and their relationships, it also propels the play forward towards the conclusion. The presence of the toxic radium necessarily influences that trajectory and adds multiple shards of meaning to the action. Moving from the metaphor of toxic to the actual toxic creates “rapidly multiplying meanings.”²⁷⁶ Like the radium-laced paint in the first scene, the Radithor that the Roeders consume on stage thus becomes a new character, an actor with significant impact on the outcome of the story and the lives of the other players.

Chen says that “Toxicity straddles boundaries of ‘life’ and ‘nonlife,’ as well as the literal bounds of bodies, in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lively or deadly subjects.”²⁷⁷ While Chen’s theorization of toxicity is robust, she relies on a boundaried binary concept of living and non-living in her theory of toxicity. Although Tom Krieder tries to deny the “in-between life” of Grace’s radioactive debility in the play, his words betray an unconscious recognition that radioactive disability seems to defy the life-nonlife binary in several crucial, and theatrical, ways.

²⁷⁵ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 13.

²⁷⁶ Chen, “Toxic Animacies,” 266.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid* 279.

Like many great characters from the history of theatre, radioactive atoms are unstable and project parts of themselves outwards, projections that can create dramatic chain reactions. Radioactive atoms have a strong objective of attaining stability. Like the minds of these great characters created from words on a page, radioactive atoms have a kind of life of their own beyond that which created them that attracts analysis to more fully understand the mysterious inner workings deep inside them. Perhaps a fuller account of radioactivity could problematize the life-nonlife binary, illuminate *Radium Girls* and other dramatic forms, and also enrich our notions of lives, non-lives, and half-lives, of ability and disability.

In an article in the journal *Nature*, J. Rondo described radium as an example of the “long-lived bone-seeking radio-elements.”²⁷⁸ Rondo’s 1969 meta-analysis gathered data from multiple studies from the 1950s and earlier that tried to describe the “biological half life” of radium, i.e., how long it takes half of the radium to leave the human body once it has been taken in. While radium’s radioactive half-life is well known (about 1601 years), its biological half-life is much less well identified, somewhere around 15-28 years.²⁷⁹ What is most interesting about these facts is not the numbers, but the language that science uses to describe the element. Radioactive elements have “life” (or at least “half-life”) as part of their definitive natures. This half-living nature of radioactive matter

²⁷⁸ J. Rondo, “Long Term Retention of Radium in Man,” *Nature* 221 no. 5185 (15 March 1969): 1059.

²⁷⁹ Radioactive half-life refers to the amount of time it takes for half of the atoms in a given sample of radioactive material to undergo nuclear decay. So, after one half-life of time, there will be 50% of the original amount of radioactive material remaining; after two half-lives of time there will be 25% less; after three, 12.5%; and so on. To give some perspective on the activity of radium, although its half-life is 1601 years, radium is millions of times more radioactive than uranium-238, whose half-life is about 4.5 billion years.

generally, and radium in particular, complicates conceptions of life and non-life that goes beyond biology and chemistry and raises significant ontological questions.

Many news articles at the time represented in the play referred to (or spectacularized) the radium girls as “The Living Dead.” Taking up a third of the page above a photo of a frail woman being comforted by other women, the headline of the February 11, 1938 edition of the *Chicago Daily Times* reads “‘Living Death’ Quiz at Bedside.”²⁸⁰ These girls are not dead yet, but they are no longer fully living. In the play, the radium girls become associated with death. “That girl is still staring at me,” Roeder says at the trial. “She looks like death, Edward.” To which his lawyer Edward Markley replies, “They all look like death, Arthur.”²⁸¹ Even the Sob Sister, who usually pulls at the public’s sentimental heart strings, can’t help having a moment of glee at how many papers she will sell because of the girls’ ultimate demise.

REPORTER: Radium Girls Go to Court Today!

SOB SISTER: Radium Girls Knock at the Doors of Justice! Will they be heard?

REPORTER: These poor, injured girls face pain!

SOB SISTER: Disfigurement!

REPORTER: Ruin!

SOB SISTER: (*cheerfully*) And death! [...] Read it in the Graphic! We care. Because you care.²⁸²

As described above, radium is a “bone-seeking” element, due in part to its chemical similarities with calcium. This is why the radium girls’ symptoms started in the mouth and jaw, since they pointed their paint brushes on their lips. When introduced to a

²⁸⁰ A few years after the Radium Girls scandal in New Jersey broke out, another radium dial painting plant in Ottawa Illinois begin experiencing the same symptoms of radium poisoning. This newspaper article is in reference to the radium girls from Ottawa, but the comparison is the same.

²⁸¹ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 105.

²⁸² *Ibid*, 75-76.

biological system, radium becomes an actor with two objectives: to seek bone and settle there, and to seek nuclear stability by emitting alpha particles and gamma rays.²⁸³

Ironically, just as life is made less-living by the addition of the half-life agency of radium, death is made more “lifelike” as a result of the same. In *Radium Girls*, when the medical examiner re-examined the remains of Amelia Maggia, the first radium girl to die, the body (particularly the lower and upper jaws and the lumbar vertebrae) was found to be highly radioactive with no evidence of syphilis, initially said to be the cause of death. The Sob Sister and Reporter jump in immediately: “Body is Radioactive!” “Bones of Dead Girl Kick Off Gamma Rays!”²⁸⁴ Even in death, the radium still lives. Conjuring images of the Valley of Dry Bones from Ezekiel chapter 37, the radium-infused bones are still kicking off gamma rays. It is as if the toxicity of the radium prevents life from being *just* life, and death from being *just* death. It will always be more than the binary of life and nonlife. Similarly, as Tom says in regard to Grace’s growing debility, it is an “in-between life.” People with disabilities are often viewed as “less than” or lacking some semblance of “normalcy” or “wholeness”, a kind of half-life to be anxious about. But what if, instead of this ableist perception, one thought of the “half-life” of disability in this more transcendent sense of an agency that brings something more to one’s existence, something that would not be possible or conceivable without the intersection of life and half-life, of ability with disability, for there is always an intermingling of ability with disability along the spectrum of our existence.

²⁸³ Alpha particles, which are ionized helium nuclei (two protons and two neutrons), have limited penetrative ability and do not pose a danger to humans unless the alpha-emitter is ingested. Gamma rays, however, are profoundly energetic and can penetrate deep into the body, altering the very DNA of cells. For the Radium Girls, the bone-seeking qualities of the element probably caused illness, debility, and death much faster than the cancerous radiation effects they would have developed had they lived long enough.

²⁸⁴ Gregory, *Radium Girls*, 82.

