

4

MICHELLE JARMAN

DISMEMBERING THE LYNCH MOBIntersecting Narratives of Disability, Race,
and Sexual Menace

Late in September 2003, in the small town of Linden, Texas, four young white men assaulted Billy Ray Johnson, a cognitively impaired African American man who had lived within the community for over forty years. As a result of the attack, Johnson sustained a brain hemorrhage that left him in a coma for a week, and his injuries ultimately led to his confinement in a nursing home. Even presented with such stark and undeniable facts, jurors recommended suspended sentences and probation for his assailants in lieu of jail time. Unsatisfied with the jury's decisions, the judge imposed additional penalties, but ultimately none of the men spent more than sixty days in jail. Johnson's beating and ensuing court case generated national attention and was rightly condemned by family spokespersons, the NAACP, and the media as a bleak reminder of enduring racial injustice in the region.¹ Shifting the focus slightly from the undeniable racism involved, I invoke this story to open a discussion of the complications inherent in interpreting race *with* disability—complications that, I argue in this chapter, are inextricable from the deeply enmeshed histories of racist and ableist violence in the United States. Focusing on the early twentieth century, this chapter closely examines discourses surrounding white-on-black lynching and the eugenic cas-

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

1 tration of cognitively disabled men. I argue that these seemingly distinct histori-
2 cal practices are in actuality profoundly interconnected; in illuminating their
3 relationship to each other, I seek to demonstrate how reading race and disability
4 as interrelated, dynamic processes can inform our understanding of both past
5 and present violence.

6 Witnesses' statements make it clear that the assault on Johnson was moti-
7 vated by racism *and* ableism. On September 27, John Owens, Dallas Stone, James
8 Hicks, and Christopher Amox picked Johnson up as he was walking along a road,
9 brought him to a rural party, plied him with liquor, and then taunted him to
10 dance and perform for their amusement. Witnesses said Johnson was subjected
11 to myriad "racial slurs" and harassed by threats that the κκκ might come for
12 him. Johnson's cognitive impairment was also exploited for the crowd's pleasure.
13 He was encouraged to reach into the fire to retrieve a burning log, apparently to
14 flaunt his difficulty in discerning between safe and dangerous acts. By the end
15 of the night, the abuse escalated; Amox hit Johnson so hard he was immediately
16 knocked out. The men then loaded him into their truck, drove him a few miles,
17 and threw Johnson's unconscious body on the ground next to a public dump, on
18 top of a nest of stinging fire ants. He was left there for hours, until Hicks called
19 the police to report seeing a man who had "passed out on the ground" (Witt,
20 "Old South" 18).

21 Local authorities used Johnson's disability to downplay the racial nature of
22 the attack against him. For example, Malcolm Bales, from the Cass County U.S.
23 attorney's office, stated: "This was a bunch of guys who were mean-spirited and
24 cruel, and they abused a black man who was retarded." While admitting that
25 the offense was "terrible," Bales didn't think it should "give rise to a federal civil
26 rights case" (Witt, "Old South" 18). Bales draws upon the widespread cultural
27 understanding of disability as personal misfortune in order to position the act
28 as a juvenile schoolyard taunting rather than a hate crime. That is, he attempts
29 to defuse what he sees as the more volatile, divisive, and political issue of race
30 by invoking the seemingly medical and individual issue of impairment. In this
31 rhetorical maneuver, he relies upon a shared, cross-racial tolerance of disability
32 prejudice to deflect accusations of racism.

33 Perhaps because this strategy has been effective, the media coverage and the
34 NAACP's responses were couched primarily in racial terms. Johnson's disability
35 was portrayed as accentuating the cruelty of a racially motivated crime but was
36 not treated as itself affording a crucial lens of analysis. Lennard Davis makes a
37 similar observation about the brutal murder of James Byrd Jr., which occurred

a few years earlier in Jasper, Texas. The conviction of two white supremacist co-conspirators in 1999 marked the case as a racial hate crime, comparable to lynchings in the early part of the twentieth century.² Davis points out that while Byrd's racial identity was highly publicized, the fact that he was disabled—arthritic and prone to seizures—was hardly mentioned in the press (*Bending* 145–46). Davis reads this as evidence of widespread ableism in U.S. society and of an unwillingness to seriously consider disability discrimination as embedded within or connected to racially motivated attacks: “Whenever race and disability come together . . . ethnicity tends to be considered so much the ‘stronger’ category that disability disappears altogether” (*Bending* 147). Davis’s point about media inattention to disability oppression is important. Yet his assertion—which entails a hierarchical rather than an intersectional analysis of race and disability—is complicated by the media coverage of the attack against Johnson, whose cognitive impairment, rather than “disappearing,” has been repeatedly invoked. This invoking, however, has not referenced questions about how his disability contributed to his being targeted, or how the assault against him connects to a long history of violence against people with disabilities. As a result, the public discourse around these events has been truncated and one-dimensional.

