



## The Rhetoric Of Ableism

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### Abstract

*This essay argues that rhetoric is both the means by which ableist culture perpetuates itself and the basis of successful strategies for challenging its practices. Public demonstrations, countercultural performances, autobiography, transformative histories, and critiques of ableist films and novels all apply rhetorical solutions to the problem of ableism. The study employs Kenneth Burke's theory of identification and Stuart Hall's configuration of ideology to uncover those commonplace "languages of practical thought" that generate and sustain ableist perspectives and ideas. Focusing on the rhetoric of ableism at the level of the warrants used to interpret disability, this article closely examines the way Aristotle's Generation of Animals relies on the equivocation "normal is natural."*

As Disability Studies continues its exploration of disability in society, scholars have paid growing attention to the rhetoric of disability. This scholarship approaches the subject from different angles, but it generally works with similar premises including the position that rhetoric can shape the way disability is understood and (in)forms its political implications. These studies range from considering how rhetoric crafts disability to examining how ideas of disability impact theories of rhetoric. Brenda Jo Brueggemann explores how rhetoric constructs the disability of deafness, revealing how Hearing culture oppresses Deaf culture.<sup>1</sup> Jay Dolmage shows how contemporary histories have "imported [exclusion] into the classical world" and oversimplified the complex views of disability that informed that era's influential theories of rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson's *Embodied Rhetorics* collects several works covering the terrain between these studies.<sup>3</sup> I seek to build upon these authors' valuable work by continuing to examine rhetoric but turning to a related yet different focus: I analyze ableism instead of disability. While disability and ableism clearly relate, I consider attending to the latter to be similar to studying racism instead of race. Neither project makes sense without the other, and arguably studying disability has greater potential for promoting awareness and emancipatory politics, but studying ableism promises unique results such as identifying the identical mechanisms that propagate different types of discrimination.

In this essay I analyze ableism as a *rhetorical* problem for three reasons. First, ableist culture sustains and perpetuates itself via rhetoric; the ways of interpreting disability and assumptions about bodies that produce ableism are learned. The previous generation teaches it to the next and cultures spread it to each other through modes of intercultural exchange. Adopting a rhetorical perspective to the problem of ableism thus exposes the social systems that keep it alive. This informs my second reason for viewing ableism as rhetoric, as revealing how it thrives suggests ways of curtailing its growth and promoting its demise. Many of the strategies already adopted by disability rights activists to confront ableism explicitly or implicitly address it as rhetoric. Public demonstrations, countercultural performances, autobiography, transformative histories of disability and disabling practices, and critiques of ableist films and novels all apply rhetorical solutions to the problem. Identifying ableism as rhetoric and exploring its systems dynamic reveals how these corrective practices work. We can use such information to refine the successful techniques, reinvent those that fail, and realize new tactics. Third, I contend that any means of challenging ableism must eventually encounter its rhetorical power. As I explain below, ableism is that most insidious form of rhetoric that has become reified and so widely accepted as common sense that it denies its own rhetoricity—it "*goes without saying*." To fully address it we must name its presence, for cultural assumptions accepted uncritically adopt the mantle of "simple truth" and become extremely difficult to rebut. As the neologism "ableism" itself testifies, we need new words to reveal the places it resides and new language to describe how it feeds. Without doing so, ableist ways of thinking and interpreting will operate as the context for making sense of any acts challenging discrimination, which undermines their impact, reduces their symbolic potential, and can even transform them into superficial measures that give the appearance of change yet elide a recalcitrant ableist system.

In the next sections I sketch an approach to investigating ableist rhetoric. The first develops a theoretical matrix for the project, articulating relationships between ideology and rhetoric, and engaging the problem of revealing a rhetoric that denies its own existence. The second expands on this foundation by developing a concept I label "rhetorical norms" as a construct for analyzing the inner workings of ableist systems of interpretation. The third section closely examines the rhetoric of Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* to demonstrate the ways an ableist rhetorical norm can operate. I conclude by suggesting how a strategy of crafting new words—the practice of neologism—can challenge ableism, and consider implications of this study in the context of disability rights and activist politics working to secure them.