There is something about the interaction of the agency of radioactivity and the agency of biological bodies that changes the very nature of materiality, agency, and life itself. The merging of life with half-life brings about an association with non-life, while conversely, the blending of death with half-life evokes a kind of liveliness. Stacy Alaimo's theory of "trans-corporeality" emphasizes the interconnectedness of human bodies with the more-than-human world. Trans-corporeality looks at the "flows of substances" and theorizes "the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors."²⁸⁵ Using this hermeneutic approach can "account for the ways in which nature, the environment, and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices," thus necessitating broader ways of thinking about the world, bodies, environments, and materiality.²⁸⁶ Thinking this way, *Radium Girls* becomes a potent example of trans-corporeal space, "in which the body can never be disentangled from the material world."²⁸⁷ The simple cause-and-effect approach to understanding the debilitating effects of radium poisoning begins to break down in favor of a more inclusive understanding of intra-acting agencies. Thus, the disabilities of the radium girls are no longer understood as additions to or deletions from a 'whole' or 'normal' body. Rather, bodies and lives exist on a spectrum possessing various degrees of half-life that is always already relational, a kind of "intra-active becoming" that is

²⁸⁵ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 9, 2.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8. This concept also connects with the exploration of the river from the chapter 4 discussion of *The Good Daughter*.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

“always the very substance of ourselves.”²⁸⁸ Thus, Gregory’s depiction of Grace Fryer is not so much an image of the progression of a disabled object, but rather she is an image of a new way of understanding bodies, abilities, and the intra/inter-actions of the material world.

In terms of theatrical spaces, *Radium Girls* in performance further illuminates the complex web of intra-activity between matter and biological bodies. Performers and audience share the same space, breathing the same air and feeling the same sound wave vibrations. Slight variations on these vibrations, neurologically interpreted as timbre and pitch modulations, contribute to an emotional performance can combine with the photons reflected off an actor and generate emotional and intellectual changes in the audience, which can then set up a feedback loop with the performer who then “feeds” off the live audience’s energy and attentive focus, all mediated by these material environmental agents. Temperature, which is just the average kinetic energy of the environmental molecules, has a profound impact on audience reception, as anyone who has sat through a show where the heat was turned up a little too high can attest. And of course, the more bodies that are in a confined space like a theatre, the more body heat generated and the higher the ambient temperature. Environment and bodies, actors and audiences, are always already intra-acting in theatrical spaces, changing each other in palpable and interactive ways that are unique to live performance. Thus the theatre itself is a kind of trans-corporeal, intra-active half-life that connects and impacts people in ways that could not have been otherwise conceived. By focusing on *Radium Girls* as a trans-corporeal space in performance, one could tease out the nuances of toxic, radioactive animacies

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 4. Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality is based on Barad’s concept of “intra-active becoming” (i.e. things do not precede their relations but are always already relational).

while engaging with trans-corporeal spaces both within the world of the play and the world of the play's performance.

Conclusion

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, "Disability studies reminds us that all bodies are shaped by their environments from the moment of conception. We transform constantly in response to our surroundings and register history on our bodies. The changes that occur when our body encounters the world are what we call disability."²⁸⁹ If this radical redefinition is so, if disability is the change that occurs when bodies encounter the world, then scholars of theatre and performance have a particularly potent (if underutilized) critical ally in disability studies for examining performances and performance texts. In the case of this essay, by treating radium itself as both actor and agency in the play *Radium Girls*, we can engage in what Stacy Alaimo might call a posthuman environmental ethics that is "not circumscribed by the human but is instead accountable to a material world that is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others."²⁹⁰ Contemporary critical thought is well aware of the power and agency ascribed to non-living or abstract entities such as class, gender, economics, and socio-politics. However, this exploration of *Radium Girls* demonstrates that accounting for the agency and animacy of material entities as well as bodies and abilities and social forces can perhaps transform the way we see our intra-acting bodies in the world, and the world in our bodies. Using this Disability perspective can transform

²⁸⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability and Representation," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005), 524.

²⁹⁰ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 158.

how we think about and approach theatrical spaces, not just in terms of accessibility and access, but in terms of how bodies and spaces are always already intra-acting on each other. The in-between half-lives of disability always intra-act with environments, other bodies, and social forces in ways that can bring new insight to theatre and performance studies, disability studies, and other theories of materiality.

CHAPTER 6 – Conclusions: Interdependent Subjectivities, Disability, and Agency

When I started this research project, I set out to accomplish two primary goals. 1) To demonstrate the power and utility of Disability Studies as an analytic lens for engaging with dramatic literature, demonstrating a variety of approaches that can help unpack the power of drama to enlighten and provoke. 2) To establish D.W. Gregory as a powerful voice and an up-and-coming playwright who is challenging dramatic conventions and creating important new works that can enlighten and provoke. A guiding theme to this dual endeavor was the notion of subjectivity in various aspects: individual agency, caring interdependence, and corporeal variation and half-life. How do these new notions of personhood relate to traditional understandings of ‘wholeness’ as freedom from lack? How can theatre artists and playwrights be empowering and generative in the way they craft their characters and their stories? How can disability help us reconsider and create new paradigms for understanding personhood in a more inclusive manner? By analyzing these three plays, I wanted to explore these questions while teasing out the provocative and empowering ways that D.W. Gregory represents disability on stage.

Throughout history, traditional theatre has always contained representations of disability. Yet these variations on bodies and minds tended to underline symbolic notions of innocence or infamy, marking characters as victims or villains in service to the plot. These traditional representations emphasize that disability is *lack*, that it sets a person apart from the “normal” in some profound way. Oedipus lacks the ability to see the truth that he is his father’s killer. Richard III lacks moral rectitude. Laura Wingfield lacks the ability to overcome her shyness and marry the gentleman caller. These shortcomings in

character are made physically manifest through a metaphoric use of disability. These representations of disability reinforce and are perhaps generative of cultural notions that marginalize disability due to its lack of adherence to socially enforced norms. Yet these notions of social or physical “norms” only exist and are predicate upon the exclusion of the “other.” In this way, there can be no freedom from lack if “lack” did not exist in the first place. In this way, disability is a precursor to normalcy, even this exclusionary and tyrannous understanding of normalcy. With out disability, the very notion of “able-bodied” could not exist; they ideas are interdependent in their very nature. Thus the traditional understandings of disability (moral, medical) over and against ‘normalcy’ begin to cave in upon themselves under the weight of closer inspection. A different understanding of personal identity and physical dis/abilities becomes necessary to avoid self-contradiction and to be more generative of the notions of subjectivity.

D.W. Gregory, by her own admission, never sought out to join the vanguard of theatre artists who are overtly changing the way that variations in bodies and minds are represented on stage. Yet I believe that she has become one of the strongest and most empowering voices in American theatre today. Growing up, Gregory lived in a crowded, Roman Catholic household that was a significant influence on the way she experienced the world as a young girl, and on the way she experienced being a young girl in the world. She describes her self-concept as a child in terms of the Saints:

My favorite saint at the time was St. Francis of Assisi. I imagined myself dressed in burlap, following him around Italy, birds alighting on my head. But being The Wrong Sex, I could not aspire to that kind of sainthood. My mother kept a picture book on the shelf—Lives of the Saints. The men were soldier, poets, teachers. Saint Sebastian run through with a dozen arrows. The women were virgins—all virgins with a capital V. That was the primary occupation of women, apparently—to be virgins and mothers at the same time. An impossible assignment. Early on I became aware of

my fatal flaw—that I was *The Wrong Sex*, and there was no recovering from this weakness. It did not matter what I did; I would never make up for it, and I would never be forgiven for it.²⁹¹

For Gregory, being born a woman was a lack that she could not fill. Though she did not experience physical disability the way that millions of people do, Gregory's gendered sense of identity was intrinsically interwoven with notions of weakness and lack. It was part of how she viewed the world. This idea – that who we are as a person includes our weaknesses, our differences, our deficiencies, our dependencies – is a profoundly subversive idea that is generative of new ways of being and representing a role; it can also be found throughout Gregory's plays. This subversively inclusive understanding of interdependence vibrates within the plays discussed here and can serve as a model for representations of disability that embrace the realities of disabled lives without resorting to oppressively metaphorical modes, carving new paths for the ways that contemporary plays can be constructed.