In an effort to contribute to a more multidimensional approach, I argue for the importance of reading disability and race together—not as equal or competing, but as dynamic social and discursive processes that inform each other. In doing so, I propose that both the nature of the attack on Johnson and the interpretations surrounding it gesture back to historical narratives interweaving race, disability, and masculinity. Investigating these nodes of cultural meaning, I turn to the early decades of the twentieth century to look at two specific, racially charged, and disability-saturated cultural narratives: those surrounding racialized lynching and eugenic sterilization. To illuminate these rhetorical relationships, I read historic practices against literary figurations, paying particular attention to representations, in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*, of the presumed sexual threat of cognitively disabled men during this time period. These representations, I argue, support and are supported by the era’s racist discourses around lynching.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF DISABILITY, RACE, AND MENACING MASCULINITIES

In the early decades of the twentieth century, white apologists for racial violence invoked the sexual threat of a mythic black rapist to justify and normalize the brutal torture, murder, and bodily destruction that came to define white-on-black lynching.³ During this same period, eugenicists constructed cognitively disabled men as social menaces and sexual predators. Increased media attention to this putatively growing sexual threat (assumed to be directed against the sanctity of white womanhood) worked to promote public acceptance of institutionalization, surgical castration, and sterilization. Although the ritualized violence of lynching differed in form and overt purpose from the institutionalized violence of surgical sterilization, the intertwining narratives of rape and the extreme corporeal punishments enacted upon black and disabled bodies share important similarities. I suggest that even as racist mob violence and surgical sterilization followed distinct historical trajectories, the ubiquitous presence of lynching in the public imagination during the period from 1890 to 1940 may have informed and helped naturalize the rationale used to support medical castration and asexualization. Conversely, eugenic narratives of pervasive and uncontrollable sexual deviance among “feble-minded” classes likely bolstered the culture’s conflation of sexual “perversion” with the highly racialized category of cognitive inferiority, providing scientific language to describe the sexual “deviance” and purported aggression of African American males.

24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

In her compelling study connecting the histories of sexuality and race, Siobhan Somerville argues that the rhetorical formations of “whiteness” and “blackness” in the early twentieth century were deeply intertwined with emerging conceptualizations of homosexuality. Her work resists making simple analogies between sexual orientation and racial identity, instead focusing on how these “discourses had varying degrees of power to shape cultural understandings of bodies” during this period (9). While Somerville is cautious about equating these discursive practices, her analysis demonstrates that the emerging field of sexology was deeply underwritten by racist discourse and in turn illustrates the ways in which nonnormative sexualities were racialized. In a similar vein, I suggest that although the discourses of race and disability were distinct, they functioned fluidly and were often employed to undergird one another. Eugenics, of course, has been widely recognized and critiqued as a racialized and racist discourse, as well as an ableist one. Examining the racism and ableism of eugenics together

makes it possible to glimpse some of the ways in which the discourse of race was intensified by a growing intolerance toward disability during this era.

While the manifestations of disability and race oppression differed significantly during the era I am discussing, they are governed by a shared political logic. In her book *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*, Lisa Duggan's juxtaposition of lynching narratives at the turn of the twentieth century with a highly publicized lesbian love murder in Memphis provides an interesting methodological frame for the link I am developing between eugenic narratives of abnormal sexuality and the rape stories used to mobilize racist mob violence. Duggan suggests that the melodramatic public discourse around the black rapist and the homicidal lesbian positioned these nonnormative subjects as particular threats to white masculinity and the sanctity of the white middle-class home. Duggan's intent is not to imply equivalence between the (rare) lesbian love murder and (all-too-common) racialized lynching as social practices, but rather to explore how the historical linking of interracial and homosexual sexuality with violence effectively controlled public discourse. As Duggan states, "narrative technologies of sex and violence have been deployed to privatize and marginalize populations, political projects, and cultural concerns in the United States, promoting the substitution of moral pedagogy for public debate" (3). She points out that both narratives constructed an erotic triangle of power in which either the black rapist or lesbian lover disrupted both white patriarchy and the normative white heterosexual union. Like Duggan's lesbian murderess, the "black rapist" and the sexually aggressive "moron" represented tangible threats to the sanctity of white domesticity. White men, through their control of new media, the legal system, and cultural justifications of lynching, cast themselves as chivalrous heroes who rescued "their" women and families by eliminating these menaces.⁴

The schema of the love triangle, which Duggan utilizes in her analysis, is also useful in developing the connections between eugenic and lynching narratives. The importance of the black rapist as the villain of the lynching story, while widely acknowledged as a white cultural fantasy, cannot be overstated. As the historian Jonathan Markovitz states, "Rape was such an integral part of white southerners' common sense understanding of lynching narratives . . . that it hardly needed to be stated explicitly" (10). In other words, the enactment of lynching implied an interracial rape, and the rape of a white woman by a black man was considered so heinous a crime that anything less than lynching would have been too mild. This imagined violation of white women also provided jus-

1 tification for white men to blatantly exceed their own laws. In a widely quoted
2 defense of lynching, the governor of South Carolina, Ben Tillman, explained that
3 preserving white femininity made violence a moral imperative:

4 The white women of the South are in a state of siege . . . some lurking
5 demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or
6 beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity de-
7 stroyed. . . Shall men . . . demand for [the demon] the right to have a fair
8 trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am con-
9 cerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law. . . Civilization peels
10 off us . . . and we revert to the original savage type whose impulse . . . has
11 always been to kill! Kill! Kill! (qtd. in Markovitz 182)

