

The Rhetorical Dimensions of Ableism

This book resides at the intersection of one of the oldest academic disciplines and one of the newest: rhetoric and disability studies. Both of these disciplines maintain an active presence in the contemporary universities of Western culture. Although much maligned at least since its documented origins in 600 BCE, rhetoric has endured, adapted, and developed such subdisciplines as public address (the study of important speeches and other forms of public discourse) and rhetorical criticism (the application of rhetorical theory to analyze and critique texts and communication events). Rhetorical theory also informs scholars from a variety of other disciplines, including composition, critical/cultural studies, and performance studies. In the latter part of the twentieth century, a “linguistic turn” reinvigorated the discipline in both the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the sciences.¹ As a result, rhetoric has spread so widely within academia that some argue it has overextended itself, essentially taking an “architectonic” or “big rhetoric” stance, meaning that it claims to underlie all forms of human experience including music, mathematics, science, and religion.² Since the 1960s, much of the debate over “big rhetoric” in the United States has explored the ways that it shapes how people know (“rhetoric as epistemic”), what people value and believe (“ideological rhetoric”), and how people see (“visual rhetoric”). Rhetorical scholars have certainly explored a good deal more than these concepts, but these three have each been the focus of extensive discussion, and each helped shift the overall trajectory of the discipline in this early part of the twenty-first century.

In comparison, disability studies is a fairly young discipline that developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Disability studies scholars cover a wide variety of topics, but generally they all interrogate the idea that disability is primarily a medical condition requiring treatment with the goal of curing the disabled individual. We call this perspective the “medical model” of disability, as it describes the approach that most doctors and health-care practitioners have

adopted for centuries when engaging disability as an empirical and physical phenomenon. The medical model views disability as a problem, and it locates that problem in the bodies of disabled people.³ Interrogating the medical model does not mean that disability studies opposes the practice of medicine or rejects medical treatment. Instead, it means that disability studies questions the medical model's assumptions about bodies and then points out its failure to account for the personal, social, and cultural dimensions of living with a disability. Disability studies also objects to any approach that researches the lives of disabled people "only in their particularity . . . as deviation from the norm in order to increase the knowledge about and stature of the norm."⁴ For much of the history of Western culture, disability has been known as something to be avoided and not as something to be understood. Disability studies seeks to rectify that.

I am not the first to explore the intersection where these two disciplines meet, but I approach it in a relatively new direction to reach the destination I call the rhetoric of ableism.⁵ While I develop a more nuanced definition of the term later in this chapter, ableism refers generally to discrimination and oppression based on ability and is analogous to racism and sexism. Rhetoricians have long been interested in the ways that the predominantly white, male, middle-class center oppresses and marginalizes subaltern groups and over time has expanded its attention from the classic triad of sex, race, and class to such issues as sexual orientation, age, and disability. At roughly the same time that rhetoricians began to examine disability, scholars in disability studies applied rhetorical theory in their analyses of laws, social institutions, political movements, popular culture, medical practices, literature, and film. As rhetoric began to establish a foothold in disability studies,⁶ another area of disability studies arose with a focus on ableism.⁷ My work takes the next step by employing rhetorical theory to study ableism. This journey toward this particular intersection of rhetoric and disability studies moves along and sometimes across the pathways taken by other scholars.

Specifically studying ableism instead of disability diverges from the most common route. While the two concepts clearly relate to one another, my work shows how explicitly engaging the former can detail insights that examining the latter can overlook. Disability studies has focused generally on the immediate concerns of disabled people and the results of ableism, often accepting disability-based discrimination's existence as a preexisting institutional problem. Simi Linton explains that to gain recognition and establish disability studies as an academic discipline, scholars have had to prove that "disabled people occupy a

subordinate position in critical social and economic domains, that disabled people are a significant constituency, and that our histories and legacies have been distorted.” As scholars complete this stage of the discipline’s development, Linton argues that it is now “incumbent on people across the disciplines to study the . . . knowledge base within which that social positioning is deemed rational and morally sound.”⁸ I craft this project along the lines she proposes.

Scholars in disability studies explore the impact of ableism in social oppression, marginalization, and discrimination against disabled people. By exposing the inequities and injustices these cause, their work challenges the historical view of disability as physical incapacities that medical science ought to cure and provides perspectives that place disability in a more positive light. This goal unites the various branches of the field. Tobin Siebers, a leading disability studies scholar, wrote that “undoubtedly the central purpose of disability studies is to reverse the negative connotations of disability.”⁹ The many works associated with this field include histories of disability and the political struggles for disability rights, studies of texts about and images of disabilities, and critiques of legal structures that both perpetuate and attempt to combat this discrimination.

By emphasizing ableism instead of disability, I tap into these social and cultural practices in a way that complements disability studies research. Focusing on the basic mechanisms and logics of discrimination directs my attention to the already well-established research of other forms of bigotry and intolerance and brings this work into the conversation. Moreover, by emphasizing rhetoric instead of other approaches, I benefit from the extensive scholarship by rhetoricians who explore how words, language, and texts construct political identities, hierarchies, and power. By examining ableist rhetoric in detail, I provide evidence that its central ideas have spread so extensively throughout Western culture that it operates in contexts well removed from disability, which helps explain why ableism is powerful and difficult to confront.

While investigating ableism differs from exploring disability, I emphasize that my project aims to complement rather than challenge disability studies. I concur with Fiona Kumari Campbell that “a move towards studies in ableism *must not* spell a separation with disability studies, rather the focus on ableism is meant to reconfigure a disability studies perspective and extend it.”¹⁰ The developing study of ableism furthers the project of removing the negative connotations of disability by calling attention to the larger ideological problem behind the multitude of ways that society discriminates against and disadvantages disabled

people. Ableism studies shifts focus away from the “individual patterns” behind specific discriminatory acts to investigate the “social situations or cultural representations that influence those patterns.”¹¹ Ableism studies enhances disability studies much as analyses of racism and sexism have extended such disciplines as ethnic studies and women’s studies.