Given her background and upbringing, it is perhaps not surprising that Gregory's gravitation towards characters with disabilities was unconscious or "accidental." *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls* are exemplary plays of this proclivity towards stories and characters that involve disability. Gregory says she has "a personal sense of being an outcast," and she "always had an intense need to make sense of things," which she thinks is perhaps why she was drawn to writing plays, and why I think she was drawn to writing the kinds of plays she does.²⁹² Despite its ubiquity in dramatic literature, disability has usually played a supporting role that tends to correlate with detrimental

²⁹¹ Email to the author, October 20, 2014. See appendix B for complete transcript.

²⁹² Ibid.

attitudes towards people living with disabilities. Gregory is part of an important force that is changing that tide.

In *Dirty Pictures*, Gregory paints the main character of Judy in complex ways that intersect with many cultural hierarchies. Judy is a woman, she is working class, she is disabled, and she becomes a sexual aggressor in her pursuit of Dan. Theatre-going audiences are not used to sexualized disabled women being portrayed on stage, and Judy does not fit the familiar victim or villain tropes that we have come to expect for disabled characters. Her limp is not a symbol of her depraved soul, nor is it a marker of her victimhood (although she is certainly a member of several culturally disempowered identity groups due to her gender, class, and physical embodiment). Judy's limp is simply (and complexly) a part of her life, but it is not a metaphor for any lack that prevents her from full subjectivity. Throughout the play, Judy rejects victimization and seeks personal empowerment, not trying to "overcome" her disability, but rather to see herself as a subjective agent, and by doing so perhaps to make others see her the same way. She does not have to "overcome" her disability, for it does not need overcoming at all. Dan's anxiety towards her disability is what hinders Judy from achieving her goal. As Gregory shows us, that cultural anxiety is well entrenched, but it can be addressed and dialogue is possible. Agency includes our messiness, our anomalies, our desires, our frustrations, and our interdependence upon others. As *Dirty Pictures* demonstrates, the theatrical task of subverting cultural anxiety towards does not have to be didactically politicized and is not to be applied simply to or by the marginalized; but rather it must embrace everyone, both Dan and Judy, oppressor and oppressed, and bring us all into the dangerous discourse together.

If *Dirty Pictures* explores notions disability from a more personal perspective, *The Good Daughter* explores those ideas from a more familial and community-oriented perspective. This play takes on traditional understandings of the American Dream and independence, exposing them as a fallacy that misunderstands what it means to be alive and in community with others. Ned has an overtly sexist view of life that regards all of his daughters as inadequate, and thus excluded from his version of the American Dream. Yet his perception is these inadequacies, and his attempt at controlling and protecting his daughters has the opposite of its intended effect. For Ned, disability is a lack of independence that is anti-American and thus something to be avoided at all costs. Paradoxically, the play exposes this fixation on independence to be a kind of ouroboros, the snake that consumes its own tail, devouring itself and revealing the absence of any foundation to this myth of American independence. Ned's quest to avoid dependency of any kind ultimately leads to his being consumed by the river. Gregory weaves a sad tale that not only deconstructs Ned's marginalizing and oppressive myth but also provides a more hopeful alternative. Cassie, who has rejected her father's sexist version of independence and tried to find her own independence, ultimately realizes that independence isn't fully possible, and she dies at her father's side, affirming in life and death that we are all inextricably interdependent. Disability and interdependency – which Ned believed were the fundamental excluders from participation in the American Dream – have become the *sine qua non* for true community and subjectivity. We are all inextricably interdependent, and the notion that dependency is grounds for marginalization and evidence of loss of subjectivity is not only a fallacy, but a rejection of the reality of the human condition and a pernicious perspective that can hurt everyone.

True subjectivity must include our dependencies, our caregivers, our care giving, and our disabilities of all shapes, sizes, and persuasions.

If *Dirty Pictures* reexamines disability and personal subjectivity, and *The Good Daughter* investigates communal and interdependent subjectivity, then *Radium Girls* can be thought to explore both the wider and the narrower edges: societal agency and material agency. The scope of disability theories that can be fruitfully applied to an analysis of *Radium Girls* is quite large, and the understanding of subjectivity reconsidered therein is equally broad. On one end of the spectrum, the play explores “enfreakment” as a social force enacted by the media and the medical industries, manipulating the public and the dial painters for profit. Yet, the freak show is more about ways of representing people than their bodies themselves, and as such melts into the ways that the labor force of early twentieth century America (and today) was intertwined with disability. The power of collective cultural and social denial can marginalize and de-humanize individuals with disabilities; their agency must be exploited and eliminated for the perceived wider social good of charity and benevolence. Socially, the concept of subjectivity must be enforced and appropriately doled out so that the able-bodied can reinforce their own systems of labor, identity, and even love. Essentially, the ableist paradigm insists that disability must be denied agency for the system to survive. *Radium Girls* exposes and challenges that paradigm.

On the other end of the spectrum is the idea that agency is related to and comes from the material and molecular interactions of matter. Thinking of radium itself as a toxic actor within the play opens up new ways of understanding lives and half-lives. The animacy of radioactive materials challenges the easy dichotomy of life and non-life, of

“whole” life and half-life. Traditional notions of life itself are being troubled by the existence of “The Living Dead Girls.” The presence of half-life is always generative and imbues more agency to whatever is associated with the half-life. By extension, disability, by means of its in-between-ness and generative “half-life” complicates the very meaning of life itself. Sub-atomic interactions and the materiality of disability thus transform the ontological nature of life and agency in ways that cannot be ignored. Clearly, using terms like “half-life” in relation to disability are precarious and possibly contain ableist overtones, but the generative notions that half-life is an enhancing power that creates more to one’s existence is worth exploring more deeply. Thinking through disability in this way demands that new ways of understanding personhood and agency be considered and generated, disrupting an oppressive and anxious paradigm of mythically independent ableism that must no longer hold ultimate sway.

The analyses that I have undertaken are admittedly broad in scope. There are a vast number of approaches to analyzing dramatic literature from perspectives that foreground disability and debility. I chose several different disability studies methods that I felt have best served the needs of the particular plays that I selected, but they in no way are meant to be touchstones of disability analysis or a limit to the possibilities that literary and dramatic critics may take. On the contrary, I hope that this project has opened up new doors for dramatic criticism, demonstrating a few possible ways that plays can be explored and the liberating, empowering potentials of using disability as an analytic tool for dramatic literature. As Ann Fox has said, Theatre Studies can be invigorated by “understanding disability representation in a more nuanced manner,” and “interpreting dramatic literature from a Disability Studies perspective is essential for critics, readers,

and audience members of all kinds.”²⁹³ This study takes up Fox’s call and moves forward in the exploration of contemporary drama from a Disability Studies perspective. My hope is that this project will further demonstrate the power and validity of such a critical approach for theatre scholars and encourage them to also take up the charge and go and do likewise, looking anew at texts and uncovering their own discoveries that show how the presence of disability in theatre can “invigorate how we understand and interpret drama.”²⁹⁴