12
13 The cultural power of this narrative to incite violence was clearly demon-
14 strated by the staggering number of lynchings carried out during this period.
15 From 1882 to 1930, the years when historians agree the best records were kept,
16 at least 3,220 African American men, women, and children were murdered by
17 lynch mobs.⁵ Although less than one fourth of the lynchings of African Ameri-
18 can men were in response to official charges of sexual assault (most of which
19 were false accusations), the connection of lynching with sexual transgression
20 was assumed. Already labeled as “demon” rapists, black male victims of lynch
21 mobs became public spectacles through the mutilation rites of lynching. These
22 protracted horrors often included being beaten or shot as well as all forms of
23 torture, including castration and the cutting and parceling out of body parts to
24 members of the crowd as souvenirs. This was followed by hanging or burning—
25 or both. Historically, lynching has been largely thought of as a regional terror,
26 a phenomenon largely isolated within the racial animosity of the South. Recent
27 scholarship, however, suggests that lynching and its supporting narratives were
28 integral to modern American cultural formation more generally.⁶ Examining
29 the ways these murders often became mass cultural events, Grace Elizabeth Hale
30 argues that “spectacle lynchings” were products of modernization (206). In the
31 years around the turn of the century, as white witnesses and participants began
32 to disseminate lynching stories, share photograph postcards and pamphlets, and
33 publicize upcoming mob executions in newspapers, the events themselves be-
34 came more ritualized, and their narratives took on standardized forms. As much
35 as the mob executions themselves, the proliferation of accounts and expansive
36 public participation functioned to normalize lynching as an expected, and even
37 justifiable, response to racial and sexual transgressions. In this way, each mob

killing demonstrated and further secured the expansive regulatory reach and oppressive power of the white majority.

Jacqueline Goldsby extends this idea by suggesting that lynching actually contained a “cultural logic” very much aligned with broader national assertions of primacy and strength in the modern era. She points out, however, that the extreme violence of lynching has complicated the nation’s willingness to remember “because lynching’s violence was so unspeakably brutal—and crucially, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time. . . . [We] have disavowed lynching’s normative relation to modernism’s history.” “Lynching’s ‘secrecy,’” Goldsby insists, is “an historical event” (6). The unspeakable brutality made lynching both highly visible and impossible to claim. Even as white people witnessed lynching’s viciousness, they also rejected it as unbelievable, unreal, and, in Goldsby’s terms, “spectacular.” This concurrent cultural normalization and disavowal of lynching has blurred its historical significance.

Goldsby’s framing of lynching as a spectacular cultural secret enables an important historical reclamation. In addition to the extreme violence of lynching, I would suggest that the racialized sexual threat—the myth of the demon rapist—has also been crucial to the collective forgetfulness about these murders. While these staged executions were dramatically public events, the supposed sexual attack precipitating the mob’s response allowed each murder to maintain an element of the private and individual. The rape narrative provided an essentially unique crime to “fit” the violent response of the lynch mob. In addition, the sexualization of the murder itself—especially in the form of castration—reinscribed the victim as sexual predator, regardless of the actual reasons behind his capture.

Robyn Wiegman suggests that the violent, ritualized castration enacted in most lynchings underscored black men’s “threat to white masculine power” (14). As a disciplinary tool, castration was central to defining the power and powerlessness among the participants in this cultural drama: “that of the mythically endowed rapist, the flower of civilization (the white woman) he intended to violently pluck, and the heroic interceptor (the white male) who would restore order by thwarting the black phallic insurgence” (93). Wiegman pays particular attention to the homoerotic dynamics among members of the white mob. Paradoxically, though, despite the charged physical intimacy inherent in ritualized castration, its more potent force seems to have been its reassertion of the primacy of white heterosexuality. Moreover, the intimacy with the victim’s sexual organs functioned in two additional but opposing directions: at once inscribing and ob-

1 jectifying the presumed excessive sexuality of the black male on a public scale,
2 castration also rendered the rite personal and private. This public and private
3 function of castration mirrors what Goldsby refers to as lynching's secrecy and
4 adds to the complicated nature of this violent history.

5 Against this public and private dynamic of the sexual violence of lynching and
6 its adherent cultural narrative, I want to consider the contemporaneous emer-
7 gence of surgical castration as a eugenic strategy to control and sexually punish
8 cognitively impaired men. I focus primarily upon the public rhetoric construct-
9 ing previously unmarked white male bodies as sexually "deviant." While African
10 American men were sterilized during this period, they were often caught up in
11 different systems of control. In the South, for example, institutions devoted to the
12 care and training of "feble-minded" individuals were strictly segregated, so Afri-
13 can Americans with cognitive disabilities were housed in mental institutions,
14 imprisoned, or left with families (Noll 98–103). The segregated nature of institu-
15 tions was mirrored by racially distinct discursive practices. Institutional direc-
16 tors spent little time justifying treatment of African American inmates (which
17 was invariably inferior to that of whites), but they did feel compelled to rational-
18 ize surgical castration and sterilization of white boys and men in their care.