Exploring ableism rather than disability turns the discussion toward a new set of questions. While much of the literature in disability studies asks the important question “What can we do about how society treats disability?” I ask the question “What makes this an ableist culture?” Enculturation arises from somewhere. From where did contemporary Western culture acquire and develop ableist ideals? I also ask the parallel question “How is this an ableist culture?” For ableist thinking to operate, its assumptions must be accepted by society at large, and these must be brought into use to engage specific situations and controversies. Where do the main premises of ableist thinking appear in our discourse, and what do we do with them? My work shows that since the earliest recorded appearances of ableism in Western culture, rhetoric has been the vehicle driving it. Considering ableism from a rhetorical perspective and examining it through related critical theories allows rhetorical analysis to work toward answers to these questions.

My research also differs from the conventional approach of rhetorical scholarship because instead of directing my attention to one or another vector of rhetoric, I explore how three key types—epistemic, ideological, and visual—work together. To allow in-depth analysis, scholars typically focus attention on one kind of rhetoric in their case studies. Research engaging epistemic rhetoric might explore how particular ways of studying something dictate how it becomes known, as when using mathematical models in economics implies that motives for human behavior function as absolute imperatives. Analyses of ideological rhetoric generally reveal the significance of values and hierarchies of worth that surround discursive practices, such as by showing how shifts in the meaning of the word “equality” throughout the history of the United States relate to the status of subordinate groups. Studies of visual rhetoric seek to understand the operation of image-laden artifacts, including when iconic photographs function as important sites of collective memory in a culture. This vital work provides extensive benefits for rhetorical analysis, and without it I would have little basis for my own approach of bringing different types together. By synchronizing epistemic, ideological, and visual rhetorics around the singular concept of ableism, I clarify what these “different” rhetorics share. My study of

ableism provides a case study of how they influence and depend upon each other while illuminating different paths through which ableism operates. In sum, a rhetorical approach to ableism uniquely explains how it works, spreads across time, and plays a role in everyday life, while showing how this process simultaneously operates through epistemic, ideological, and visual rhetorics.

Two Key Terms

While his wife and three other children were at church on October 23, 1993, Robert Latimer of Saskatchewan carried his sleeping twelve-year-old daughter Tracy from her bed to his pickup truck and piped carbon monoxide into the cab until she died.¹² He then returned her body to her bed. When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police investigated the next day, Latimer initially claimed she had died in her sleep but quickly confessed to having planned and committed the murder. In November of the next year, he was found guilty of second-degree murder but acquitted of first-degree (premeditated) murder. He was subsequently released on bail pending his appeal. On February 6, 1997, the Canadian Supreme Court ordered a retrial on the basis of jury tampering but refused to acquit Latimer entirely, holding that his confession was admissible and legally obtained.

On November 5, 1997, Latimer's second trial concluded when a jury again found him guilty of second-degree murder. Under Canadian law, the conviction carries a minimum sentence of life with the possibility of parole after ten years. Although instructed by trial court judge Ted Noble not to do so, the jury recommended that he be eligible for parole after just one year. The court released Latimer on his own recognizance pending an attempt by his lawyer to seek intervention from the Canadian federal government. On December 1, 1997, in a decision that surprised many legal experts, Judge Noble refused to impose the mandatory ten-year prison term on Latimer, instead sentencing him to serve one year in a provincial jail and a second year confined to his farm in Wilkie, Saskatchewan. Noble granted the rare constitutional exemption by finding that the mandatory sentence would in this case be cruel and unusual punishment.

Thus described, the story of Robert Latimer makes little sense. Such a light sentence and preferential treatment for a man who confesses to murdering his daughter seems bizarre. But the story changes dramatically and begins to become comprehensible once a single element is added: Tracy Latimer was disabled.

She had cerebral palsy since birth. She could not walk, talk, or feed herself, and she weighed less than forty pounds at the time of her death. She had undergone a number of operations, and, according to her family, had lived in pain most of her life. Once added to the story, Tracy Latimer's disability alters the interpretive framework used to understand the narrative, and ableist rhetoric shapes the significance of the event. Latimer's crime becomes rearticulated as "mercy killing," "euthanasia," or "compassionate homicide." His claim that he had only wanted what was best for his daughter, and that his act was one of love, becomes comprehensible. Judge Noble's statement that "the evidence establishes Mr. Latimer was motivated solely by his love and compassion for Tracy and the need—at least in his mind—that she should not suffer any more pain" appears more reasonable in this context.¹³ This reevaluation of the story of Robert Latimer is made possible by the ableist thinking deeply entrenched in society. Western culture continues a tradition that values the lives of disabled people less than it values the lives of able-bodied human beings.

The single detail of Ms. Latimer's disability changes the story not simply because readers interpret disability as a negative characteristic, but because they presume they can understand the total value of her life through it. She becomes a function of her disability, a synecdoche that signals an ableist orientation. The story teaches very little about Tracy Latimer's condition, her quality of life, or even what her future might have held. Readers learn only that she was disabled, she had a condition that has a medical diagnosis, she lacked skills associated with everyday living, she had a small body, and her family believed she experienced a lot of pain.

In our ableist culture, those signifiers of disability come with so much ideological baggage that they change the entire paradigm through which people understand the narrative. Were her disability considered simply another element of the story, whose relevance and significance needed to be considered carefully before they could be understood, such a shift would not be possible. Learning that Ms. Latimer had a disability would probably reveal an area that needs further investigation, but it could not stand alone as an explanation for what happened any more than would learning that she was black, lesbian, or impoverished. But within an ableist culture, the mere mention of disability can lead us to see the situation differently, and to interpret the events surrounding the end of her life through a whole new ideological system. The epistemology, ideology, and vision all change: people know Tracy Latimer differently, evaluate her life differently, and picture her differently. Readers make assumptions about

her quality of life that reflect little more than prejudices about disability. Because they believe they would not want to live in her shoes, they put themselves in her father's.