Furthermore, taking these three plays as models, playwrights of all varieties can begin to craft new characters in new ways, characters with and without disabilities. Stories of disability do not need to be confined to the didacticism of message plays, and representations of diverse bodies and minds do not have to be limited to supporting symbols of innocence and infamy. Disability in dramatic literature has a deep history and the possibility of a vibrant future that can be empowering, challenging, and liberating. The question, “Does art reflect life or life reflect art?” can be most fruitfully answered quite simply: yes. Instead of philosophizing over the causality of societal attitudes and the representations of bodies, it can be more productive to explore their interrelatedness and how both can be changed for the better, creating a more inclusive and empowering understanding of what it means to be an interdependent agent in contemporary society. Interdependent subjectivity is not freedom from lack. Agency includes our personal leakiness, differences, and interdependence. Interdependent subjectivity includes our communities, our failures and successes. Interdependent subjectivity includes weakness

²⁹³ Fox, “Battles on the Body,” 1.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 2.

and strength, incompleteness and sufficiency, debility and ability. Interdependent subjectivity includes self and society, the half-lives and in-between-ness that are inextricably connected through the inter-action of environments, bodies, and communities. Interdependent subjectivity ultimately becomes possible only through disability.

APPENDIX A – Comprehensive List of Plays

The information below represents a comprehensive list of D.W Gregory's playwrighting activities that she is willing to divulge as of the time of this writing. The information below was compiled from the author's website (www.dwgregory.com) and her publishers' websites (noted below), accessed on August 4, 2014. Any missing details were filled in through email correspondence with Gregory in December 2014. As she is a living and working playwright, the list below is necessarily incomplete and still growing, with some unfinished works strategically omitted to make sure they can still be considered new plays when they do become finished. But this list contains at least what Gregory considers "the ones worth mentioning."²⁹⁵

The B-Word (2007) 1w (comic, short)

- A comic monologue about the power of a certain insult
- Originally produced by Kennedy Center Page to Stage Festival, 2007, directed by Dawn Naser.
- Published in *Best Women's Stage Monologues 1999* from Smith and Kraus
- Sage Theatre, Manhattan, 2009, directed by Carrie Simpson

Cabbage Hill (formerly **The Truth About Charlie**) (1994) (comedy, full length)

- Workshopped by Playwrights Theatre of Madison, NJ and the New Harmony Project.

²⁹⁵ Email with the author, December 11, 2014.

Dirty Pictures (2011) 2m 2w (comedy, full length)

- A bawdy comedy about four lives transformed by the discovery of 21 shocking photographs.
- Semi-finalist, Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, 2009
- Semi-finalist, Hot City Theatre Greenhouse Play Festival, 2011
- Individual Artist Award 2009, Montgomery County (MD) Arts and Humanities Council
- Developed in workshops and readings at the Playwrights Center Minneapolis, Theatre of the First Amendment, Boston Playwrights Theatre, New Jersey Rep, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre
- For mature audiences

Driven to Abstraction (1994) 2m 3w (drama, one-act)

- A time-bending journey in search of self.
- Winner of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Award for Best Student work, 1993
- For general audiences

The Five-Cent Girl (2012) 2m 1w (drama, short)

- An O. Henry-esque tale of love gone wrong, set at a seedy pub in an Irish American slum in Washington D.C. the spring of 1896.

- Commissioned and produced by Rorschach Theatre, Washington D.C. as part of its Klecksography Project 2012.
- Full script available at www.dwgregory.com

The Good Daughter (2003) 3m 3w (drama, full length)

- One man would tame a raging river, another his rebellious child. Neither can foresee the consequences. An epic story of love and defiance in World War I Missouri.
- For general audiences
- Nominee, Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 2003.
- Originally produced by New Jersey Repertory Co., directed by Jason King Jones.

The Good Girl is Gone (2007) 2-3m 3w (comedy, full length)

- A dark comedy that pokes at the bruised heart of the American family to examine the power of memory to torment and heal.
- For general audiences
- Published by Dramatic Publishing
- Fellow, Shenandoah International Playwrights Retreat 2001.
- Finalist, Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, 2000
- Originally produced at Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, directed by John Pietrowski
- Presented as part of the NYU/Tisch School of the Arts Hot Ink Festival, 2005

- Developed at The Shenandoah International Playwrights Retreat, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Repertory Co.
- Selections appear in *Best Stage Scenes 2000* and *Best Men's Stage Monologues 2000* from Smith & Kraus.

A Grand Design (2014) 2m 1w (drama, full length)

- When their new neighborhood becomes the target of a serial sniper, a young couple is forced to reconsider the tradeoffs they have made between security and satisfaction.
- Commissioned by New Jersey Rep. and Theatre J., Washington D.C.
- Developed through Theatre J's Locally Grown Festival.
- Finalist, Seven Devils 2014 Playwrights' Conference.
- For general audiences

The Grid (2007) (drama)

- Drama for young actors
- Commissioned and produced by Imagination Stage/BAPA, 2007

Miracle in Mudville (2004) 5-11m 13-17w (comedy, one-act)

- A comedy about time-traveling little leaguer, riffing off the poem *Casey at the Bat*.
- A play for youth and educational theatre with a large cast.
- Published by www.YouthPLAYS.com

- Commissioned and originally produced by Imagination Stage as part of its 2004 Speak Out on Stage Program

Molumby's Million (2003) 6m 1w doubling into 14 roles (satire, full length)

- Boxer Jack Dempsey takes center stage in this fast-paced satirical look at America's peculiar obsession with celebrity.
- For general audiences
- Originally produced by Iron Age Theatre Company, Philadelphia
- Finalist for the 2011 Barrymore Award (Independence Foundation Award) for Outstanding New Play by the Philadelphia Theatre Alliance.
- Semi-finalist, Fulton Opera House Play Competition, 2005
- National New Play Network Development Grant, 2004
- Individual Artist Award in Playwriting, 2005, Maryland State Arts Council.
- Finalist, Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, 2003
- Finalist, New Harmony Project, 2003
- Developed at the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, New Jersey Repertory Co., Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, and Theatre of the First Amendment.

October 1962 (2007) 1m 3w (comic drama, full length)

- A paroled killer's return to his home town creates havoc for a neighboring family already struggling with Cold War paranoia.
- For general audiences

- Originally produced by New Jersey Repertory Co., 2007, directed by Matthew Arbour
- Finalist, Bloomington Playwrights Project, 2001 Woodward/Newman Drama Award

Penny Candy (2005) 2m 7w (comedy, full length)

- A boy plays go-between and discovers the down side of deception in this romantic romp set in 1950s Appalachia.
- A play for family and youth audiences
- Published by Dramatic Publishing 2005
- Commissioned and originally produced by Imagination Stage as part of its 2005 Speak Out on Stage Program.

Radium Girls (2003) 4/5m 5w to play 38 parts (drama, full length)

- Based on the true story of the dial painters who made labor history.
- A play for family audiences
- Available from Dramatic Publishing
- Finalist, Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference
- Finalist, New Harmony Project
- National Endowment for the Arts production grant
- Best new play of 1999-2000, *The Newark Star-Ledger*
- Ensemble Studio Theatre / Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science and Technology Project grant, 2001

- Winner, Best Production, The Burlington Players, AACTFEST 2013
- Originally produced at Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, directed by Joseph Megel. John Pietrowski, producing artistic director.
- Nearly 300 productions worldwide since its premier
- Selections appear in *Best Stage Scenes 2000* and *Best Women's Stage Monologues 2000* from Smith and Kraus.
- One-act competition version of script commissioned by Dramatic Publishing, developed through Imagination Stage's High School Acting Conservatory, publication in 2015.