19 Preoccupied with preserving the sanctity and strength of the white race,
20 leading eugenicists stressed the importance of controlling the reproduction and
21 sexuality of "feble-minded" people. They defined broad categories of inadequate
22 classes—in addition to designations based upon physical impairments and dis-
23 ease—in terms of sexual promiscuity, excessive appetites, and prodigious repro-
24 duction. Walter Fernald, a leading eugenicist, argued that controlling the sexual
25 impulses of such people should be of the highest priority: "Perhaps the chief
26 function of these classes in America has been to demonstrate that the commu-
27 nity is not the place for an adult imbecile . . . an adult human being, with the mind
28 of a child and the body and passion of an adult, is a foreign body in any com-
29 munity" (416). Nonconforming sexuality functioned as a foundational indicator
30 of otherness and was deployed by eugenicists to secure the public's approval of
31 medical regulation and confinement.

32 In the United States, the first law permitting sterilization went into effect in
33 Indiana in 1907; by 1921 fifteen states had laws on their books. Even before the
34 turn of the century, arguments favoring eugenic and punitive castration were
35 common. In 1894 a large public debate was instigated when Dr. Hoyt Pilcher,
36 superintendent of the Asylum for Idiots and Feble-minded Youths in Winfield,
37

Kansas, admitted to castrating forty-four boys in his institution. While Pilcher was publicly rebuked and removed from his position, many doctors and leading eugenicists came to his defense, and he was ultimately reinstated (Reilly 29). During this period, even though castration and sterilization were not legal, many institutional leaders took it upon themselves to pioneer such eugenic controls. Much as white lynch mobs asserted their racial privilege against African Americans, some administrators used their institutional power to move fluidly outside legal confines to enact what they perceived as correct and *correctional* measures upon the bodies entrusted to their care.

As states began enacting eugenic laws during the first decades of the twentieth century, much of the support for surgical sterilization continued to come directly from superintendents, many of whom were doctors. Martin Barr, the chief physician at the Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble-minded Children in the 1920s, was one such vocal enthusiast of sterilization. “Personally I prefer castration for the male . . . as insuring security beyond a peradventure,” he stated plainly. Making a small concession to those who might consider castration to be extreme, he went on to add, “if for sentimental reasons the removal of the organs are objected to, vasectomy . . . may be substituted” (234). Medical professionals’ cavalier attitudes toward massive surgical procedures did much to normalize the idea of medically regulating disabled bodies. In addition, continued public support was elicited through the promulgation of the idea that adult men with disabilities were unpredictable, foreign, and sexually dangerous.

FAULKNER’S EUGENIC VILLAIN (AND VICTIM)

To look more closely at the potency of this eugenically constructed predator, my analysis turns to literary representations of disability. Specifically, I consider how the characterizations of disabled white men seem informed not only by deterministic assumptions of sexual deviance but also by the racially inflected hypersexuality attributed to the purported villains (and inevitable victims) of lynching narratives. In order to better imagine the social mindset behind eugenic sterilization, I discuss Benjamin Compson’s castration in *The Sound and the Fury*. Through Benjy’s “gelding” in response to his supposed attack of a neighbor girl (263), Faulkner depicts social acceptance of eugenic thinking among the residents of Jefferson, Mississippi. After his beloved sister Caddy is exiled from the family compound, Benjy continues his daily ritual of lingering at the gate to

1 watch the girls returning from school—in a timeless anticipation of her return.
 2 One fateful day, the gate is left open, allowing Benjy to venture from the confines
 3 of the yard and (presumably) to sexually attack a neighbor girl. Witnessing the
 4 event (or in response to the girl’s cries), her father, Mr. Burgess, assails Benjy. The
 5 ultimate punishment for this transgression is Benjy’s rapid removal to a hospital
 6 to be surgically castrated.

7 Faulkner provides the details of this event from two differing points of view,
 8 that of Benjy and that of his brother Jason. Benjy’s stream-of-consciousness
 9 narrative portrays a series of miscommunications rather than a directed attack.
 10 His memories suggest nonthreatening motivations: “I opened the gate and they
 11 stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she
 12 screamed and I was trying to say” (53). From this point of view, Faulkner’s novel
 13 suggests that Benjy’s attack was an attempt to reach out to people beyond the
 14 parameters of his yard. On the other side, Jason might be seen as the narrative
 15 embodiment of the eugenic mindset that supports stigmatizing interpretations
 16 of cognitive impairment and compels the family to pursue castration in response
 17 to Benjy’s transgression. Jason admits that Benjy didn’t know “what he had been
 18 trying to do” (263), but he also reads the incident deterministically—as the in-
 19 evitable outcome of Benjy’s disability: “This family is bad enough, God knows.
 20 I could have told you, all the time” (52). The Compsons understand that Benjy
 21 crossed a moral line that must be restored; something drastic must be done
 22 to reestablish Benjy’s docility within the neighborhood. Internalizing a eugenic
 23 perspective, Jason believes that if they don’t institutionalize Benjy, which his par-
 24 ents refuse to do, they must do something decisive—something permanent—to
 25 assure their neighbors that such an attack will never happen again.