To understand ableism I analyze the change in orientation that occurs once Ms. Latimer's condition is revealed, by discerning the assumptions that begin to operate as the rhetorical framework through which her story is understood. Disability is a loaded term, weighted down with tools and supplies sufficient for the task of making difference. In ableist culture it is one thing to kill your own child, but an entirely different thing to kill your own disabled child. Such baggage begs to be unpacked. I seek to unload the term "disability" by casting attention on ableism itself and on the rhetorical mechanisms through which it operates. Scholars define these terms—ableism and rhetoric—in a wide variety of ways, and since they form the matrix of this project, I next explain how I use them in this study. I do not argue that my way of defining these and the critical terms that make up the definitions should be preferred or are in any way more correct than alternatives. I specify my ways of understanding ableism and rhetoric to clarify my own approach and to position it among the work of other disability studies scholars and rhetoricians.

Ableism

Scholars define ableism, like any complex concept, in different ways that allow them to conduct the work of their particular projects. The result is a range of ideas about what we mean by the term. As Campbell notes, "There is little consensus as to what practices and behaviours constitute ableism."¹⁴ But the various definitions of ableism found in the literature do not weaken the term's primary value, because they all link ableism to the negative connotations that provide the word with its primary political, social, and rhetorical power. Disability studies and ableism studies share the goal of convincing people that ableism has a destructive, unethical, and intolerable connotation, which furthers the project of transforming disability into a positive term describing a common facet of human life and a valuable component of human diversity. However scholars define ableism, we agree on its fundamental nature as a critical problem that needs to be understood and addressed.

Moreover, a variety of different definitions motivates and enables in-depth examination of the idea from distinct perspectives and lines of analysis. By

defining ableism in even subtly different ways, scholars can more precisely shape their perspectives employed in their research, which produces more opportunity for discussing with and learning from each other. By extension, multiple definitions may even enhance the word's impact because different perspectives of ableism will identify more places where it can and should be challenged. The definition I offer should not be the only one people invent, understand, and employ. I choose it because it focuses on the rhetorically constructed roots of ableism as the core justifications for the attitudes and practices of discrimination against disabled people.

I define ableism specifically as an orientation that considers physical deviation from a presupposed norm as a lack. I see it as a system of discrimination that rhetorically invents and employs the idea of a "normal body" and treats physical deviance from that norm as lacking something that all other nondisabled people share. Ableism involves ways of knowing, valuing, and seeing the so-called "abnormal" body as inferior. By extension, ableist discrimination places the "normal" body at the top of an ideological hierarchy, isolates any deviant body as the oppressed Other, and protects this arrangement by denying its presence while promoting practices based upon it. While ableism most clearly targets "severely" disabled people, it also tends to exclude people with any disability perceived as a relevant element of a situation.

Although I developed my definition years before I encountered the one used by Campbell, our concepts of ableism are remarkably similar. Campbell defines it as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is then cast as a diminished state of being human."¹⁵ Campbell and I share the point of view that the core of ableism is an idealized norm that defines what it means to be human, that those who do not fit that norm are disabled, and that the disabled are cast as lacking something they are supposed to have. In my work, I extend this concept of "lack" to explore how ableist rhetoric promotes discrimination against people who have extraordinary abilities in much the same way that it oppresses people perceived as disabled.

The ableist tendency to discriminate, at varying degrees, against *any* body deemed abnormal affords the opportunity to examine any deviation from the norm as subject to ableist oppression. The normalized identity of the able body at the center of ableist thinking sees only itself as pure. Although society traditionally associates only disability with lack, I view any body lacking the form of

the “normal” body as deviant—even those bodies that exceed the form in some “extraordinary” or even “superhuman” way. A body exhibiting parts, skills, or abilities not shared by the majority of its population may be called a freak or a sport, but it too will be treated differently from the normal body, much like the body lacking parts, skills, or abilities shared by the majority of the population. A radically different body that has unconventional skills may be discriminated against, oppressed, and isolated. Medical science may seek to cure and correct it, children can be taught to be shocked or repulsed by it, many will pity the person “forced to live” in it, and social institutions can isolate and constrain it.¹⁶ In the ableist mindset, having only one arm or having three pose the same problem. Put simply, any body that lacks the ability to be normal is abnormal and can thereby be subjected to ableist discrimination. As H. G. Wells made clear in his famous story “The Country of the Blind,” society decides what is normal and seeks to correct that which is not, even when that deviance is the *ability* to see.¹⁷

I find it difficult to understate the predominance of ableism in Western culture. Ableism has become so culturally pervasive that we rarely encounter the word. Siebers notes that although some time has passed since disability activists and scholars “proposed the term *ableism* to name this prejudice,” it has not been accepted in general usage, and its use “elicits scowls and smirks, even in progressive society.”¹⁸ Disability has and continues to be interpreted, understood, and evaluated in a complex web of predominantly negative associations, but much of the time people do not consider this as discrimination because the strands of its web are largely invisible. Our culture is so used to its presence that many fail to recognize it until getting entangled in it by becoming disabled.¹⁹

Consider the example of stairs. Stairs are overwhelmingly accepted as a useful device that allows the efficient construction of multilevel houses and buildings. Growing up in an ableist culture, I thought little of stairs, or even saw them as elegant architectural devices—especially those grand marble masterpieces that elevate buildings of state, like the steps of the U.S. Capitol. But I now read stairs as a discriminatory apparatus—as if they were tagged with a “For Walkies Only” sign that only those looking for ableist practices can see—that makes their inevitable presence around government buildings a not-so-subtle statement about who has and deserves access to our most important public spaces. As Siebers explains, “In a society of wheelchair users, stairs would be nonexistent, and the fact that they are everywhere in our society seems an indication only that most of our architects are able-bodied people who think unseriously

about access.”²⁰ The devices have become so ingrained in cultural assumptions about architecture that thinking of stairs as tools of oppression will strike many as ludicrous.

But disability studies scholars view such ubiquitous things as stairs as the very origins of what society considers to be “disability.” They point out that someone who cannot climb stairs only becomes disabled after stairs are invented and become widely used. Once stairs are common and society constructs itself around their presence, the person who cannot gain access through them is excluded from certain areas and activities. In this way, someone is not disabled by their inability to use stairs; rather, society’s reliance on stairs as architectural devices disables the non–stair user. The availability of ramps and other devices that might be used instead of stairs means that the choice to build stairs reflects social assumptions about whom buildings should be built for, and who belongs in them.