Salvation Road (2010) 6 actors for 9 speaking parts, or 5m 11f (comedy, full length)

- Two guys. One rusted out Honda. Twenty-four hours to separate a girl from her fundamentalist guru. The road to Hell was never more fun.
- For family audiences
- Winner, Walden Youth Theatre 2012 Slant Culture fest Competition.
- American Alliance for Theatre in Education (AATE) Playwrights in Our Schools Award, 2011
- Marilyn Hall Award, 2009, honorable mention, Beverly Hills Theatre Guild.
- Named "Show You Can't Miss" by Philadelphia Weekly for 2009 Philly Fringe Workshop (one-act version)
- Originally produced at NYU Steinhardt School, 2012
- One-act version originally produced at Art Riot Theatrical Co. (Philly Fringe), 2009.

- Developed at NYU New Plays for Young Audiences, and Utah University Youth Theatre workshop

The Savage Sex *or* Madame Poisson's Guide to Health, Wealth and Murder (2011)

4m 2w (comedy, short)

- A comedy of bad manners. Will Inspector Idiot finally discover the alluring secrets of Madame Poisson and explain the missing suitors, or will he fall victim to her fatal charms?
- For general audiences
- Published by www.Playscripts.com 2011
- Originally produced by Catholic University, Washington D.C. 1994
- Finalist, George R. Kernodle One-Act Play Contest, 1997
- Second Place, Castleyons One-act Festival, Ireland, 2004

Screw You, Jimmy Choo (2009) 1w (comedy, one-act)

- A one-woman show. With Christine Bruno.
- Performed at the Dada Festival, Liverpool, U.K.
- Kennedy Center Page to Stage Festival 2009.

The Secret Lives of Toads (2005) 5m 18w, expandable to 38 (comedy, one-act)

- A comedy about fitting in and breaking free
- For youth theatre and family audiences
- Published by Dramatic Publishing

- Commissioned and originally produced by Imagination Stage as part of its 2004 Speak Out on Stage program

So Tell Me About This Guy (1995) 2w (comedy, short)

- Two girls wax ecstatic about the new boyfriend, despite his odd habits
- For mature audiences
- Finalist, Heideman Award, Actors Theatre of Louisville.
- Published by Samuel French in *More Ten Minute Plays from Actors Theatre of Louisville, Vol. 3*
- Translated into Spanish and published in *Art Teatral*, a Valencian theatre journal, 1996.
- Published in *Seven Shorts from Playwrights Forum* 1994.
- Published in *30 Ten-Minute Plays for Two Actors* from Smith and Kraus.
- Originally produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville

Tales Between the Threads (2004) 5m 7w to play 25 parts (comedy, full length)

- A classic Armenian folk tale about a bookish girl and a lazy prince who have something to teach each other.
- For youth theatre and family audiences
- Developed by Purple Crayon Players, Chicago.
- Commissioned and originally produced by Imagination Stage as part of its Speak Out on Stage program, 2004.

What Goes Around (2011) 2m 2w to play 8-11 parts (comedy, short)

- A bullying boss sets off an emotional chain reaction that comes back to him in ways he never imagined. The trickle-down theory of pushing people around
- For youth theatre and family audiences
- Multiple productions, including Omaha Theatre Company
- Commissioned by Dramatic Publishing for *The Bully Plays*, an anthology published in 2011

Why We Invented God or 'SAFE' (2004) 1m 1 w (drama, short)

- A couple trapped in a suburban nightmare.
- For mature audiences
- Winner 2004 George R. Kernodle One-Act Play Competition
- Finalist, Heideman Award 2004, Actors Theatre of Louisville
- Originally produced by Emerging Artists Theatre Co.

Yellow Stockings (in development) (musical comedy, full length)

- A musical retelling of Twelfth Night, as a mash-up of 16th and 21st century cultures.
- Book by D.W. Gregory, lyrics by Sarah Knapp and D.W. Gregory, music by Steven Alper.
- For family audiences

APPENDIX B – Interview Transcripts

The following questions were sent to D.W. Gregory via email on September 4, 2014. Her responses were sent back via email on October 20, 2014. Below is a transcript of the questions and Gregory's responses. I would have much preferred to have been able to interview Mrs. Gregory in person or via phone or Skype, but travel plans and schedules intervened. There were moments where follow-up questions would have been helpful, yet Gregory's wit and candor are expressed so well in her writing. Finding a playwright willing to respond to these questions so fully and frankly has been a joy for me as a researcher, a playwright, and a person.

1) Do you understand that your responses to the following questions will be used for research purposes, and that any or all of your responses may be transcribed or reproduced for purposes of research and/or publication? Do I have your permission to use these responses in my dissertation research?

GREGORY: "I understand that the research will be used for scholarly purposes and publications and give my permission—with certain exceptions—for you to use these responses in your dissertation research. I have to say I hesitate about answering some of these questions because I am not sure the relevance to the project; I cannot say that some of the things I experienced early in life had much influence on the plays you're analyzing, though I suppose it's fair to say they had an influence on me. It's just that I struggle with

how thorough to be in these answers and thinking about the possible responses is not a comfortable thing. So you might need to pose more specific questions to your purpose.”

2) Early biographical information (birth date, location, family members, family occupations, significant early life experiences like moving, deaths, etc).

GREGORY: “I was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania while Eisenhower was still in office, but owing to gross immaturity put my mental age at somewhere between 30 and 43. My physical age is a matter of profound astonishment to me—fifty-something, that’s all you need to know; I can’t figure out how I got to be this old without having had more fun, but this is what happens when you entertain yourself by locking yourself in a room with a typewriter for most of your early years. Had I been wiser I would have acquired some actual experience, gone to a party once in a while or started a fistfight in a bar; being a bookish child I lived life through the experiences of others for many years. It was easier that way and saved me a lot of bail money.

“Growing up I was a neurotic, anxiety ridden Roman Catholic girl in a crowded house. There were nine children and occasionally a dog—first a sweet old collie, then later a nasty little Chihuahua that served as a proxy for my mother’s repressed aggressions. The dog bit people she did not like; my mother never seemed upset by this. Her way of dealing with life’s traumas was to hand out holy cards. Say a prayer to Saint Who-ever and all will be well.

“My favorite saint at the time was St. Francis of Assisi. I imagined myself dressed in burlap, following him around Italy, birds alighting on my head. But being The Wrong

Sex, I could not aspire to that kind of sainthood. My mother kept a picture book on the shelf—Lives of the Saints. The men were soldier, poets, teachers. Saint Sebastian run through with a dozen arrows. The women were virgins—all virgins with a capital V. That was the primary occupation of women, apparently—to be virgins and mothers at the same time. An impossible assignment. Early on I became aware of my fatal flaw—that I was The Wrong Sex, and there was no recovering from this weakness. It did not matter what I did; I would never make up for it, and I would never be forgiven for it.

