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## Creating the Cultural “Other”: Ableism, Racism, and Imperialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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# *Creating the Cultural “Other”: Ableism, Racism, and Imperialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

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## **Abstract**

This project argues that disability and physical difference were simultaneously both sensationalized and hidden in the United States and the United Kingdom, while also being overemphasized in non-Western countries, with the intention of evoking either revulsion, a sense of racial superiority, or pity, all of which was used as justification for Western imperialism. In order to make this argument, the project looks at varying attitudes and actions toward the disabled, physically different, and visibly ill in the U.K. and U.S.A., as well as the varying attitudes and actions toward the disabled, physically different, and visibly ill in the broader imperial scope. Understanding how ableism, racism, xenophobia, and paternalism are connected in this context allows for a better understanding of how proponents of imperialism, colonialism, and anti-immigration justified (and, often, are still justifying) these practices.

## **Introduction and Review of the Literature**

Anyone, at any time, can become disabled. It could be argued that ableism is a response to the fear of becoming disabled; that is, in order to distance oneself from the ever-present potential, disabled and visually ill individuals are treated as inherently and essentially **different**, as hidden away, pitied, or gawked at. In the United States and the United Kingdom, disability was allowed to exist as an individual trait within whiteness, yet it was viewed as a defining group characteristic for non-white and non-Western peoples. As Western medical knowledge increased and hygiene became entwined with morality, imperialists in the United States and the United Kingdom looked for ways to distance themselves from those they deemed inferior. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, perceived disability, physical difference, and visible illness became increasingly associated with a racial or ethnic Other.

I argue that disability and physical difference were simultaneously sensationalized and hidden in the U.S. and the U.K., while also being overemphasized in non-Western countries, with the intention of evoking either revulsion, a sense of racial superiority, or pity, all of which was used as justification for Western imperialism. Unfortunately, this trend did not fall out of fashion in the twenty-first century; as scholar Michelle Jarman demonstrates, modern churches, charities, and other organizations still use the image of disability and physical difference in the Global South to source support (both moral and monetary) for “good imperialism.”<sup>1</sup> In order to recognize this in current affairs, it is important to be aware of the historical context in which ableism has been used as both an excuse for injustice and a tool for imperialism.

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1 Michelle Jarman, “Resisting ‘Good Imperialism’: Reading Disability as Radical Vulnerability,” *Atenea* 25, no. 1 (June 2005): 108.

Imperial and colonial history cannot be separated from this cultural history of ableism without losing valuable context about the perception of the Other.

Disability, as a term, is actually quite variable. Even now, but especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “disability” could encompass anything from physical disability (such as limb difference or blindness) to the purely aesthetic (visible difference, including things like scars, “ugliness,” or just non-whiteness). As Lennard Davis explains, the concept of “normality” and a “normal” body developed only in the context of “fitness” for industrial labor.<sup>2</sup> The definition of disability and ableism, especially in different cultural contexts, is a popular topic within the field of disability studies. In his 2015 article, “Decolonizing Eurocentric Disability Studies,” Shaun Grech argues that examining imperialism through the lens of disability provides incredibly valuable insight, and that disability studies should focus on the Global South, not only through the lens of Northern colonialism, but as part of global history in its own right.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Michelle Jarman argues in a 2005 article that images and ideas of disability (specifically a 2004 advertisement using images of children with cleft palate) are used to support and justify medical intervention in postcolonial countries, while ignoring overarching issues of “economic imbalances, poverty, national tensions, unequal access to knowledge and technology, and myriad other social issues.”<sup>4</sup> Both of these articles are foundational to this project; although the authors discuss issues much more contemporary, the concepts are still applicable to this

period. Another foundational work is “Approaching Anomalous Bodies,” David M. Turner’s introduction to *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*.<sup>5</sup>

Turner introduces the historical variability of terms like “disability, deformity, and defect,” as well as the relationships among these terms.<sup>6</sup>