26 These contrasting perspectives within *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrate
 27 how vulnerable a nonlingual, cognitively impaired man is to the interpretations
 28 of others. The “truth” of Benjy’s intentions and actions are determined externally
 29 and inscribed upon his body, in this case surgically. His script is written by those
 30 observing him, judging him from a standard by which he has already been coded
 31 “deviant,” sexual, and dangerous. When Benjy’s family and neighbors witness an
 32 eighteen-year-old “idiot” (the scientific term used during this period) approach
 33 and touch a schoolgirl outside of his fence, one interpretation, that he is a sexual
 34 menace, presents itself as the natural, and only, conclusion. As Fernald’s asser-
 35 tion that “the community is not the place for an adult imbecile” makes clear, there
 36 was no socially acceptable place for a person like Benjy.
 37

Within Faulkner's framework, Benjy's castration takes place when he is eighteen years old, in 1913. During this era, men with cognitive impairments similar to those embodied by Benjy were highly vulnerable to surgical asexualization. In his historical research on "feble-mindedness," James Trent points out that "most sterilizations were castrations, and the majority were done on idiots and low-grade imbeciles whose 'obscene habits' were most bothersome to superintendents and their staff" (195). Within this social and historical context, a fictional figure such as Benjy already signaled to readers the potential danger of transgressive sexuality. The eugenic rationale of surgery functions to guarantee Benjy's sexual complacency and at the same time to ensure his limited freedom within the confines of his yard.

THE SOCIAL MENACE OF THE "MORON"

In the early part of the twentieth century, eugenicists pursued sterilization and castration primarily to control the behavior and reproduction of people diagnosed as "idiots" or "imbeciles"—the scientific terms for those not expected to advance beyond a mental age of seven years, many of whom were already confined in institutions or sequestered in family homes. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, as eugenicists became more concerned with "morons"—borderline "feble-minded" individuals who could pass for normal—they began sounding an alarm against the imminent sexual threat posed by these purported predators. Again, untarnished white women were invoked as the targeted prey of "deviant" and feble-minded men. Echoing the familiar rhetoric of the racialized mythic rapist to underscore the sexual threat of "morons," the female physician Isadore Dyer stated, "we ourselves . . . should try to establish or have enacted a law protecting our sisters and our descendants from the possibilities to which they have been exposed" (22).

In Chicago and other cities in the United States, numerous news articles reported on the sexual crimes of "morons," and new laws to confine and unsex these supposed criminals were widely discussed. In his court testimony, the psychologist David Rotman stressed the danger of letting such borderline individuals remain free and unsupervised: "Often they seem innocent enough, but they are responsible for a large percentage of our sex crimes. We will have no real solution of the moron problem until our legislators recognize the potential peril of these individuals" ("Urge" 3). In stories supporting the push for tougher laws,

1 sexual crimes were graphically reported. In some cases, the perpetrators had
2 been diagnosed with cognitive impairments, but in many instances the nature of
3 the crimes themselves—specifically sexual crimes against children—were used
4 by the media as conclusive evidence of the perpetrators’ intellectual incapacity.
5 Increasingly, sexual criminality was seen as synonymous with cognitive impair-
6 ment. For example, when the Illinois state representative Peter Granata intro-
7 duced a bill in the 1930s that would castrate *anyone* who committed a sexual
8 offense against a boy or girl under the age of sixteen, media coverage consis-
9 tently referred to the proposed legislation as the “bill to unsex morons” (“Bill” 1).

10 Returning to the intersections between narratives surrounding white-on-
11 black lynching and those authorizing eugenic castration, I suggest that the ex-
12 cesses of lynching—the spectacularization of murders as cultural events, the
13 barbaric mutilation, and communal participation—served a contrastive func-
14 tion to eugenic methods, rendering their purportedly scientific rhetoric and
15 medicalized violence seemingly more benign. In addition, lynching and surgical
16 castration had in common an ambiguous legal status. Although mob lynchings
17 were conducted arrogantly outside the law, the repetition, public acceptance, and
18 widespread participation in white-on-black violence allowed lynching to func-
19 tion as a sanctioned cultural practice. In fact, the extralegal nature of lynching
20 demonstrated to its victims that the boundaries of the law were quite permeable
21 along the racial divide, as the practice persisted, usually with full participation or
22 complicity of judges, sheriffs, and local officials.⁷ Sterilization and medical cas-
23 tration, by contrast, because they were most often enacted by white doctors upon
24 white inmates (and often rhetorically situated as an intraracial problem) during
25 this period, needed to be integrated into the rationality of law. Thus, while un-
26 told numbers of sterilizations were carried out behind institution walls, medical
27 professionals used these illegal operations as evidence to build public acceptance
28 and provide arguments for changing policy. At first officially outside the law, but
29 ultimately either incorporated within it (surgical castration) or supported by
30 legal authorities (lynching), each of these two modes of sexualized violence—the
31 spectacularized, ritual castration and murder of African American men, and the
32 more quietly conducted, scientifically rationalized castration and sterilization of
33 cognitively disabled men—likely had the effect of normalizing and legitimizing
34 the other. Certainly, each responded to what can be interpreted as the same cul-
35 turally produced fear: that of a threat, animalistic and sexual, to the sanctity of
36 normative white heterosexuality—a threat whose extremity necessitated drastic
37 and violent responses.