“We were a blue collar family; my father worked the same factory job for 42 years. He was a child of the Great Depression and a veteran of World War II, and growing up it was impressed upon me that I had Never Suffered The Way My Parents Had Suffered. This was a lesson often repeated at the dinner table when my father was in a loquacious mood. He told stories of severe deprivation – the Christmas he played Santa Claus because, at 16, he was the only one in the household who was working. The times his mother told him – ‘here’s dinner. I don’t where the next meal is coming from.’ His shiftless father who seldom had a job; who spent more time at the bar than he did at home. And yet my father also talked about a carefree Huck Finn childhood of wandering about the countryside with his friends, camping by the creek, learning to smoke at 14, getting sick on handmade cigars, laughing about it later.

“He was a lesson in contradictions; a frustrated and resentful man who nevertheless lived up to his ideal of fatherly duty – pay the bills, put bread on the table, come home on time. When he was in a good mood he was a great storyteller, very humorous. He also drank too much and flew into violent alcoholic rages that he lived to regret. My most vivid early memory is of him storming about the house, threatening to

walk out on us, go out the door and never come back. It was easy to forgive him once I grew up and realized how lonely he was in that marriage, how limited his opportunities were and how concrete he was in his thinking. He was not a man to sit and reflect on his failures; that might be what enabled him to keep on going; I don't know.

“My mother was the other enduring mystery of my life. A woman with nine children who had little interest in any of them; she retreated into books and laundry and later, selling cosmetics. We were not to disturb her. The worst possible thing you could do was upset her; this brought the wrath of the universe upon our heads. So I quickly learned not to tell her anything and to ask nothing of her. There was no point in asking; she would not listen.

“For years I believed her when she said she could not give us any attention because there were simply too many of us. I accepted it as the way things were; a natural thing. Then, when I was 20 years old I landed an internship on the local paper and my perspective changed radically. One of my assignments was to write a story about adoption. I interviewed a couple who had four children and adopted six more. They eagerly told me about their methods for managing the household and dealing with all the kids – how they allotted so much time each week to spend with each child, alone. Suddenly my mother's excuses no longer held up; I realized that this couple had choices and so did she. It was her choice to neglect us; it was not a matter of fate.

“After that I began to look at life much differently, through a skeptical lens. I rejected her religion. I rejected her opinions. And I found a therapist to help me work through the sense of hopelessness and isolation that had dogged me from childhood. It has been a lifelong struggle and it dogs me still.”

3) Recent and current biographical information.

GREGORY: “My life is a crashing bore and there is not much I can do to make it sound interesting. I make a living as a journalist. Currently I work for Bloomberg BNA – a legal publishing house. I cover the US Tax Court by day, which drives me to drink.

“I worked as a newspaper reporter for many years, including a brief stint at the Columbia Daily Tribune in 1985-86. It was a life-changing experience, but I can’t talk about it in this kind of forum.

“My husband Paul plays blues guitar. He is much more interesting than me and far better looking.”

4) Any other juicy secrets you’re hiding?

GREGORY: “The shadow that hangs over me is the seminal experience of my young life --- having been sexually abused as a child by my oldest brother and induced to keep the secret until I was 21. Then I found out I was not alone. He’d gone after every girl in the house, with impunity, it appears. For years I wondered if my mother knew, and if she did, why she did not stop him. When I was 27 I decided to confront him—and in the process I brought down holy hell upon my head. My mother was outraged—but not at him. She reserved her anger for me—because I did not keep quiet about it.

“This experience led to an existential crisis – I was suicidal and unable to respond appropriately to the attentions of a young man whose interest I badly wanted. My heart still breaks thinking about it.

“From my mother’s point of view the worst thing you could possibly do was shame the family – and that is what I had done, by trying to bring it public.

“From my point of view, breaking the silence was the only way to ensure that he would be stopped. Because who knew what other victims he had found?

“For me it was a major turning point in my life—I was no longer willing to pretend that a horrible reality did not exist, just for the sake of appearances. I began to see her demands for what they were—soul-killing. She wanted my silence as a way to ignore the truth; I refused.

“But the law was not on my side, and we had no way to find out whether my brother had gotten his problem under control—or whether he was still trolling for children to abuse.

“What any of that has to do with writing plays I am not sure, except that I have always had an intense need to make sense of things. Growing up in that environment you learn to hide from yourself; writing plays for me is about diving into myself---figuring out how you feel, what you think, about one thing or another, rolling around with it—indulging emotion, diving into pain and living it with your characters. So perhaps there is a connection.

“The connection to disability is rather accidental. The Good Daughter to me was more about the male gaze---assumptions about the women; the way the men don’t really

know the women but categorize them based on superficial assessments. Esther's polio is part of that.

“Radium Girls was a story that had fascinated me for years; it had more to do with the failure of male authority---and denial. So that really is a direct link to the past because the piece of it that resonates with me is the idea of being confronted with a reality you don't want to face and lying to yourself about it.

“Dirty Pictures came about because the actress who played Esther in my one production of the Good Daughter had CP – I wrote the character of Judy for her. It never went anywhere, though---I was never able to get it on its feet anywhere, and she and I had a dispute over it, which I don't want to go into in print – she simply was too close to the material to play it, I think. And without her, it's a tough sell.

5) Describe some of your most significant relationships (family, friends, spouses, etc) and how they have influenced your life and your writing.

GREGORY: “See above.”

6) What kind of playwright are you?

GREGORY: “An obscure one. Not very good at self promotion.”

7) Why do you write plays?

GREGORY: “I don’t know. If I were smart I’d write murder mysteries and make some money.”

8) Who have been the most influential people in your career as a playwright?

GREGORY: “‘Career’ is a rather loose term in my case.

“Two small theatres in New Jersey have been supportive of my work. John Pietrowski at Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey has read every play of mine and he’s produced two. Gabe and Suzanne Barabas at NJ Rep had also been very devoted supporters. They’ve provided ballast and some productions.

“Kent Brown, now retired, of the University of Arkansas, provided early encouragement. I took a workshop with him in 1991 and he helped me make tremendous strides in my work, just by pointing out the obvious and helping me see it –

“Joseph Megel, now at UNC, directed the first production of *Radium Girls* and was a real proponent of my work, a real help in bringing that play along.

“Jacqueline Lawton, a fellow playwright, who is a fan – who tries to direct work my way.”

9) What are some of your favorite plays and playwrights, and why?

GREGORY: “By this you mean influences. Early on – William Inge, for the delicacy of the relationships and the sensitivity of the writing. Brecht – for the sense of scope, for taking on big questions and refracting them through intense personal relationships.

Mother Courage is an amazing play for that reason. Caryl Churchill and Harold Pinter – for creating such strange, self-referential, yet fascinating worlds. Joe Orton and Chris Durang for making me laugh out loud.”

10) What drew you to writing about the story of the Radium Girls?

GREGORY: “This story stuck in my head since I was 10 years old, when my teacher told me about the dialpainters. I was fascinated. But in 1997 I came across an article about the New Jersey case and decided I would write a play about it. By that time I’d met John Pietrowski, and when I told him about it, he was immediately interested. To me, as I said above, it’s a story of denial – for me, the question of the play was not what happened, but why it happened – and why it keeps on happening.”

11) You have said that the role of Esther in The Good Daughter and Judy in Dirty Pictures were written for and/or performed by the same actress. Could you tell me about that and how it came about?