In her book, *The Ugly Laws*, Susan Schweik details the so-called “ugly laws,” or ordinances against “unsightly beggars” in public spaces.<sup>7</sup> Schweik argues that “lack of regard” is what allowed these laws to pass and be enforced, whether successfully or not.<sup>8</sup> She elaborates on their history, providing the foundation for these laws, as well as the laws themselves and their intersection with race, gender, and nationality. In a 2015 article, Stefanie Kennedy goes into detail of one aspect of this intersection: race and the practice of slavery. Kennedy argues that “colonialism, race, and, specifically, slavery are key to understanding the intersections between the commodification of the laboring body and disability.”<sup>9</sup>

There are quite a few works that discuss the idea of racialized disability. One of these is Esme Cleall’s “Orientalising Deafness,” which argues that, when looking at “categories of difference” in an imperial context, disability and race are inseparable.<sup>10</sup> She uses the example of d/Deaf Indians, identified as both “a cultural group (“deaf heathens”) and a biological category (“a deaf race”).”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Natalia Molina uses twentieth century Mexican immigration to the United States to argue that the label of “unfit” was

- 2 Lennard J. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Beyond Bioethics: Toward a New Biopolitics*, ed. Osagie K. Obasogie and Marcy Darnovsky (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 72.
- 3 Shaun Grech, “Decolonizing Eurocentric Disability Studies: Why Colonialism Matters in the Disability and Global South Debate,” *Social Identities* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 2015): 6-21.
- 4 Jarman, “Resisting ‘Good Imperialism,’” 112.

- 5 David M. Turner, “Approaching Anomalous Bodies,” in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, ed. David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (London and New York: Routledge, 2006): 1-16.
- 6 Turner, “Approaching Anomalous Bodies,” 2.
- 7 Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 2.
- 8 Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 20.
- 9 Stefanie Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young and Stoutly Set in Limbs’: Race, Labor, and Disability in the British Atlantic World,” *Social Identities* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 2015): 37-52.
- 10 Esme Cleall, “Orientalising Deafness: Race and Disability in Imperial Britain,” *Social Identities* 21, no. 1 (Jan 2015): 22-36.
- 11 Cleall, “Orientalising Deafness,” 25.

selectively applied to a group when advantageous – in this case, to oppose Mexican immigration.<sup>12</sup> Jay Dolmage, in *Disabled Upon Arrival*, also considers immigration and disability, but he looks at Ellis Island as a place where presumed “illness, deformity, insanity, and criminality” could be removed from the population, and that these presumptions were heavily associated with race and “constructions of class, sex, and sexuality.”<sup>13</sup> Esme Cleall<sup>14</sup> and Sharon Betcher<sup>15</sup> discuss the intersection of race and disability, but with the added lens of religion. Both Cleall and Betcher demonstrate how missionaries used language of disability to refer to non-Christians: blind, deaf, crippled, etc. Cleall argues that the “voyeuristic” images of disabled people in missionary magazines supported the pathological “othering” of colonized peoples.

### **Ableism at Home**

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of growth for the entertainment industry, including “circuses, street fairs, world’s fairs, carnivals, and urban amusement parks, all of which exhibited freaks.”<sup>16</sup> “Freak shows,” like the cabinets of curiosity and “museums” before them, displayed the unusual, which, essentially, meant people with visible disabilities, physical differences, unusual skills (such as extraordinary strength or flexibility), and anyone

who could be labeled as “exotic,” whether the claims of the showmen were true or not. Performers were often labeled as a different ethnicity in order to add exoticism to the act and make it all the more intriguing for the audience. One example of this is Hiram and Barney Davis, who were advertised as “Waino and Plutaino: Wild Men of Borneo,” despite being, in reality, disabled brothers from Connecticut.<sup>17</sup> The role of “the missing link,” usually played by a disabled person but, at least once, by an ape in a dress, was also a common character in freak shows. Douglas Baynton states that in these cases, disability “was in effect the costume that signified the role of ‘subhuman.’”<sup>18</sup> In the case of Hiram and Barney Davis, their disability was also a costume, signifying the role of “exotic” or “racial Other,” despite the performers being white Americans.