Until society sees ableist discrimination as a culturally generated and reinforced system, people generally view disability itself as the problem. In effect, ableism becomes a problem only for disabled people, similar to the way racism is often treated as a problem only for people of color. Instead of seeing the absence of ramps as a problem faced by society as a whole because it undermines opportunities for interaction, commerce, and community, stairs are seen as a problem only for those who cannot walk. The shift between these two perspectives requires a relatively small but profound movement, because it brings to light the operation of a system almost always overlooked. Just as studies of whiteness have revealed the invisibility of institutional and subtle racism, I seek to engage the problem of ableism by exposing the ideological foundations, assumptions, and thinking that perpetuate its existence.²¹ I do this by focusing on its rhetoric.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the second word at the center of my project. The range of ways that scholars have defined this word in their work varies greatly, and its ancient roots and disparate uses make it a much broader term than the much newer “ableism.” As above, I find this a useful state for scholarship, and I reiterate that I do not seek to discipline other scholars who wish to approach the concepts from different angles.²² My approach to rhetoric focuses on the way that it explains how a thing becomes meaningful—that is, how society comes to understand, evaluate,

and perceive something—and I ground my application of the term in two concepts: ideology and warrants.

Stuart Hall defined ideology as “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”²³ This theory of ideology “helps us to analyse how a particular set of ideas comes to dominate the social thinking of a historical block . . . and maintain its dominance and leadership over society as a whole.” I find ideology thus described especially useful for explaining the hierarchies of dominance and subordination through which society organizes itself. As Hall writes, ideology “has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation.”²⁴

Hall’s articulation of ideology provides an excellent basis for understanding ableism, which dominates the thinking of our society as a whole and operates as a discourse of power. Furthermore, ableism becomes most visible as a mental framework transmitted through rhetorical devices, including language, imagery, and systems of representation. In this sense, I propose to identify the primary rhetoric that generates an ableist response and sustains ableist culture.

Every way of thinking about something—every perspective, value system, paradigm, and ideology—has its basis somewhere. We are not born thinking of things one way or the other, and we are taught to understand the world as we do. In other words, we learn meaning—it does not arise naturally from objects or relationships. In Hall’s words, “there is no one, final, absolute meaning—no ultimate signified, only the endlessly sliding chain of signification.”²⁵ The rhetorician Kenneth Burke made the point in more dramatic terms: “Stimuli do not possess an *absolute* meaning. Even a set of signs indicating the likelihood of death by torture has another meaning in the orientation of a comfort-loving skeptic than it would for the ascetic whose world-view promised eternal reward for martyrdom. Any given situation derives its character from the entire framework of interpretation by which we judge it.”²⁶

If we consider ableism a framework of interpretation, we can identify its dimensions by examining the linguistic codes and rhetorical assumptions that govern interpretation. As Burke put it, “We discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born. Our minds, as linguistic products, are composed of concepts (verbally molded)

which select certain relationships as meaningful.” From this perspective, meaning exists primarily as a function of language rather than a natural or necessary consequent of material objects or bodies. Indeed, as Burke concludes, “different frameworks of interpretation will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is.”²⁷

I identify my work as an examination of ideology and rhetoric to situate it in the context of these and similar arguments. Whatever the factual—or material, or empirical, or scientific—status of disability, the main subject of importance in my project is its *meaning*. To engage that meaning, I work toward two inter-related goals: first, to identify the rhetorical practices and systems that continue to teach us and our children to see disability and the disabled from an ableist perspective, and, second, to provide a foundation for crafting ways to challenge ableism so that society might know, value, and see disability differently. By recognizing how certain ideas create ableist hegemony and systems that privilege able-bodied people, I locate a space where rhetorical pressure could contest this reified and institutionalized orientation. Identifying ableist rhetoric renders it visible and exposes it to a variety of responses.

My application of rhetorical theory adopts what Stephen Toulmin called “warrants” as the aspect of rhetoric that locates and explains how interpretation works.²⁸ Warrants are the assumed rules of interpretation called and recalled into practice by texts that rely on them to produce comprehension. Toulmin focused on the warrant as an element of an argument, where it connects the grounds of a position with the claim being made. Here “argument” refers to an assertion that someone offers as a statement of fact, assignment of value, and/or proposal to adopt a specific course of action. Someone who makes a claim (“Socrates is mortal”) grounds that position in data or information (“Socrates is human”), and the warrant is the reasoning that validates the connection between the two (“All humans are mortal”). In other words, warrants operate in the space between the message sent and the message received by forming the logic that connects things and concepts. But when I use it, I expand the theory of the warrant to include more than what it does in the context of a claim or message; I use it to explain what happens *anytime* someone makes sense of something.

My concept of warrants rests on the assumption that audiences and readers always interpret information (broadly construed to include narratives, observations, data, displays, etc.) whenever assigning meaning or comprehending something. I use “comprehension” as a relative term, because an audience finds its interpretation to be a source of comprehension even if others view this

interpretation as flawed or inaccurate. Everyone seeking to comprehend something—such as an audience watching a performance, students reading a book, or people seeking to understand a perplexing encounter—constructs an interpretive framework from preexisting opinions, values, and views and applies these as warrants to determine what that thing means.

In this sense of rhetorical action, something being understood becomes a text, and here I do not limit “text” to things that are spoken, written, or otherwise understood as a message. Literally anything that can be perceived or conceived can work as text, whether coded as a message or not. At least at the level of the warrant, interpretation works the same way when people make sense of what someone else communicates to them as it does when people assign value to what they encounter or think about. As identified in the first of its five classic canons, rhetoric practices “invention,” which means that it begins by collecting and weaving together arguments, ideas, and information to create a rhetorical stance.²⁹ If we view rhetoric as ways of encouraging audiences to adopt a way of thinking about something (e.g., “viruses are alive,” “censorship is immoral,” or “social media should be regulated by the government”), then rhetoric works as an explanation for how meaning comes into being and circulates throughout a culture. But since rhetorical analysis generally examines the role of communication in perpetuating social views, it often uses the metaphor of spoken or written (i.e., linguistic) expression as a way of discerning and critiquing the messages involved. In the example above, the stairs “speak” a view of disability that becomes as clear as if they displayed a sign saying “For Walkies Only.”