GREGORY: “I wrote The Good Daughter originally as my thesis play, though it was much different (weak). After some years of reworking I sent it around and got a lot of readings – 14 in all – and no production offers. Then NJ Rep did a read and loved it; they produced it the following season and invited me to join them as a writer in residence. The actress who played Esther had CP – a form that affected her lower body. She was—is—a really beautiful woman—and I found her fascinating to watch. We got to be friends

– and I asked her one day what part she wanted to play but never got a chance to. She said she wanted to play someone tough and sexy who gets the guy. So I set out to write that character for her.

“The idea behind *Dirty Pictures* was to present a character with a disability as a complete person – with virtues and flaws and a sex drive – who, like a lot of other people I know, sometimes go to crazy extremes to get the guy.

“Apparently this is so radical that no one wants to touch it, so I have not been able to get the play produced. Or maybe it’s just not a very good play; I don’t know.”

12) Why does so much of your writing focus on working class, female Americans?

GREGORY: “It’s a world I grew up in and felt comfortable in.”

13) Why does so much of your writing explore characters with physical and psychological disabilities?

GREGORY: “See above and below.”

14) What experiences with disability (physical, cognitive, emotional, etc.) have you had in your life, and how have they influenced your writing? [unless you answered this in previous questions]

GREGORY: “None direct. Unless you count a personal sense of being an outcast, of being the odd one, the one who does not belong.

“This doesn’t fit in with disability, but recently I realized that every play I’ve written involves abandonment. Someone walks out on someone else. That of course is part of my DNA.

“When I was living in Denver, Colorado I met a woman who was looking for someone to write a book about her son – who was deaf. She wanted badly to tell the story of how her son dealt with a hearing world. I did not do it; I wasn’t able to. But I was deeply impressed by something she told me – that the deaf have no desire to hear; they don’t consider themselves disabled. Deafness is a subculture.

“Years later I was living in Rochester NY and working on a paper there. I was friends with – still am – with a woman who had spina bidifa and was impaired because of it – she had short legs and difficulty walking, though she got along without a brace. She was also hysterically funny, attractive and talented woman. We were theatre nuts together and went to see all the shows we could. One day my (ex) husband remarked to me how nice I was to be friends with her. I said “huh?” He said: oh wasn’t I kind to spend time with her. I could not believe my ears. I said “what the hell? You think I hang out with her out of pity?” He gave me this blank look like ‘duh, what else could it be?’ I said: ‘I am friends with her because I LIKE her.’ The shock of it was that he worked with her directly; he knew her. And yet he could view her not as an interesting person but as a charity case.”

15) How do you think disability currently fits within today's world of playwrighting and professional theatre? Is that role changing? How?

GREGORY: "I don't know, really; I'm not a scholar and I don't keep up on what the trends are. I don't think disability is depicted much on stage except as an "issue." I think my work tries to present disability as a fact of life – not as "issue" but as an element; someone has a bum leg, someone is a depressive, someone can't see well – the play is not "about" disability but about something else and disability is not a metaphor, it's a part of life – so why not just show it? That was the idea behind *Dirty Pictures*."

APPENDIX C – Additional Thoughts and Areas for Further Study

Although disability studies has been my primary theoretical perspective for the analysis of these three plays in the preceding chapters, it is not the only way one can approach these works. The depth of Gregory's plays can be plumbed from many different perspectives, and their value as dramatic literature and powerful performance texts should not be construed as being limited to a specific vein of scholarship. Indeed, much of my previous analysis relies on the intersections of disability with gender, class, and cultural identity; but disability need not be the primary entry point for study. I offer here a few brief thoughts and about opportunities for further study of these plays beyond the scope of a disability studies perspective. Indeed, the cultural and artistic significance of *Dirty Pictures*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Radium Girls* can be amplified by using multiple avenues of analysis. One of the most interesting ways that Gregory shapes her work is by the intersection of multiple cultural hierarchies in her plays. In addition to disability, three significant representational themes are gender, class, and American identity. By interweaving these multiple identities using a variety of formal and stylistic conventions, even without invoking disability as an analytic perspective, one can uncover how Gregory is able to push beyond simplistic or metaphoric representations and develop deeper, more complex and intersectional characterizations.

Gender plays a significant role in all three plays. The protagonists of all three plays are women operating within patriarchal cultures. Judy in *Dirty Pictures* is a shortorder cook in love with her boss and tired of being overlooked because she's not as stereotypically "pretty" as Bonnie. Grace Fryer in *Radium Girls* works for a living in the

U.S. Radium Corporation plant, wants to marry her sweetheart, but is driven to fight for justice against the men who run the Corporation that poisoned her and killed her friends. Esther, Cassie, and Rachel in *The Good Daughter* are three sisters who take different paths towards personal fulfillment under the strict hand of their religious father. Casting these characters as women in oppressive, male-dominated cultures immediately situates them behind an obstacle where men stand in the way of what they want. However, such a characterization on its own can result in simplistic and even sexist readings that perpetuate stereotypes and oppressive power structures. Using the intersections of gender with class, ability, and American identity creates a complexity that resists simple formulations and challenges rather than reaffirms the oppressive power structures.

Class is also a powerful voice in Gregory's work. All three plays present a section of working-class America, historically and geographically situated. *Dirty Pictures* takes place in the 1980s in the midst of the Reagan era recession. It is located in a roadhouse in rural Colorado with a distinctly mid-western American feel. Judy and Bonnie work at the bar, owned by Dan, who is behind on his bills but won't admit to it. Chet is an unemployed Vietnam Vet who takes odd jobs as a handy man whenever he can. All of the characters are struggling to make ends meet while still trying to get what they want out of life. Their socioeconomic situation is a very real obstacle to their goals, and the events of the play stem from the pictures taken of Bonnie that she hopes to use to finally get a break and escape from her life. It is the struggle against their class location that both instigates the action and provides an obstacle to the characters' objectives.

Class mobility in the 1980s may have been difficult, but at least it was seen as possible, unlike the historical settings of *Radium Girls* and *The Good Daughter*. The

Great War was an influential character in these plays as well, separating the lovers in *The Good Daughter* during the act break and motivating (or at least justifying) the use of the radium-laced paint on the watch dials in *Radium Girls*. The notion of wanting to have more than what you were born with was a fairly radical idea at the time, especially for women. Cassie Owen was chastised for her radical notions of wanting to move into the city instead of getting a husband and settling down close to home. Grace Fryer did want some independence, as evidenced by her taking a job in the radium plant, but she never dreamed of having more than the simple home and simple family that she and Tom wanted together. Her legal battle was about justice and responsibility, not financial gain to help her escape her lot in life. Class identity was a given for these women in their historical and geographical moments. Grace, however, had the benefit of urbanization and mass communication to help (or perhaps overwhelm) her legal battle, but the Owen daughters had almost no exposure outside the farm on which they grew up. In both cases Gregory uses socioeconomic and geographic class to deepen the complexity of the action of the plays. These class structures are just as much dramaturgical tools as they are thematic elements, and they contribute to the overall story being told by interacting with gender and ability in a uniquely American setting.