In addition to false claims, these types of shows often exhibited actual people from other countries, especially from colonized places. At the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, one of the most popular attractions was the Philippine exhibit, which “had several Filipino tribes in ‘native costume’ doing day-to-day activities before curious fair-goers.”<sup>19</sup> This exhibit, already playing into popular exoticism, went further by classifying the Filipinos into a moralized hierarchy, with the “Christianized Visayan, dressed in western attire” at the top, and the “Negrito, whose facial features led Smithsonian officials [...] to call them ‘the missing link,’ and the Igorot, who impressed fair-goers not only for their nakedness, but also for their dietary

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12 Natalia Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican: Immigration, Race, and Disability in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States.” *Radical History Review* 94 (Dec 2006): 22–37.

13 Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: The Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018.

14 Esme Cleall, *Missionary Discourses of Difference: Negotiating Otherness in the British Empire, 1840-1900* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2012).

15 Sharon Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission: Religion and the Politics of Disablement,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Maya Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2012). Hoopla e-Book via Jacksonville Public Library.

16 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 38.

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17 “Waino and Plutaino: Wild Men of Borneo,” Card featuring a photograph of Waino and Plutaino, Wild Men of Borneo; actually Hiram and Barney Davis, two mentally disabled dwarf brothers from Connecticut (Approximately 1898), *Wellcome Collection*.

18 Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 40.

19 James W. Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair: Constructing Disability in 1904,” *Remedial and Special Education* 19, no. 4 (Jul/Aug 1998): 202.

habit of eating dogs” at the bottom of this moral hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the “Christianized Visayan” attended classes at the fair, where they studied (for an audience) “mathematics, geography, and composition.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a school for the deaf and blind held classes at the fair, in which students studied “academic and vocational subjects” and performed art and music for the audience.<sup>22</sup> Both this exhibit and the Filipino exhibit were physically separated from the audience with metal bars. By placing disabled or physically different people on display with people of “so-called primitive races,” these shows were merging the two, and, in doing so, cementing ideas about whose humanity could be ignored or denied for the sake of a spectacle.<sup>23</sup>

While these types of shows grew in variety and popularity in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they were popular enough by 1847 to provoke satire: in an edition of *Punch, or the London Charivari*, the public’s obsession with freak shows was satirized as “The Deformito-Mania,” in which crowds flock to buildings labelled “This is the Ne Plus Ultra of Hideousness, Acknowledged Such by the Press,” “Hall of Ugliness: the Greatest Deformity in the World Within – No Connection with Deformity Next Door,” and “By Far the Ugliest Biped is Here: One Shilling.”<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on ugliness is particularly interesting, as many of the performers circulated in advertisements and publicity photos were by no standards unattractive, except for their very visible disability. The lovely “Gabrielle the World’s Wonder, [...] entirely devoid of any lower limbs” is one

example.<sup>25</sup> Often, performers were famed for their height, weight, or another extreme characteristic, rather than a “deformity” of any kind.<sup>26</sup> How, then, do we define ugliness?

Susan Schweik, in her analysis of the “unsightly beggar ordinances” that started to gain popularity in the 1880s, explains that ugliness and unsightliness, like disability, are extremely variable terms.<sup>27</sup> “Unsightly” could include anything from “deformed, diseased or maimed” to “improper” and “imperfect.”<sup>28</sup> While this often referred to perceived disability or physical difference, Schweik also notes that a “beggar’s infirmity could be, of course, sheer poverty.”<sup>29</sup> These unsightly beggar laws or, as Schweik and other scholars refer to them, the Ugly Laws, were enacted (if not thoroughly enforced) to remove those deemed “ugly” from public view. At the same time, laws were being created to ban the freak show or, more specifically, to ban the “exhibition [of] any deformed human being or human monstrosity, except as use for scientific purposes before members of the medical profession,” and to criminalize “those who by making Exhibition of themselves and their infirmities

20 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 210.