## Ideology And Rhetoric: Revealing Ableist Interpretation

Stuart Hall defines 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."<sup>4</sup> 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." Ideology thus described is especially useful for explaining the hierarchical arrangements 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."<sup>5</sup> Hall's articulation of ideology is an excellent construct for understanding ableism. Ableism dominates the thinking of our society as a whole and it clearly operates as a discourse of power and

domination. Furthermore, ableism becomes most visible as a "mental framework" transmitted through rhetorical devices including language, imagery, and systems of representation.

Every orientation, perspective, and ideology has its basis somewhere; 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."<sup>6</sup> Earlier, Kenneth Burke argued similarly that "Stimuli do not possess an *absolute* meaning" and pointed out that "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." Burke concludes: "Any given situation derives its character from the entire framework of interpretation by which we judge it."<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of ableism as a framework of interpretation, we identify its dimensions by examining the linguistic codes and rhetorical assumptions that govern sense making. 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." In other words, meaning exists primarily as a function of language rather than a natural or necessary consequent of material objects or bodies. Our comprehension of reality itself arises from our perspective, so "different frameworks of interpretation will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is."<sup>8</sup>

Complicating the simple materiality of things does not necessarily entail rejecting material existence: things can exist as simultaneously material and rhetorical constructs. Material might be experienced "directly" by a body, but what—and how—this material "is" depends on filters that shape perception. Repeated stress on a knee may promote swelling, strain ligaments, and alter the shape of cartilage. Depending on the way it is described, this might be understood as "injury," expected "wear and tear," or "a natural consequence of running long distances." If the condition causes pain, it might be considered "trauma," a "danger signal," or the simple "cost that one pays for extraordinary performance." To say and understand what happened we use "stress," "swelling," "ligaments," and "cartilage" as concepts that we have created to relate to the experience in particular ways. Substitute "stress" with "strenuous activity," "work," "play," or "abuse" and the condition changes yet its materiality remains the same. Exchange "swelling," with "inflammation," "being sore," "recovery mechanisms," or "cushioning," and this alters the proscribed treatments. Replace "ligaments" and "cartilage" with "tissues," "sinews," "flesh," or "well designed structural components" and the anatomy itself becomes something else. The event could not be explained at all if the words were lost or it involved something unnamed. The context in which observers place something and the implications of the words used to make it meaningful rhetorically construct the experience. We say what happened, and if we do not or cannot, then the characteristics of the event remain undefined, unfixed, and mutable. Material may exist independently of our subjective awareness, but what something is, how it should be, and why it matters cannot exist except as a function of language.

Whatever the factual (or material, or empirical, or scientific) status of disability, my only concern here is the concept's *meaning*. Disability is a loaded term, weighted down with tools and supplies sufficient for the task of making difference. Such baggage begs to be unpacked. But the project quickly becomes complicated because the ropes that bind the luggage are largely invisible as common sense. Racism and sexism may have no legitimate place in this "civilized" world, but the

precepts governing modern civility continue to allow an ableist orientation. This requires those who would undermine ableist thinking to step outside of the rhetorical foundations bounded by ableist assumptions in order to recognize ableism as a destructive and dangerous perspective. In rhetorical terms, the problem is one of studying from within a rhetoric that denies its own rhetoricity.

Researchers have addressed this issue with other rhetorics. 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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in their study of the Law and Economics movement, Edward M. Panetta and Marouf Hasian, Jr. used the term "anti-rhetoric," which they define as "any foundational quest for truth that privileges itself as *the* only or primary 'rational,' 'objective,' and 'neutral' means of acquiring epistemic knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Practitioners of anti-rhetorics deny their own rhetoricity so as to appear value neutral, mere messengers of the truth, who by being above the sticky political world of rhetoric are not tainted with its excesses.