The American-ness of these plays is more than just a style or a setting; it is also a deeply troubling identity at which Gregory probes and challenges with multifaceted tools. *Dirty Pictures*, set in rural Colorado, is foregrounded by the face of 1980s America: Ronald Reagan. After the prologue, the opening moments of the play are when Judy makes her self up for a date and speaks to a framed picture of Ronnie. Her femininity and her disability are juxtaposed immediately against Ronnie's benign smirk. "We all know

you're a leg man, Ron."²⁹⁶ Reagan's portrait remains a constant reminder throughout the play of the notion of American identity (as well as the pervasiveness of his economic decisions). It is also an all-American bar, filled with beer, sex, and "dirty pictures." All of the characters have a kind of rugged individualism and a desire to make it on their own that fit nicely within the archetype of American identity. However, Gregory ultimately deconstructs those notions of independence by the end of each of these plays. In *The Good Daughter*, the 'heart' of America is more fully exposed in northwest Missouri. The Owen family members are rural farmers, making a living off of the land, and looking to God for guidance. They resist change and are very connected to their land and their way of living, or at least Ned is. Again, Gregory draws the sense of independence and we-can-make-it-on-our-own-ness. In *Radium Girls*, American identity is manifest somewhat differently in the obsession with health, wealth, media, consumerism, and the commoditization of science. Whereas the Owens made their living by working with nature, the nuclear businessmen make their profit by exploiting the powers of nature. The media presence is characterized as a tool for publicizing Grace's campaign for justice as well as a ravenous, opportunistic paper-pusher. Gregory explores the double-edged nature of these American fascinations, holding them up for examination and exposing their (not so) hidden consequences. She also explodes that notion of American independence as a contributor to the tragic outcomes of *The Good Daughter* and an obstacle to the subjectivity of the characters in *Dirty Pictures*. It is by acknowledging that true independence can't ultimately or socially function and that *interdependence* is the true nature of human relationships that Gregory deconstructs the myths of American identity,

²⁹⁶ Gregory, *Dirty Pictures*, 3.

whether in an all-American bar, a farm in the American heartland, or in the center of a scandal-based American media circus.

In addition to notions of gender, class, and American identities, formal and stylistic characteristics illuminate these three plays and the intersection of these multiple identity politics. *Dirty Pictures* is the most naturalistic play of the three. It is also set the closest to the present day, in the 1980s. Except for the prologue, the action takes place basically in real time in one location. On the surface, the play is a sex farce with ridiculous physical comedy and liberal use of whipped cream, but the photographic projections that bookend the story offer a structural frame for the play. However, Gregory uses these projections and photographs to expand the audience's perception of the action and its implications. The opening moment is a flash forward to a time after the play ends, when Chet has become an employed artistic photographer and is displaying some of his artwork and, accidentally, some of his more personal pictures. This moment is echoed at the end when he displays a series of photographs of Judy who has embraced her body and her beauty. Are these "dirty" pictures because they are partially nude? Are these the kind of pictures that were taken of Bonnie that caused all the chaos and conflict? Are they a different way of thinking about beauty? Even though the play is realistic in style, the use of the photographic slides tends to challenge the audiences' notion that what they see is objectively true, that perhaps there are different ways of seeing plays and people and that using a particular lens (literally or metaphorically) can actually expose more truth than we thought was present in the realism of the play.

The Good Daughter is slightly more epic in form – in both the Brechtian sense and the sense of scope. It takes place from 1916-1924, spanning nearly a decade in time,

and uses projected scene titles. The production is open to a slightly more stylized approach than would be appropriate for *Dirty Pictures*, and it spans a series of life events rather than a crucial moment in time, but still staying within the single location of the Owen family farm. With such an expanded scope and the use of projected titles, and a more distant setting in time, the audience is already distanced slightly from the play (more so than *Dirty Pictures*). Gregory is asking the audience to take a wider perspective on the events and look more closely at the cultural and environmental demands that are pressing on this family. In this way, the culture and environment become significant characters in the action; indeed the river itself provides the ultimate conclusion of the play. Whereas *Dirty Pictures* focuses narrowly on the characters' personal wants and needs and allows cultural and societal pressures to be subtle but important factors, *The Good Daughter* has a wider focus that includes the socio-cultural and environmental forces in the action, situating Ned's family more visibly within a wider and influential framework.

Radium Girls continues this trend in style, setting, and scope. This play is even more Brechtian in style, episodic, with multiple characters played by an ensemble of actors. It takes place between 1918 and 1928 in multiple locations in and around Orange, NJ. The play is intended to be cinematic, briskly paced, and mixing naturalistic scenes with more presentational scenes, set and costumed simply in a way to facilitate the fluidity of action. Such stylistic choices by the playwright intentionally produce a distancing effect and call attention to the political and social forces in the play. It is the most "urban" of the three plays, although the protagonist and her fiancé both long for the romantic archetype of the white picket fence out in the country/suburbs. Many

productions include the use of projections and subtitles to further highlight the Epic theatre style. In doing so, these structural and performance elements heighten and make explicit the impact of social forces, bringing notions of media frenzy, marketing, and capitalistic excess to the forefront, perhaps even to the status of the play's antagonist.

Though all three plays present cultural forces as important players in the story and the personality of the characters, formalistic concerns dictate the extent to which these outside presences are made manifest to the audience. By making these formalistic choices, in conjunction with the intersections of gender, class, American, and disability identities, D.W. Gregory has crafted three powerful plays that engage audiences on multiple levels, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly integrating the social realities that permeate her work and our lives, challenging audiences and readers to reach beyond easy formulations of character and identity and explore their own place in a multiply-configured world.

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VITA

Bradley Nichols Stephenson was born in Raleigh, NC on a blustery October day in 1977. He grew up immersed in sports, Transformers, and the Baptist Church. After graduating valedictorian of his high school, he went to Wake Forest University where he was pre-med and majored in Physics. It was at Wake Forest where Brad got the opportunity to direct his first show, *The Fantasticks*, and discovered that teaching and directing theatre was his passion in life. So he added theatre as a second major and then flew to Northwestern University to earn a master's degree in theatre. When he failed to get a job teaching high school theatre, he had a minor spiritual crisis, resulting in enrollment at Wake Forest University Divinity School where he hoped to discern if he was called to vocational ministry. He was not.

However, while in Divinity school, he met the young, beautiful, and brilliant Lauren Russell whom he convinced to spend the rest of her life with him. After getting married, Brad *really* needed to get an actual job, so he earned his Masters in Education at Wake Forest University to get a teaching license and finally earn some money at what he loves doing. He then got a job teaching high school science (biology, physics, and chemistry) in a program for students with language-based learning differences and for whom a traditionally structured classroom was not conducive to learning. He also started an award-winning drama program at the school, writing new curriculum and teaching three levels of dramatic arts in addition to his science courses. Soon came baby number one (Jeffrey). Although he loved his experiences teaching high school, Brad knew that, professionally, he needed the freedoms and challenges that came with teaching college

level students. Once Lauren agreed, they packed up and moved to Columbia, MO for a Ph.D. program in theater at the University of Missouri. Then came baby number two (Emmett). Brad discovered a keen interest in playwriting, as well as a curiosity about disability in relation to theatre and focused his research and studies to that end.

Eventually, he completed his dissertation, which you have just finished reading. He hopes you enjoyed it. What comes next for Brad is yet to be written, but whatever it may be...

S.D.G.