21 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 210.

22 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 203.

23 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 203.

24 “The Deformito-Mania,” *Punch, or the London Charivari* v.13 (September 4, 1847), From the University of California via *HathiTrust*.

25 “Gabrielle, the World’s Wonder. Born in Switzerland, devoid of any lower limbs, Greatest curiosity of this, or any other age.” Photograph. 1900. *National Fairground Archive*, University of Sheffield.

26 For examples, see “Lofty and Seppetoni,” Postcard signed photograph: “Compliments from Lofty and Seppetoni” showing a “giant” performer Lofty and “midger” performer getting out of a car (Photograph, 1930-1939), *National Fairground Archive*, University of Sheffield. And “Souvenir de Mademoiselle Teresina,” Souvenir postcard photograph of “fat lady” performer (1910-1919), *National Fairground Archive*, University of Sheffield. And “Souvenir of Abomah: The Tallest Lady in the World,” Postcard photographic print of female “Giant” performer, Abomah, born Ella Grigsby of Laurence County, SC, USA (1900-1909), *National Fairground Archive*, University of Sheffield.

27 Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 9.

28 (In order of appearance) Denver, CO law of 1898, Lincoln and Denver laws of the 1880s, and New York law of 1895 in Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 9-10.

29 Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 32.

seek to obtain money from people.”<sup>30</sup> Not only did these laws aim to remove disabled or “ugly” beggars from sight, but they also aimed to remove access to sensationalized displays of disability like those in freak shows, further pushing visibly different and disabled people out of sight and, perhaps, out of mind.

Another part of the effort to push visibly different people to the margins of society was the creation of institutions or “homes.” In an 1875 article from the London *Daily News*, a new institution for “crippled boys” is announced, and the word choice within the article reveals a lot about the author’s (and, presumably, the audience’s) feelings about disability.<sup>31</sup> Significant emphasis is placed on preventing these “crippled boys” from becoming “the victims of poverty, wretchedness, and crime,” a feat that could only be achievable by “the segregation of the persons who were so afflicted [with disability].”<sup>32</sup> When describing what occurs when the disabled are not so segregated, the phrases chosen are extremely harsh: “distortion and deformity of every kind” and “misshapen and repulsive objects that everywhere meet the eye.”<sup>33</sup> This article was just a brief announcement in the daily paper, which further suggests that these views would have been shared or, at least, accepted by the audience as nothing out of the ordinary.

In contrast to the support for institutionalization, an essay published in New York in 1911 argues for the “non-residential system of education and care” for “crippled” children.<sup>34</sup> The beginning of this essay

describes the author’s opinion of the then-current experience of the average “crippled” child:

“shut-in, neglected, deprived of any educational advantages, unable to engage in any form of activity and enduring an existence devoid of any fun or play – the crippled child’s attitude may well be one of hopelessness and discouragement.”<sup>35</sup>

McMurtrie goes on to say that, with proper encouragement and out-of-home education, “it is amazing what the crippled child can accomplish. He is far from the complete wreck we may have thought him.”<sup>36</sup> The ultimate goal, according to the author, is to make these children into self-sufficient adults. This essay is a support piece for the Association for the Aid of Crippled Children, so it is, of course, extremely optimistic about the work of said Association. The things the author chooses to emphasize, however, reveal a lot about what was considered important – self-sufficiency, medical or surgical cure, and normalcy.

This idea of “normalcy” was new; the word normal was not used in the context of the body and its abilities until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Lennard J. Davis argues, in fact, that the idea of normalcy was directly related to the rise of both industrialization and eugenics: normal “is part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>38</sup> This relationship is certainly demonstrated at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, where, unlike the deaf and blind students who could demonstrate some ability to work (i.e. to contribute to an industrialized society), those deemed “feeble-minded” (displayed in an exhibit that “emphasized education” but was physically distanced from other educational exhibits intended to show progress) were considered to have a “permanent abnormality; they might learn, but not enough to

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30 Michigan Act 103 of 1903 and Alderman Peevey to the mayor of Chicago in 1881, quoted in Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 101.