HURSTON'S RESCRIPTING OF THE LYNCHING NARRATIVE

In the 1930s and 1940s, the public proliferation of accounts featuring the threat of “morons” appears to have seemed more credible to some than the equally frequent invocations of the mythic racialized rapist. Zora Neale Hurston’s final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, replaces the latter of these figures with the former, rewriting the familiar lynching narrative so as to feature a white disabled villain. Published in 1948 but set in the early decades of the 1900s, *Seraph* traces nearly twenty-five years of marriage between Jim and Arvay Meserve, a hard-working white couple living on the edges of the Florida swamplands. Until recently, many critics had dismissed *Seraph* as an abandonment of Hurston’s rich black folk tradition,⁸ but over the last decade, several scholars have demonstrated that although the plot revolves around an insecure white woman and her domineering husband, Hurston’s novel nonetheless develops complex social, racial, and gendered critiques.⁹ Yet although disability looms large within the novel, driving much of the marital conflict, critics have, in keeping with *Seraph*’s own governing assumptions, tended to treat disability as a problem to be solved or, more specifically, as a domestic disruption the family must extirpate in order to achieve normative harmony. In closely examining representations of disability in Hurston’s novel, I seek to underscore the tacit eugenic narrative at play in the text.

Situated centrally in the novel is Earl, the eldest son of Arvay and Jim, who is born with an unspecified cognitive impairment and minor physical disabilities. Earl seems to possess a violent and uncontrollable nature. As a baby, he demonstrates an “unnatural” appetite, “ferociously” attacking his mother’s breast (68). As a toddler, he becomes unrecognizable to Arvay when he emits “animal howls” in response to losing a piece of fruit (100). His atavistic nature—a loose designation common in eugenic and racist rhetoric—portends his ultimate crime. Years later, Earl sexually assaults the teenage daughter of their neighbor, an act for which he is spectacularly hunted down and killed. In ways that exceed those of Benjy Compson’s castration, Earl’s murder becomes reminiscent of a lynching narrative. This parallel is troubling, given *Seraph*’s apparent endorsement of Earl’s death. The novel depicts the murder as unavoidable and as a necessary sacrifice that solidifies the survival and growth of his parents’ marriage. Thus, Hurston’s novel can be read as strategically deploying the sexual threat of a disabled figure in order to displace the figure of the mythic black rapist as the villain of the lynching story. More important, although the novel calls attention to the

lynching narrative, its deployment of the eugenic threat as the basis of an alternative script obscures the ways in which these cultural narratives bolster each other.

Hurston's representation of Earl reiterates eugenically inflected stereotypes tying cognitive and physical impairment to immorality, animalistic impulses, violence, and criminality. It is therefore not surprising that Earl's sexual awakening takes the form of an animalistic frenzy. When he is nearly sixteen, one of his father's friends, Alfredo Corregio, moves his family into the cabin behind the Meserve home. The Corregios have two daughters, the eldest of whom—the teenage Lucy Ann—immediately becomes an obsession to Earl. Recognizing the danger Earl suddenly represents, Jim and Arvay attempt to confine him to the house. Predictably, these efforts fail, and within weeks Earl executes his escape. Pretending to go to sleep after dinner, he cuts a hole in his screened window and slips out. Sitting at her sewing after dinner, Arvay is startled by shrieks mixed in with “howl[s]” and “yelps” coming from the grove (142). She immediately recognizes Earl's animal-like cries and runs toward the cottage to join a group crowded around Lucy Ann, who lies unconscious on the ground. “Blood was running down from a mangly spot on the side of her neck,” Arvay observes. “The fingers of the white hand that lay limply across her body were chewed and bloody.” The girl's skirt was torn and pulled up to reveal “a bleeding wound on one thigh” (143). Judging from her wounds, which seem more animalistic than sexual, Lucy Ann looks as if she had been attacked by a wild creature, not a young man.

The novel's representation of disability as animalistic reinstates deterministic rhetoric established by eugenicists in the early part of the century. Barr, the influential physician supporter of surgical sterilization quoted earlier, expressed the common eugenicist belief: “What is not fully recognized is the fact that mental defectives suffer not only from exaggerated sexual impulses, but from mental and moral debility . . . leaving them greater slaves to the impulse of the moment” (232). *Seraph* reifies these cultural assumptions in its depiction of Earl, who is portrayed as incapable of reigning in his destructive impulses. This is underscored when Earl turns upon his mother, who has been his lone defender. When Arvay discovers Earl hiding in the house, he attacks her: “The weak fingers feeling for her throat . . . the intent was here, only the strength was lacking” (148). Even this threat upon her own life fails to fracture Arvay's motherly devotion, which the novel depicts as misguided: Arvay urges Earl to run from the posse of men forming outside.