Recognizing ableism requires a shift in orientation, a perceptual gestalt framed by the filter of the term "ableism" itself. The same texts that broadcast "Ableism!" to those oriented to perceive it are usually read innocently even when viewed from a liberal, humanitarian, or progressive perspective. Ableism is so pervasive that it is difficult to identify until one begins to interrogate the governing assumptions of well-intentioned society. Within the space allowed by these rhetorical premises, ableism appears natural, necessary, and ultimately moral discrimination required for the normal functioning of civilization. Consider a set of stairs. An ableist culture thinks little of stairs, or even sees them as elegant architectural devices—especially those grand marble masterpieces that elevate buildings of state. But disability rights activists see stairs as a discriminatory apparatus—a "no crips allowed" sign that only those aware of ableism can read—that makes their inevitable presence around government buildings a not-so-subtle statement about who belongs in our most important public spaces. But the device has become so accepted in our culture that the idea of stairs as oppressive technology will strike many as ludicrous. Several years ago when I began to study ableism, a professor—unconvinced of the value of the project—questioned my developing arguments by pointing to a set of steps and exclaiming, "Next you'll be telling me that those stairs discriminate!" He was right.

The professor's surprise suggests that commonplace cultural assumptions support themselves because the very arguments available against them seem unwarranted and invalid. Interrogating stairs was such an outrageous idea that a simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument depicted the critique of ableism as a fallacy. As an ingrained part of the interpretive frameworks sanctioned by culture, ableism gets reinforced by the everyday practice of interpreting and making sense of the world. Using this idea of *what* ableism does at the intersection of rhetoric and ideology, I next develop a way of understanding *how* it operates. I argue that this way of conceiving ableist thinking as rhetorical practice identifies potential approaches for challenging ableism.

## Rhetorical Norms Of Ableist Culture

I work to expose and critique the rhetorical structure that argument theory labels the "warrant." Stephen Toulmin defined the warrant as the "self-authorizing statement" connecting the "grounds" of an argument (also called "data") to the "claim."<sup>12</sup> He defined claims as "assertions put forward publicly for general

acceptance" and grounds as "statements specifying particular facts about a situation ... facts, observations, statistical data, previous conclusions, or other specific information [used] as immediate support for [a] claim."<sup>13</sup> Thus, warrants are the reasoning that—as "the *previously agreed general* ways of arguing applied in the particular case"—are relied upon "as ones whose trustworthiness is well established."<sup>14</sup> I use the term "rhetorical norms" to describe warrants that become commonplace assumptions that govern interpretation and promote an ideological orientation throughout a culture. In Toulmin's formulation, most warrants are "field-dependent," meaning that they appear and work primarily within a specialized discipline or area such as mathematics, sport, or law.<sup>15</sup> What I call rhetorical norms transcend field boundaries to become generally available for interpretation across a culture; they become "common sense," or reasoning that one need not justify or defend because it works and appears in so many places that to question its legitimacy in one area would require reconsidering its use in all the others.<sup>16</sup> Common to the culture as a whole, rhetorical norms appear arhetorical; not requiring defense by argument they make reasonable the discriminatory action that would otherwise appear to violate other cultural norms of justice or equity. Two rhetorical norms of ableist culture I have discussed elsewhere; I briefly explore a third in this article to demonstrate how these rhetorical norms sustain ableist rhetoric and discrimination.

One warrant that informs ableist rhetoric is seeing deviance as a sign of evil. Western art and literature have long relied on the convention of displaying physical abnormalities to reveal the presence of evil that would otherwise be invisible. As Paul Longmore notes, "Disability has often been used as a melodramatic device ... Among the most persistent is the association of disability with malevolence. Deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil."<sup>17</sup> At the foundation of this visual rhetoric is a long-standing religious perspective that reads physical imperfection as evidence of moral imperfection. Ruth Mellinkoff catalogues extensively the appearance of various deviant physiques and disabilities in Northern European art of the late middle ages. She argues that "Disease, deformity, and physical features different from those of the majority were linked with evil and sin, and so it is not surprising to find these alleged imperfections attached in artistic representations to historical, legendary, and contemporary figures who were viewed as ignoble or evil."<sup>18</sup> Mellinkoff maintains that this artistic tradition was not particular to the period on which she focuses, tracing "an amazingly consistent pattern of thought [that] has persisted in Western society, from at least as early as ancient Greece into our own time."<sup>19</sup>