31 “Crippled Boys’ Industrial Home,” *Daily News* (London, England), February 10, 1875, From the British Library via *Gale Primary Sources*.

32 “Crippled Boys’ Industrial Home.”

33 “Crippled Boys’ Industrial Home.”

34 Douglas C. McMurtrie, “The Permanent Betterment of the Crippled Child: an essay on the operation of the nonresidential system of education and care, the social principles involved, and the restoration of crippled children to places as useful members of the community; an account of the work of the Association for the Aid of Crippled Children,” New York, 1911, *Wellcome Collection*.

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35 McMurtrie, “The Permanent Betterment” (1911), 4.

36 McMurtrie, “The Permanent Betterment” (1911), 5.

37 Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” 64.

38 Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” 72.

rejoin civilization.”<sup>39</sup> Even as the fruits of the students’ labor – handicrafts, schoolwork, writing samples – were enjoyed by the audience, “speeches and writings advocat[ed] the segregation of the feeble-minded from society, their sterilization, or even extermination.”<sup>40</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people believed that eugenics was necessary for societal progress, and the disabled were some of the primary targets. Ayça Alemdaroğlu identifies two main strategies of practicing eugenics: positive, “promoting reproduction, marriage and childcare among the healthy groups in the society,” namely with “education, moral inculcation and material benefits,” and negative, to discourage:

“reproduction in families having inferior hereditary qualities” by “premarital medical examinations, birth control, prenatal screening, abortion, sterilization, and immigrant restriction.”<sup>41</sup>

Immigration officers were trained to visibly scan for anything that could indicate that a person was “likely to become a public charge,” namely “a man’s posture, a movement of his head or the appearance of his ears, [which] may disclose more than could be detected by putting around a man’s chest with a stethoscope for a week.”<sup>42</sup> This first “major federal immigration law,” in fact, banned anyone likely to “becom[e] a public charge,” including “lunatic[s], idiot[s], or any person unable to take of himself or herself.”<sup>43</sup> This identification process also became racialized, as certain ethnic groups came to be associated with particular illnesses and/or perceived disabilities, as well as race or ethnicity itself being treated as an inherent disability.

39 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 204 and 206.

40 Trent, “Defectives at the World’s Fair,” 208.

41 Ayça Alemdaroğlu, “Eugenics, Modernity and Nationalism,” in *Social Histories of Disability and Deafness*, eds. David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 129.

42 Dolmage, *Disabled on Arrival*, 16 and Victor Safford (medical doctor at Ellis Island), quoted in Dolmage, *Disabled on Arrival*, 14.

43 The Act of 1882, quoted in Baynton, “Disability and the Justification,” 45.

## Racialized Disability

In addition to the disabled, eugenicists targeted people of color, and disability became a tool for this, especially with regards to immigration. By arguing “that certain ethnic groups were mentally and physically deficient,” eugenicists could use ableist immigration laws to “exclude[e] undesirable ethnic groups.”<sup>44</sup> Even before these laws were in place, however, race and disability were often equated. Esme Cleall explains how, first, geographic areas were pathologized as medically dangerous for the white colonizer.<sup>45</sup> She notes that d/Deaf people in the wider British Empire were increasingly identified as “both a cultural group (‘deaf heathens’) and a biological category (‘a deaf race’).”<sup>46</sup> The first, “deaf heathens,” identifies the entire non-Christian population as deaf; this, along with other words such as lame, crippled, and blind, is a common metaphor used by Christian missionaries to refer to non-Christians. The second, “a deaf race,” isolates and others deaf people from the idea of normalcy; that is, that the deaf are biologically, essentially **different** from the hearing.