By establishing Earl as an undisputed sexual “deviant,” Hurston’s novel displaces the mythic black rapist as the villain of the lynching narrative. Instead, it seems to suggest that some disabled white men should rightly be understood as very *real* threats to women of all races. The efficacy of this reversal depends upon the very similar ways in which these two figures have been narrativized. In other words, the novel’s counternarrative calls attention to the parallel ways African American and cognitively impaired men were discursively produced as sexual predators in the early twentieth century. However, in its exposure of the racialized rape narrative as false, the novel has the effect of reinscribing the imagined sexual threat attributed to cognitively disabled men. This is a key and troubling point for two reasons: first, in order to challenge a racist cultural narrative, *Seraph* constructs cognitively disabled men as dangerous; second, even as the novel relies upon the similarity of these narratives, its textual displacement opposes and disconnects these two deeply imbricated figures.¹⁰

My intention is not to detract from *Seraph*’s critique of white-on-black lynching but rather to investigate the ramifications of deploying ableist narrative strategies as a means of counteracting racist practices. Such deployments, in foreclosing possibilities of reading racist and ableist narratives in conversation, obscure the ways in which eugenic discourses and rationales for racialized lynching may historically have lent support to each other. The interconnectedness of racist and ableist cultural assumptions is evident in the scene in which Earl leads his trackers into the depths of the swamp. Seemingly to trope upon the historic racism in evolutionary science, *Seraph*’s representation of Earl’s retreat to the swamp, a murky home to earlier forms of life, marks him as atavistic. After hunting for Earl all night, the posse goes to Joe Kelsey’s house to see if he has taken refuge there; it is Joe, Jim’s African American overseer, who suggests they look “in the Big Swamp somewhere” (149). Joe assures the men that he has seen Earl “ducking and dodging down in there . . . too many times” (149). By using an African American character to point the white men in the right direction, Hurston’s novel hints at a connectedness between the marginalization of blackness and disability.

This is not, however, to suggest that racism and ableism function in identical ways. For one thing, the posse hunting for Earl seems civilized in comparison to lynch mobs. By the 1940s, the extraordinary brutality and violence of lynching were well known, and so the contrast between a lynching and the tracking of Earl would have been striking to Hurston’s readers. It is also worth noting that this manhunt is led by Earl’s father—a detail that brings to the surface another crucial

difference between race and disability. In contrast to racial violence, which functioned to control whole communities of African Americans, regulation of people with disabilities often involved the active participation of family members. In an effort to keep the group of men from hurting Earl, Jim leads the search into the swamp, knowing “if it wasn’t for [his] presence, they would have killed Earl a long time ago” (153). For hours, Jim begs him from a distance to relinquish his rifle and give himself up. Earl not only ignores his pleas but threatens his father’s life: “seeing his father where he had no chance of escape, [Earl] advanced to get Jim exactly under his gun-sight again” (153). Witnessing Jim helpless in front of his son, the men fire on Earl, killing him instantly.

While the events leading up to Earl’s killing echo the rape narratives associated with lynching, Earl is not tortured or mutilated as lynching victims were. His death thus stands in contrast to the barbaric violence of lynching. This seeming restraint of violence in the novel, like the scientific rationalization of surgical castration, may have been instrumental in procuring the familial acceptance of such measures that was crucial to their success. As Jim says to Arvay: “You ought to be able to see how they wouldn’t want nobody like Earl loose on the community” (148). In participating in Earl’s removal, Jim validates the eugenic solution to disability: death or incarceration.

CONCLUSION

In considering the eugenic constructions of the sexually menacing male in relation to the rape story that fueled white-on-black lynching, I have traced the ways both discourses functioned within turn-of-the-century public discourses to support a reconsolidation of power in the white, heterosexual, nondisabled domestic structure. These discourses, and the social practices they supported, demonstrate some of the ways in which the promises of a more inclusive democracy initiated in the post-Civil War period were dramatically shut down and contained in the early decades of the twentieth century. One of the reasons these sensationalized stories proved to be so culturally salient is that they potently stigmatized non-white, disabled, and sexualized bodies in ways that compelled a public response. At the same time, however, because the victim was successfully positioned by those in authority as the perpetrator or criminal, his or her—if we remember Duggan’s lesbian love murder—personal fate (the violence enacted upon him or her by the lynch mob, the court, or the surgeon) was strategically removed from the political to the personal sphere. In other words, much as the spectacu-

lar violence and sexualized backstory of lynching subverted the public nature of the events, the deterministic—and also sexualized—diagnostics around disabled men during this period tended to privatize the social, surgical, and institutional controls enacted upon them.

Returning to contemporary manifestations of violence against African American and disabled people, it is important to remember the historical narratives informing such acts. The turn-of-the-century period is particularly relevant because in many ways, in the early decades of a new century, we find ourselves in a somewhat analogous political milieu—one in which the promises of feminism, civil rights, gay liberation, and disability rights continue to be curtailed and contained in various ways. However, these liberatory social movements have succeeded in engendering widespread intolerance to violence that was commonplace in an earlier era. The jurors in Johnson’s civil case against his attackers, for example, sent a clear message that such targeted violence would not be tolerated, awarding Johnson nine million dollars in damages (Witt, “\$9 Million” 3). At the same time, however, apologists for Johnson’s white assailants cited the brutality of lynchings as evidence of the comparative innocuousness of Johnson’s attack. These arguments are disingenuous, of course. Moreover, the men who attacked Johnson were motivated by both racism and ableism. Not only did his cognitive disability contribute to his being targeted for abuse but the attack produced more impairments, resulting in his permanent incarceration in a nursing home. This makes evident the continued inextricability in contemporary U.S. culture of racially motivated and ableist violence. The violence enacted against Johnson should be understood as the legacy of intersecting discourses that underwrote both lynch mob violence and surgical castration in the early twentieth century: while the brutality of his attackers’ actions echoes and perpetuates a history of spectacularized public violence against African American people, Johnson’s incarceration in an institution is also a form of violence—one that shares much with the privatizing discourses of eugenic science that rationalized and promoted the castration of cognitively disabled men. Indeed, much as early twentieth-century doctors represented castration, sterilization, or permanent confinement of disabled people as compassionate treatments, some contemporary commentators have interpreted Johnson’s confinement as beneficial to him. As one supporter of the defendants stated, “[Johnson] is better off today than he’s ever been in his life” (Witt, “Old South” 18). Locking Billy Ray Johnson up in a nursing home outside of town may allow the locals the luxury of forgetting his story, but as the legacies of lynching, surgical sterilization, and cultural