When an audience adopts an interpretive framework, it orients *itself*, rendering the text sensible from a particular perspective. When taking a point of view, an audience learns the warrants and replicates the perspective when it applies it to situations, issues, and objects beyond the immediate text. Thus, by interpreting a specific text, the audience shapes the general ways it encounters the world around it. Burke clarified the connection between the way an audience positions itself vis-à-vis the text and the way that audience views the world by using a single term—“orientation”—to describe both.³⁰

When the ways of orienting and interpreting implicit in these warrants become widely used and familiar, they evolve into the normal, accepted, and expected assumptions available as cultural resources. As audiences generate additional texts by relying on and replicating the warrants, their reasoning comes to be expected as “common sense”—typically unquestioned foundations for practical ways of thinking in a culture. Gaining this status, warrants become

generalized and escape the boundaries of a specific context and grow into ideas frequently used to interpret other texts. Every time a warrant slips from one immediate context to another, it becomes more reified—made more concrete and real—eventually producing interpretations that few ever question. Audiences employ them in all kinds of situations, but they tend to rely on them especially when encountering something they do not initially understand or when meaning seems unstable. When encountering ambiguity, an interpreter can render a meaning more reasonable by adopting familiar and accepted warrants, whose generalizability appears to provide stability by suggesting commonality. A new and perplexing situation becomes less so when people orient themselves to it through readily accessible and well-established ways of thinking. As the meaning of the disabled body becomes more contested and destabilized, it is more likely to require the audience to interpret its meaning through the comfortably familiar and widely accepted ableist warrants. Thus, as disability studies challenges traditional ways of making sense of disability, reliance on these ableist ways of thinking may even become more common and their political power can be amplified. To resolve this dilemma, I work to expose the interpretive frameworks generating ableism to allow alternative meanings of disability to develop without being simultaneously undermined by the rearticulation of ableist warrants. Until the widespread rationale of ableism becomes evident and suspect, it can disrupt the project of encouraging people to rethink how to understand the disabled body.

Generalizing warrants also reveals how they infiltrate and eventually saturate a variety of types of rhetoric. As noted earlier, a linguistic turn in academia led to the development of different ways of thinking about rhetoric. Three of these that have elicited substantial debate are epistemic rhetoric, ideological rhetoric, and visual rhetoric. The question of rhetoric as epistemic courted controversy over the ways that and extent to which words shape reality; the concern over ideological rhetoric centered on rhetoric's place along the traditional divide between (false) ideology and materiality; and visual rhetoric moved rhetoricians' gazes from discourse to images. For these to develop into mature lines of inquiry, scholars focused on these individually and in depth, which can encourage thinking of these as isolated and relatively separate rhetorical practices and theories. While many if not most rhetorical scholars treat the epistemic, ideological, and visual as overlapping if not congruent categories, researching them separately tends to suggest that they work in fundamentally different ways. Because the rhetoric of ableism offers an opportunity to theorize the action of

the same warrants applied generally across all three dimensions, studying it can work in the opposite direction and reveal essential characteristics they share.

In other words, the ableist rhetoric I explore does not fit nicely into any of these categories, and it exhibits epistemic, ideological, and visual characteristics. Ableism is epistemic rhetoric: it is a way of knowing and locating disabled and normal bodies and the realities associated with them. Ableism is also ideological rhetoric: it is a way of thinking about and evaluating disability. Ableism is finally visual rhetoric: it is a way of seeing and envisioning disability and disabled people. While at times I may focus on one of these facets more than the others, each of these related senses of rhetoric are at work in all of the texts examined here. This provides an opportunity to explore relationships between these different types of rhetoric, and examining generalized warrants reveals how the epistemic, ideological, and visual are like facets on a single jewel that can never be separated. Examining the operation of ableism—as the machinery through which disability is known, evaluated, and observed—suggests an approach to the study of rhetoric, ideology, and culture as a whole that could be used to address many systems of discrimination.

Engaging these three rhetorics in the same project also suggests why legislative measures and other steps toward reducing ableism have struggled to accomplish this end. I contend that contemporary attempts to move away from ableism remain limited because they do not confront these three dimensions simultaneously. The epistemic, ideological, and visual components of ableist rhetoric entwine ways of knowing, evaluating, and seeing to create a powerful web that resists change unless all three strands are addressed at the same time. Leaving one or two of the strands untouched allows those to reinscribe ableist modes of interpretation. For example, it is not enough to simply envision the disabled body differently if one continues to evaluate and think about it in the same way. Similarly, changing how society evaluates disabled people but continuing to look with horror upon disability as the inevitable demise of bodies does little to alter ableist culture. Finally, knowing disability as a natural condition does not challenge ableism if people continue to evaluate and view the disabled as they do now. This requires a whole new way of seeing, valuing, and knowing the meaning of disability.

When ableist warrants remain accepted ways of thinking in the culture, they limit the capacity of antidiscrimination measures. Because they shape the direction of such discursive activities as public debate by policymakers and judicial decisions in legal cases, ableist reasoning operates as the framework of

interpretation through which many disability related policies are developed, understood, and put into action. It is fairly easy to establish that disabled people in most contemporary societies live in poor conditions. In the United States, unemployment, discriminatory victimization, objectification as subjects of pity, and limited opportunities for participation in public life are extremely common problems faced by the disabled. Simply put, people considered able-bodied enjoy greater status and opportunities than people considered disabled.

In the United States, legislation such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) attempted to address these inequities. But after this act became law, the situation faced by most disabled people improved very slowly and in some cases worsened. While the law ensured that many accessible facilities replaced physical barriers to public life, such institutional changes did not translate into a better life for disabled people. For example, in the decade following passage of the ADA, unemployment among disabled people increased.³¹ Part of the problem appeared to be flaws in the ADA itself, which had led to a number of Supreme Court cases that limited the presumed scope of the law and worked to protect employers from lawsuits. But even after the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (PL 110–325) sought “to restore the intent and protections” of the ADA by removing these flaws, the economic status of the disabled remains far from equal. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2018 only 19.1 percent of disabled persons were employed, compared with 65.9 percent of the able-bodied population.³² I do not suggest that legislative efforts like these are pointless, but these results suggest we should consider how widespread ableism can undermine the success of any policy measure that fails to address the root causes of this discrimination. At the very least, recognizing the widespread presence of ableist rhetoric rejects the idea that discrimination against the disabled can be easily dismissed as an architectural problem that can be resolved through appropriate legislation and policies.