Mexican immigrants to the United States are another group against whom disability or the idea of “fitness” was racialized. At first, Mexicans were presented by immigration advocates as “uniquely able-bodied” and suited for manual labor.<sup>47</sup> Those opposed to immigration, however, presented Mexicans as extremely “unfit, [...] even as laborers.”<sup>48</sup> This affected Mexican women the most, since the American economy was not dependent on their labor like it was on male manual laborers. While health and illness were not initially used to oppose Mexican immigration, health became the deciding factor to prevent Mexican women from immigrating; for example, Natalia

44 Baynton, “Disability and the Justification,” 47.

45 Cleall, *Missionary Discourses*, 81. See also Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

46 Cleall, “Orientalising Deafness,” 25.

47 Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican,” 24.

48 Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican,” 24.



Molina argues that the focus on “high [infant mortality rates]” was used to “mark Mexican women as the source of the health problems,” shifting the blame away from male Mexican laborers.<sup>49</sup> This brings up the subjectivity of “fitness.” Male Mexican laborers were presented as both exceptionally fit for labor and exceptionally *unfit* for labor, in order to support either opinion on immigration.

Disability was also racialized to justify slavery, both in Europe and the United States. For the trafficking and sale of enslaved people, disability affected their material value: in Jamaica, “traders disguised the illnesses and injuries acquired during capture and forced transformation,” and proof of smallpox or yew survival raised a person’s material value, “for they gave evidence of the individual’s immunity to such illnesses.”<sup>50</sup> “One plantation management guide,” from which Kennedy’s article takes its title, stated the preferred physical qualifications for enslaved laborers:

“let them be young and stoutly set in limbs, strait a full open eye, their tongue red, a broad large chest, wide shoulders; their belly small, not large and watery, clean and strong bodies, large thighs and legs, and strain of equal length; and be careful that they are not foolish, which you may judge by their looks and attention on you.”<sup>51</sup>

Outside of the market, however, disability was applied to enslaved people as a defining group characteristic. One medical doctor, John H. Van Evrie, wrote a number of pro-slavery texts, including *Negroes and Negro Slavery: The First an Inferior Race: The Latter its Normal Condition* in 1861, in which he uses “the figure” and “the features” to argue that African

“inferiority” was proof of the “great and fundamental law of organized life” – meaning slavery and white supremacy.<sup>52</sup> His examples of this physical “evidence” are things such as “stooping posture,” “the narrow forehead and small cerebellum – the centre of the intellectual powers,” and comparisons to animals like the “ourang-outang.”<sup>53</sup> The emphasis on the bodies of enslaved people is part of the dehumanization required to justify slavery.

The institution of slavery was, in itself, disabling. Shaun Grech writes that, in domestic slavery as well as the broader imperial world, “bodies became the medium upon which these differences [racial and other categories] were permanently inscribed and displayed.”<sup>54</sup> Enslaved people were maimed and disabled while enslaved: from overwork, illness, accidents in dangerous jobs, and as punishment.<sup>55</sup> In Jamaica, punishment was physical; for example enslaved people were “sentenced to have their ears cut off close to their heads, to have a foot removed, and to have their nostrils slit for crimes such as theft and running away.”<sup>56</sup> The result of these punishments was often then used for identification, especially when advertising that an enslaved person had escaped.

In addition to this, the descriptions of “‘bow-legged,’ ‘knock-kneed,’ ‘splaw footed,’ ‘parrot toed,’ and ‘crooked in both knees,’” likely the result of rickets due to malnutrition, contributed to the popular idea that “Africans and their descendants were biologically, indeed racially, prone to these physical deformities.”<sup>57</sup> From their earliest days, slave laws “constructed enslaved [people] – in the coarse parlance of the day – as “cripples,” “mutes,” and “idiots,” in an effort to “mark them [enslaved Africans] as visibly

49 Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican,” 26.

50 Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young,” 42.

51 Dovaston, J, *Codex Agricultura Americana* or improvements in West-India husbandry considered (Vols. 1&2 [N.P., 1774], *Codex Eng* 60), quoted in Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young,” 43.

52 John H. Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro Slavery: The First an Inferior Race: The Latter its Normal Condition* (New York: Horton&Co., 1861), 3.