1 violence remind us, distorting memories of these oppressive and intersecting
2 rhetorical strategies prevents us from condemning ableism and racism as inter-
3 acting processes, and this is certainly a “luxury” we cannot afford.

4 NOTES

5 Many thanks to Lennard Davis, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder for helping me
6 begin to think through these issues during my dissertation research. I am especially
7 grateful to Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow for their invaluable insights during the
8 many stages of revision of this chapter. I would also like to express my gratitude to the
9 anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Finally, I want to acknowledge and
10 remember my dear friend, Chris Bell, whose legacy continues to encourage and inform
11 my work on race and disability.

12 1. As reported by Howard Witt, Johnson’s family members, with the legal and finan-
13 cial support of the NAACP, are pursuing the case as a racial hate crime. The FBI has been
14 brought in to determine whether Johnson’s attack should be classified as such; their
15 investigation is ongoing.

16 2. James Byrd Jr. was kidnapped and brutally murdered by white supremacists
17 John William King and Lawrence Russell Brewer. These men chained Byrd to a truck,
18 dragged him for over two miles, and dismembered his body.

19 3. I use the term “black rapist” purposefully to call attention to the way this figure
20 was deployed historically to objectify, dehumanize, and stereotype African American
21 males.

22 4. The term “moron” was coined by eugenicists to refer to individuals who were cog-
23 natively disabled but who could “pass” as nondisabled. As I discuss further, this ability
24 to pass became more and more troubling to eugenic reformers, and socially unaccept-
25 able sexual behavior—among women and men—was increasingly seen as evidence of
26 cognitive disability.

27 5. For more detailed information on lynching statistics, see “Appendix C” in Tol-
28 nay and Beck 271–72. These figures summarize lynching from the Deep South and do
29 not include antiblack violence in other regions of the country. For limitations of these
30 numbers, see “Appendix A” in Tolnay and Beck 259–63.

31 6. In addition to the invaluable records kept by the NAACP and other antilynching
32 groups to document lynching in the United States, recent photographic collections and
33 publications have ushered in a renewed interest in this important history. The shocking
34 and powerful photographic collection compiled by James Allen and exhibited across
35 the country was also published in book form in 2000 under the same title, *Without
36 Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Anne Rice’s *Witnessing Lynching*, pub-
37 lished in 2003, is a careful selection of literary works, essays, and journal articles by
38 leading figures in the antilynching movement. Most recently, Christopher Waldrep’s

Lynching in America constructs a fascinating history of lynching out of primary source documents from the early 1800s through 1945.

7. Although lynching was never considered legal, the federal government's resistance to actually criminalizing these acts as murder effectively provided amnesty to lynch mobs. As Jacqueline Goldsby points out, each time antilynching legislation was introduced—in 1901, 1921, 1922, and 1934—Congress rejected the bills ostensibly to protect states' rights (18–20).

8. Mary Helen Washington, for example, suggests that the novel fails because Hurston abandons the wellspring of “her unique esthetic—the black cultural tradition” (12). Alice Walker, who pioneered a revival of public interest in Hurston's work, flatly rejects *Seraph*: “[Hurston's] work, too, became reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid. This is especially true of her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people who are bores, which is” (xvi).

9. Claudia Tate, for one, argues that *Seraph on the Suwanee* engages in a persistent joke on white culture's fetishization of passive female desire (371). Janet St. Clair also suggests that feminist dismissals of Hurston's protagonist too easily accept a superficial reading of Arvey as a passive, self-abnegating, and dependent wife, while failing to acknowledge the “subversive undertow” at work in the “feminist substory . . . [that rejects] both oppression and, more important, the mental submission to oppression” (38). Although *Seraph*'s resolution to the marital battles waged between Jim and Arvey Meserve doesn't represent a straightforward feminist victory, it is true that, as Ann DuCille points out, the novel does expose the sexual violence and oppression endemic to heterosexual marriage.

10. For a provocative consideration of the ways in which historically situated counternarratives are constructed to contest and rescript melodramatic dominant discourses, often using but resignifying the same discursive material from the dominant narrative, see Duggan's discussion of the counternarratives to the lynching narrative constructed in the journalism of Ida B. Wells (*Sapphic* 20–22).