In this sense, calling attention to ableist rhetoric is a “radical” step, incorporating both the political connotation and classical denotation of this word derived from the Latin for “root.” Recognizing ableism reaches toward and rips at the roots of common sense, reasonable thinking, and rational decision making. Many have sought to recondition ableist thinkers, reeducate ableist students, reengineer ableist structures, and retrofit ableist buildings within the context of our current moral, political, and legal systems. Many have questioned ableist excesses, especially when these become apparent in moments of crisis, and reformers have worked to curb these overt acts of discrimination. But in the context of an ableist

culture, their efforts often become moderate steps designed to resolve an immediate problem rather than attacks on the core problem of ableism. This approach can even protect the roots of ableism, allowing it to grow and survive.

Until the roots of ableism are exposed, the only approaches available to those who would combat ableism are partial measures. Even as our civilization has made much progress in its egalitarian search for equality, society remains firmly attached to ableist ideals. These warrants have become natural, accepted, even necessary aspects of understanding disability. In our culture, ableism is physically architectural as we traditionally build our houses, buildings, and public spaces with ableist assumptions about their users. It is also metaphorically architectural. Our most powerful social institutions—medicine, religion, sport, and government—have been built around concepts of normal and ideal bodies, the importance of physical power, and the need for individuals to have well-developed abilities so they can contribute to collective actions for the common good. As I demonstrate at length in chapters 2 through 4, those who lack these qualities are regularly excluded from public activities and spaces. Recognizing such fundamental ideas as ableist thinking is a radical move, but it is the only way to challenge ableism at its roots.

Engaging the rhetoric of generalized commonsensical reasoning grounded in the foundations of a culture is also difficult because it tends to be invisible against the backdrop of what almost everyone knows and accepts. This creates a conceptual problem: to identify ableism we need to make sense of ideas that have become so accepted they can limit our own perspectives. To render ableism visible requires a new way of seeing, and we must develop that orientation while examining things that we can only fully recognize as ableist once that view is developed. Recognizing ableism requires a shift in orientation, a perceptual gestalt framed by the term “ableism” itself. We are required to step outside of the rhetorical ground bounded by ableist assumptions in order to recognize ableism as a destructive and dangerous perspective. This makes it hard to convince others of ableism’s presence and pervasiveness. The same texts that scream ableism to those perceiving it are usually read innocently or naively by those who interpret them unthinkingly through an ableist viewpoint. Simply calling attention to the relevant warrants does not in itself demonstrate their discriminatory nature, so proving the presence of ableist reasoning requires that one already accept these ideas as ableist. Within ableist culture, ableism is a natural, necessary, and ultimately moral perspective required for the normal functioning of civilization—and it can be very hard to escape its limitations.

In rhetorical terms, this invisibility problem denotes a rhetoric that denies its own rhetoricity. Researchers have addressed this issue in areas like the rhetorics of science and judicial philosophy. Michael Calvin McGee and John R. Lyne used the term “antirhetoric” to describe the “cool, comfortably neutral technical reason (associated in the public mind with computing machines and sterile laboratories)” that scientists since Plato have sought to perfect.³³ As McGee and Lyne make clear, antirhetorics are still a form of rhetoric, whose “appeal to objective knowledge and its accompanying denunciation of rhetoric is one of the most effective rhetorical strategies.”³⁴ Similarly, in their study of the Law and Economics movement, Edward M. Panetta and Marouf Hasian Jr. defined “antirhetoric” as “any foundational quest for truth that privileges itself as *the* only or primary ‘rational,’ ‘objective,’ and ‘neutral’ means of acquiring epistemic knowledge.”³⁵ Practitioners of antirhetorics deny their own rhetoricity so as to appear value-neutral, mere conduits of the truth, who, by being above the sticky political world of rhetoric, are not tainted with its excesses.

But ableist rhetoric does not even need to make claims denying its own rhetoricity. It is so accepted that it does not require a defense, and it speaks without being given voice. It literally *goes without saying*, which is a rather remarkable thing for a rhetoric to do. Its silent pervasiveness becomes just part of the accepted ways of knowing, evaluating, and seeing. It becomes part of the generalized and accepted commonsensical orientations that a culture encourages people to adopt as conventions. It provides the warrants that audiences turn to when interpreting something as a text, especially when encountering one that does not fit nicely with the familiar things they encounter every day. Exposing it as rhetoric creates space for moving away from ableist culture, but until the culture at large accepts this, it will continue to provide the interpretive framework through which accessible structures and antidiscrimination laws are developed and deployed.

In summary, the meaning of disability arises out of the application of ableist warrants when readers, viewers, and/or hearers interpret something as a text in order to comprehend it. These rhetorical warrants are part of a coherent system (what Hall labels “ideology”), and they become the given and accepted ways of reading and interpreting texts in ableist culture. Repeated use of these warrants over extended periods of time establishes them as elementary knowledge and common sense, which reifies them as invisible, taken-for-granted truths taught by texts that require particular ways of knowing, valuing, and seeing. This rhetoric becomes the mechanism that transmits an ableist orientation from one generation to the next, and the warrants grow into the deeply buried roots of ableist

culture. As these warrants generate the commonsensical assumptions that inform cultural understanding, they have the potential to displace and render meaningless the various attempts to alter perception through laws, positive images of disability, or memorable political slogans. However, once recognized, the warrants' rhetorical action suggests how they can be changed. As rhetoric, they remain places of invention, which means they also provide a place for articulating new ways of interpreting.