Using physical deviance to render evil visible saturates the Western artistic tradition, and it plays a crucial role in such genres as horror stories and films about demonic possession. Indeed, in these narratives the rhetorical norm is essential, for viewers and readers who fail to interpret the deviant/disabled body as possessed will not understand the plot at all. In the possession narrative—from Cotton Mather's 1689 treatise *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* to Peter Blatty's contemporary 1973 touchstone *The Exorcist*—the audience must learn to see or read the possessed body's physical difference as proof of a spiritual Other's presence.<sup>20</sup> Unlike many texts that simply display ableist associations between disability and criminality, monstrosity, or immorality, the possession narrative *requires* the audience to adopt the ableist perspective that "deviance is evil" in order to comprehend the story. The possession narrative literally puts a face on evil, and it teaches us to recognize that face by its extreme deviance from the "norm."

Similarly, ableist rhetoric often dictates realizing ability as arising directly and simply from the physical body, employing a warrant that specifies "body is able."

The social systems of sport provide an excellent example, for these activities privilege particular skills or physical capacities by rewarding their presence or performance within the structure of a game. Without the sport of golf, having the capacity to club a small white ball extremely accurately over long distances would be meaningless; only in the context of the game does this become an ability that elevates the victorious winner to obtain rewards of fame and wealth. The rules of such games create spaces where particular performances appear salient, which shape expectations of bodily capacity, and which identify as "disabled" or "incapacitated" those whose bodies do not or cannot participate.

As I argue elsewhere, this rhetoric played a central role in the 1998-2001 controversy over whether professional golfer Casey Martin should be allowed to use a cart during play in Professional Golf Association (PGA) events as an accommodation for his disability.<sup>21</sup> Arguments opposing Martin's case frequently depended on the rhetorical norm "body is able" by locating his ability entirely in his body; sport's presumed celebration of natural physical prowess obscures the ways rules always already privilege some physical capacities over others. Presuming that the rules created a "level playing field" to which everyone had equal access, advocates for the PGA argued that "fair play" required that *nobody* be given the unfair advantage of using a device that others were not allowed to employ. Although the decision to grant his accommodation was ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court, the widespread opposition to Martin's case showed the depth of this norm's pervasiveness. As this case demonstrates, the ableist equation of ability and body protects ableist institutions and architecture from scrutiny, locating as simple knowledge the clearly questionable assumption that one's abilities inhere in one's physical corpus. As the capacities privileged, rewarded, and normalized by cultural systems that depend on their presence and performance, "abilities" are thoroughly social constructs communicated rhetorically. Knowing them as such reverses the ableist episteme that "body is able," opening to critique potentially any claim that some skill should be favored over others.

In this article I analyze "normal is natural," a third rhetorical norm that obscures as "natural law" the ideological preference for things "normal." Like "deviance is evil" and "body is able" this warrant justifies ableist discrimination by providing rationale for subordinating disabled people. It works by deploying the idea of the normal body as a fact of nature, thereby absolving responsibility for employing it in medical, scientific, political, and religious institutions. According to this norm, valuing normal bodies and devaluing "abnormal" bodies reflects sensible awareness of the way things naturally work instead of employing questionable ideology. Presumably dispassionate and objective science that merely describes natural law presents the idea of the normal body as "objective truth." Normality thus becomes an inherent and relatively unquestionable characteristic, appearing against a framework grounded in scientific certainty. Historically, society often declaims discriminatory assumptions as scientific fact. As Robert Garland observes: "Modern science has often served merely to reinforce our cultural presuppositions."<sup>22</sup> Scientific or medical evidence can redefine what counts as normal because generally the culture considers these approaches (at least when conducted "objectively") to merely report "facts." In contrast, social criticism and commentary (particularly when conducted "subjectively") struggle for legitimacy. This tends to bury and protect the roots of ableist discrimination. As Abby Wilkerson argues, this division between the natural and the social works "to obscure the social origin of practices that differentially harm members of oppressed groups, while making these harms appear to be 'facts of nature.'"<sup>23</sup>

## **Aristotle's *Generation Of Animals*: Naturalizing The Normal**

Arguments relying on the logic that "normal is natural" appear throughout history, and one field that has relied extensively on this ableist assumption is the science of "teratology," also known as the study of "monsters." The prominence of the norm can be traced throughout the development of this science back to ancient Greece, where it played a central role in its founding text. Aristotle established the basis for the modern aetiology of congenital deformity in his *Generation of Animals* (GA).<sup>24</sup> Although other scholars addressed the subject, Aristotle's book inspired several influential physiologists including Galen of Pergamon, Hieronymus Fabricius ab Aquapendente, William Harvey, and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who coined the term teratology in 1822.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle's reliance on the norm "normal is natural" thus informed the primary body of research on the topic for over 2000 years.