53 Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro Slavery* (1861), 93-97.

54 Grech, “Decolonizing,” 9.

55 Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young,” see page 41 discussing illness and dismemberment on plantations.

56 Diana Paton, cited in Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young,” 45.

57 Kennedy, “Let Them Be Young,” 47.



different from [white] indentured servants.”<sup>58</sup> Africans were considered inherently less able than other ethnic groups, specifically, white Europeans. The idea that enslaved people would be disabled by their freedom was also commonly used to excuse or justify slavery.<sup>59</sup>

John H. Van Evrie claimed that:

With the broad forehead and small cerebellum of the white man, it is perfectly obvious that the negro would no longer possess a center of gravity, and therefore those philanthropic people who would ‘educate’ him into intellectual equality or change the mental organism of the negro, would simply render him incapable of standing on his feet or of an upright position on any terms. [...] But were it true that men can make themselves, can push aside the Almighty Creator Himself, as taught by certain ‘reformers’ of the day, and vastly improve the ‘breed’ and, as the ‘friends of humanity’ hold, that the negro can be made to conform in his intellectual qualities to those of the white man, then it is certain that their difficulties would become greater than ever.<sup>60</sup>

This idea, often “evidenced” by the ratio of disabled freemen to the (reported) number of disabled enslaved persons, is just another way in which disability became a racial characteristic in order to justify slavery and the slave trade.

## Paternalism

Abolitionists were not exempt from using images of disabled bodies to further their cause. By circulating images that, similarly to the runaway or “fugitive” advertisements, emphasized physical traits and bodily injuries, abolitionists aimed to evoke pity in their audience in order to gain support for abolition.<sup>61</sup> One abolitionist strategy, writes Marcus Wood, emphasized

“suffering and failure: the slave is an innocent victim who might have been saved had he or she reached the North but who is now a prime site for sentimental lamentation as a victim of Southern savagery.”<sup>62</sup>

Not only do these types of narratives take away the agency of the enslaved person, but they place the (white, free) reader into a position of power. These stories and images tell the reader, *you* can help, *you* could have saved them, they need *your* help, *you* can be the savior. This idea of white saviorhood or paternalism is extremely important to the imperialist agenda.

Rosemary Garland Thompson, discussing images of disability, presents three types of visual rhetoric: the wondrous, the sentimental, and the exotic. The sentimental, she explains, “constructs the viewer as benevolent rescuer and the disabled figure as grateful recipient. Such a model infantilizes the disabled figure [...] and bestows authority and agency on the spectator.”<sup>63</sup> Missionaries, particularly medical missionaries, frequently used such rhetoric. Stories and photographs were sent home, usually describing sick or disabled people (often children) who were “cured” with modern western medicine, and then, immediately after, converted to Christianity and went on to tell all their friends and family how good

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58 Jennifer Barclay, “‘The Greatest Degree of Perfection’: Disability and the Construction of Race in American Slave Law,” *South Carolina Review* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 36 and 28.

59 Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 23.

60 Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro Slavery* (1861), 94.

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61 See Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1750-1865* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) for visual examples of this.

62 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 97.

63 Rosemary Garland-Thompson, “Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *The New Disability History*, 342.

the Christian doctors were. These stories usually also vilified the culture and beliefs of a missionized group, at the same time as the missionaries themselves were presented in the best light possible.<sup>64</sup>

One such example of this is from a promotional work for the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. There are numerous examples in this short book of heroic American physicians. The missionized people are presented as “ignorant of the simplest principles of modern medical science,” who will only be helped by the goodwill of the Christian medical missionary.<sup>65</sup> The missionary, Abraham Woodruff Halsey, describes his own failures to communicate well, but frames it in a very paternalistic manner, as if the problem lies entirely with the child-like, foreign patient and not at all with the knowledgeable, American doctor. Halsey claims that “custom, tradition, ignorance, superstition are fast giving way before the medical missionary. The medical missionary is welcomed in many lands. His task is but just begun.”<sup>66</sup> Another work from 1894, twenty years earlier than Halsey’s, describes the most perfect situation that a missionary could ever hope to come across: a young girl (Iness), treated for an [infected] dog bite, goes on to live with the Kerrs for a time, after which she professes her love for Jesus and her plans to convert her family:

[Iness was] open-minded and had a bright intellect, and quickly learned a number of gospel hymns, and the Lord’s Prayer [...] Next she learnt a number of texts of Scripture [gives examples of memorized verses]. By-and-by, Mrs. Kerr taught her to sing “Jesus loves me” to the tune so familiar to us all [...]