Or, to sum this up in another way, in ableist culture one need not be told to think differently about Tracy Latimer's death. It is enough to simply identify the condition of her body, and that cues a reinterpretation of the narrative to one that rearticulates what readers should know as the critical facts, shifts the evaluation of Robert Latimer's act, and reimagines his daughter as a *disabled* child instead of simply a child. One thinks differently about her not because people rewrite the entire story, but because her disability changes everything. Ableist culture has whispered the rest of the story in our ears since we were born.

But once we know these whispers as ableist rhetoric, Tracy Latimer cannot be so easily understood merely by learning that she had cerebral palsy. Instead, introducing this element into the narrative simply generates new questions. Why was she in such pain? Was the Latimer family not aware of drugs and therapies that could have alleviated it? If they were aware, what ideas or material limitations stopped them from obtaining and providing them? How can pain—a quality that is nearly universal in the human experience—become so horrific that it can justify putting someone to death? Why was her quality of life so poor? What could have been done in her home, community, and society to improve it? To what extent did ableist assumptions lead to her father's apparent belief that causing her death was the only appropriate solution? The critical position developed in this project raises these and similar questions to problematize the Latimer narrative, making it *incomprehensible* instead of acceptable.

The Three Warrants

In this book I investigate three rhetorical warrants of ableist culture that I identify by the essential relationships they express: *deviance is evil*, *normal is natural*, and *body is able*. *Deviance is evil* refers to the religiously based interpretation of deviant bodies as punishment for sin or as marked by demonic possession.

While we may attempt to consign such views to an ignorant past, I will show how they live on in the contemporary traditions of criminalizing deviance and in the genre of stories about possession. *Normal is natural* refers to the practice of naturalizing “normal” behavior, viewing the “normal body” as a natural construct, and regarding any deviation from the norm as “freaks of nature” or violations of “natural law.” Unlike *deviance is evil*, this norm remains so viable today that most readers today will not question its reasonability. *Body is able* refers to the continuing practice of equivocating ability with skill, and the assumptions made about the capacity of a body once it is labeled “disabled.” This last warrant seems so commonsensical that many will reject my critique of it as absurd. These three guidelines shape the interpretation of the disabled body as unholy, unnatural, and unable. This results in an extremely negative orientation toward being or becoming disabled, and from this perspective arise the discriminatory attitudes and activities associated with an ableist culture. Although I firmly believe that other rhetorical warrants play a role in ableist culture, I seek to expose a substantial part of the rhetoric of ableism by examining each of these in more depth, tracing their history, demonstrating their transmission, and showing how they play a role in the contemporary status of disability.

As a rhetorical critic, I demonstrate the operation of these warrants by examining texts that orient audiences by having them adopt these principles. For each warrant, I analyze a historical text that I expect very few readers will know and a contemporary text that most will recognize and some will know quite well. I chose the specific contemporary pieces in part because of their ready accessibility and popularity, and also because of their presence in powerful cultural institutions. *Deviance is evil*, the focus of chapter 2, appears in the possession narrative, most dramatically expressed in the iconic book and film *The Exorcist* (1973), which has crafted a genre that continues to appear in pop culture. This warrant arises in the institution of religion and the spiritual, metaphysical, and supernatural ideas that ableist culture connects to images of disabled and disfigured bodies. *Normal is natural*, explored in chapter 3, plays a significant role in debate over whether the cochlear implant should be used in children born deaf, especially in the image of the cyborg found in that controversy. This warrant appears in the institution of government, where laws and policies are shaped by what most perceive as natural ways of acting that society must encourage. *Body is able*, the subject of chapter 4, repeatedly arises in the relationship of disability and sport, particularly as engaged in the U.S. federal case over whether Casey Martin should use a cart while golfing on the

Professional Golf Association Tour and Oscar Pistorius's international case to use his prosthetic legs and compete in the able-bodied Olympics. The cultural institution of sport, whose rhetorical functions have only recently gained substantial attention by scholars, has an explicit relationship with how bodies are understood, valued, and seen.³⁶

I chose the historical texts I critique for a more complex set of reasons. By closely reading these texts as moments in the ideological development of Western culture, I locate early iterations of the three warrants. I do not try to draw an unbroken line connecting these texts to the present, nor do I claim that these are the primary texts that historically produced ableism. I am also unconcerned with the issue of cause, and the related concerns of intent, blame, or responsibility. My analyses move beyond what might be considered the authorial intent of those who crafted these texts. Instead, I chose these texts by adopting a premise articulated well by Michel Foucault: "What counts in the things said by men is not so much what they may have thought or the extent to which these things represent their thoughts, as that which systematizes them from the outset, thus making them thereafter endlessly accessible to new discourses and open to the task of transforming them."³⁷ The texts I chose present the warrants I expose as systems of interpretation relied upon to make sense of a confounding situation, yet their interpretations are no longer considered valid. Thus, they reveal the warrants in a way that encourages people to reassess the viability of this ableist rhetoric, suggesting places where society might radically revise how disability comes to be understood.

To this end I analyze three historical works: Cotton Mather's published sermon *Memorable Providences*, Aristotle's treatise *Generation of Animals*, and Alexander Graham Bell's study *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*. They are by no means the only texts that espouse and rely on the ableist warrants that I wish to examine. Indeed, if my thesis holds any water at all, they merely float on the surface. But each shared the following characteristics that I believe make them particularly useful for this project.

First, each of these documents was important in its own time, and the documents spanned Western history from the early records of the Ancient Greek period until the early modern era in nineteenth-century America. Aristotle's work played a central role in the development of his program of natural science and is recognized as the first significant text in teratology (the study of monsters). Many historians contend that both Mather's popular sermon and his subsequent role in the event encouraged the hysterical chaos of the Salem Witch

Trials. Bell's elaborate argument to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in 1883 correlates with influential changes in conventional practices for educating deaf students and helped lay the foundation for the eugenics movement that began that same year with Sir Francis Galton's coining of the term.