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64 For examples of this vilification, see John Lowe, *Medical Missions: Their Place and Power* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), *Wellcome Collection*.

65 Abram Woodruff Halsey, “Go and Tell John”: *a Sketch of the Medical and Philanthropic Work of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (New York, 1914), *Wellcome Collection*, 11.

66 Halsey, “*Go and Tell John*” (1914), 20.

she manifested great delight in family prayers, and would listen with rapt attention when the Bible was read. [...] When asked what she thought of the doctor and his wife when she first came, her answer was, “I was greatly afraid. I had never seen a Christian before, and our people said the Christians were vile and wicked, and ate continually pig’s flesh, and never prayed to God.” “Do you think those stories are true now?” asked Mrs. Kerr. “Oh, no! oh, no!” was her reply. “I know you are good; I know you love Saidna-Asia” (our Lord Jesus). [...] she said, “[...] I love Jesus too – I have given my heart to Jesus.” [...] Iness said, “I would like so much that my mother and father heard about Jesus [...] When I go back to my tent I will tell them all about Jesus – how He can give us new hearts, and wash away our sins in His precious blood.”<sup>67</sup>

In the context of Christianity, disability is an extremely common metaphor. The ideas of “wholeness” and “health” have been conflated with goodness and righteousness.<sup>68</sup> Sharon Betcher writes that

“both disabled persons and colonial subjects have been jointly marked as the territory of mission and objects of social pity. So marked, disablement [which includes both physical disability and non-Christianity] has been read as necessitating (humane) intervention.”<sup>69</sup>

In this way, stories and images like this are circulated to demonstrate the need for these missionary interventions. Whether these stories were true or

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67 Robert Kerr, *Pioneering in Morocco: A Record of Seven Years’ Medical Mission Work in the Palace and the Hut* (London: H. R. Allenson, 1894), *Wellcome Collection*, 55-56.

68 Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission.” Note that the e-Book edition does not have fixed page numbers.

69 Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission.”

not is irrelevant; more important is that the majority of stories published from medical missions were extremely positive tales of success (both medical and religious), in which the missionary is praised as a hero and the conclusion of the story aligns with imperialist ideals. Like the abolitionist advertisements, the end goal of these stories was to garner support – often financial support – for the missions. In this context, the circulation of these types of stories and images are propaganda, not only for the good, Christian nature of medical missions, but for the “positive” effects of imperialism itself.

Postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak calls this “good imperialism.”<sup>70</sup> Others, like Arthur Frank, call this “medical colonization,” meaning that “modern medicine lays claim to the patient’s body as its own

territory.”<sup>71</sup> This medical colonization generally ignores deeper issues in favor of things that are visible and much easier to fix (like, for example, a cleft palate) than poverty or the effects of colonialism.<sup>72</sup> Rather than acknowledging that imperialism was driven by power and greed, the script was flipped so that imperialists suddenly became benefactors helping the poor, diseased, and “disabled races” of the world. At home, disabled or otherwise physically different people were increasingly institutionalized and kept out of the public eye, while images of illness and disability were increasingly circulated from the Global South, along with tales of miracle-working western doctors and their eternally grateful, newly Christianized patients, which served as a justification for western imperialism.

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70 Quoted in Jarman, “Resisting ‘Good Imperialism’.”

71 Jarman, “Resisting ‘Good Imperialism’,” 107.

72 Jarman, “Resisting ‘Good Imperialism’,” 112-113.

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