Second, all three share an explicit scientific and rational ethos. Aristotle would become the influential father of natural science, Mather was known as a member of the intellectual elite for having graduated from Harvard at age fifteen and for writing extensively in the idiom of empirical research, and the noted inventor Bell used statistical data and scientific language to construct a paper presented to and published by the leading scientific organization in America at the time. This ethos is important because science occupies a powerful position in Western culture, and is often simplistically understood as the objective, unbiased, and systematic pursuit of the truth. As discussed above, science rhetorically denies its own rhetoricity. It accomplishes this by relying on and perpetuating already accepted warrants that few question, which means their interpretive schemes do not taint the text's scientific "objective" ethos. In other words, the comfortable presence of the warrants amidst these texts' claims to scientific objectivity implies the degree to which ableism has been accepted as commonsensical, valid, and true ways of understanding the world. Furthermore, the presence of these warrants in privileged scientific texts tends to validate them. As Robert Garland observes: "Modern science has often served merely to reinforce our cultural presuppositions."³⁸

Third, consistent with this scientific ethos, each of these works exhibits a strong degree of certainty, a zeal for its argument, and a complete lack of doubt as to its conclusions. These authors express complete confidence in their claims. The works become a simple exercise of copiously providing proof, as if the audience will have no choice but to agree once merely presented with the evidence. What these authors choose as proof clearly identifies the rhetorical warrants on which they rely to craft their argument. Without these warrants, their proof ceases to support their positions. In effect, these authors' conviction denotes a firm belief in the clarity and appropriateness of their way of knowing, valuing, and seeing; it indicates unconditional adoption of ableist thinking. Public acceptance of these texts therefore testifies to the widespread acceptance of ableist rhetoric. Today we should easily consider the zealous certainty voiced about the scientific validity of these works as mistaken allegiance, for our current scientific views discredit all of their essential claims. Aristotle's explanation of procreation, Mather's defense of demonic possession, and Bell's rationale for

eugenics all fundamentally conflict with contemporary scientific doctrine. Even a layperson would recognize that these texts are filled with archaic interpretations of human bodies and biology. Perhaps seeds of ableism's deconstruction can be sown by recognizing the strong acceptance of its warrants among bodies of knowledge completely disavowed by modern society.

Finally, in each of these instances, the impact of ableist rhetoric becomes rather visible and easy to reject. While you may have trouble identifying contemporary culture as oppressively ableist, you will have little difficulty finding these moments troubling. The events surrounding these texts are consigned to remain in the past because they present dark periods from which people wish to distance themselves. The Salem Witch Trials, the proverbial (and exaggerated) practice of infanticide by exposure, and the eugenics movement are all things that society as a whole now condemns. Linking these moments to ableist rhetoric, and revealing that same rhetoric in contemporary texts and practices, tends to show that the oppression of back then continues now. The science may have changed, the hate may not be so vocal, and the penalties may not be so inhumane, but the warrants that guided interpretation continue to propagate ableism today.

Postscript: A Word About Words

As a rhetorician I am very sensitive to the power of names and words, and deliberately chose to use phrases such as “disabled people” and “the disabled” in this book. I selected these terms over the now common “person-first” language, which employs phrases such as “people with disabilities” with the logic that identifying subjects as persons before noting their disability will prioritize their humanity. Proponents of person-first language argue that using the term “the disabled” tends to reduce people to a mere category identified by their condition, and that “disabled people” syntactically prioritizes disability over personhood. In theory, person-first language implicitly critiques the medical model, which conflates a person and their disability, because it approaches someone first as a person rather than as a broken body that needs to be fixed.

When originally developed, using person-first language challenged the conventions of ableist discourse that dehumanized people, and thus called attention to it. Saying or writing “person who is blind” instead of “the blind” sounds awkward and unwieldy to an ableist culture conditioned to think that a disability

defines a person. In this context, using person-first phrases made an important statement and encouraged hearers and readers to consider the reasons why someone would willingly speak and write in this unconventional manner. For these reasons I formerly encouraged person-first language in my writing and classrooms, and I defended the practice in my dissertation. At the time I argued that I could best support the challenge to ableist culture by using language that deviated from typical ableist terminology.

But person-first language is not without its problems or critics, and these have convinced me to instead use such terms as “disabled people” and “the disabled” in this book as a rhetorical practice that challenges ableist rhetoric. One problem with person-first language is that it risks reifying negative connotations of disability because it implicitly accepts the ableist idea that disability lessens value. The idea that putting disability first undermines personhood relies on the ableist assumption that something is wrong with being disabled. If we view disability as a neutral or positive term, then it should not undermine someone’s status and there would be no reason to put the person first and disability second. We would not object to calling someone an “outstanding student,” “exceptional athlete,” or “best friend,” and we do not express a preference for phrases like “person who is an outstanding student,” “person with exceptional athletic skills,” or “person who is my best friend.” In other words, using the adjective “disabled” as a neutral or even positive description is one way of following Foucault’s suggestion that we open the existing discursive practices to new meanings to transform the culture that uses such words and texts.

Additionally, the phrase “people with disabilities” may counterproductively displace attention from the ableist social oppression that it seeks to challenge. Linguistically putting the person first obscures the way that society generally treats disabled people as second-class citizens. Brendan Gleeson, among others, suggests that the term “disabled people” foregrounds the way that society strips humanity from the disabled through oppressive ableist practices.³⁹ In this view, the label “disabled people” activates a political orientation just as the phrase “oppressed people” calls immediate attention to the primary reason for discussing the group in the first place. Putting “disabled” first identifies people who face ableist discrimination on multiple levels all of the time, while “people with disabilities” are secure in their personhood and incidentally have an idiosyncratic difference that only partially impacts how they live. Person-first language deflects attention from the way that ableist society discriminates, and the ways that it is people’s disabilities that makes them the target of ableism.

For many, using person-first language connotes sensitivity to disability issues and demonstrates a desire to avoid appearing offensive. As a result, it has become the standard in the “politically correct” vernacular, which I view as its greatest flaw. Using terms because they appear “p.c.” becomes a substitute for genuine consideration of the feelings and views of the people described. In America the political right pretends that the left created the concept of political correctness, but it was conservative scholars, pundits, and radio talk show hosts that popularized this phrase as a pejorative way of mocking the political strategies of identity politics and other practices that recognized the power of names and words. We *should* choose our words carefully, but we *fail* to do so when we select terms that provide the superficial veneer of sensitivity while allowing us to avoid actually thinking about the views of the people who might be offended.