Moreover, "normal is natural" works as a basic tenet in Aristotle's explanations for all biological phenomena. GA occupies a significant space among his works, as it "integrated as it is nowhere else" Aristotle's thoughts on origins, form, and natural law.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, in GA Aristotle couples his observations on procreation with his typology of four causes, well known as the foundation of his epistemology, to explain why life takes its variety of forms.<sup>27</sup> By studying the reproductive system, he sought to account for the diversity of nature itself. As Garland puts it, "Aristotle's insistence that 'monsters' are a necessary part of Nature is not so much evidence of exceptional enlightenment on his part, but rather the consequence of his need to defend the epistemological foundations of his biological system."<sup>28</sup>

The book was the first to defend systematically an "anthropocentric view of deformity" as scientific observations of biological fact.<sup>29</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, Aristotle viewed the world of animals as a hierarchy with the human male at the apex.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the human male stood as the standard of physical perfection "in comparison with which all other animal life is at best deviant, at worst monstrous."<sup>31</sup> This aspect of the text plays a significant role in my analysis, both because it illuminates how distorted "scientific objectivity" can be, and because it suggests the attitude inherent in the rhetorical norm of interpreting what is understood as normal as natural.

Because Aristotle often explicitly stated his reasoning, it is not difficult to locate the places where the text encourages the reader to operate with the assumption that "normal is natural." In the first book of the GA he declares, "It is what occurs generally that is most in accord with the course of Nature."<sup>32</sup> The idea appears more explicitly in book four, where he uses it as the foundation for his discussion of monsters, stating, "(A)nyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type."<sup>33</sup> He makes it clear that by this he does not mean the monstrosity is a completely unnatural being, because nothing that exists "is contrary to Nature in her entirety," but rather that it belongs to the class of things "contrary ... to Nature *in the generality of cases*."<sup>34</sup> Whenever "some violence is done contrary to what is normal ... that *ipso facto* means something contrary to Nature, because in the case of things which admit and do not exclude the possibility of being other than they are, '*normal*' and '*natural*' are identical."<sup>35</sup> At the end of the book, Aristotle even suggests the origins of this idea, arguing that Nature testifies to the importance of regularity and normality in the repeated patterns of the sun and moon. And, as the moon dictates the rising and falling tides, all life must follow the same regular pattern of generation and decay. Whatever the reasons for the stable revolution of the heavenly bodies, "Nature's aim" is to bring all things into similar patterns, "to measure the generations and endings of things by the measures of the bodies ... ." But Nature ultimately fails to accomplish this task, foiled by "the indeterminateness of matter and the existence of a plurality of

principles which impede the natural processes of generation and dissolution and so often are the causes of things occurring contrary to Nature."<sup>36</sup> In these final claims, Aristotle raises his equation of the normal and natural to the status of the natural laws governing the bodies of the universe.

The repeated presence of this norm as warrant in Aristotle's argument is necessary to maintain his general orientation as a natural scientist bent on revealing the laws that govern nature. Because the monster violates the rules that Aristotle argues govern reproduction, it must be explained. If his analysis reveals the ways nature works, then that which does not follow those principles must be deemed relatively unnatural. In other words, the claim that "normal is natural" maintains the consistency and cogency of his explanation of the reproductive system. Without the rhetorical norm, his systemic explanation would be imperfect. Instead of revealing the laws of nature, all his copious examples would simply suggest the way things worked "most of the time." According to Aristotelian logic, a theory of how something should work must account for those cases where it does not. By defining those exceptions to the rules he establishes as aberrations contrary to nature, Aristotle protects the general epistemological claims of his explanation of how animals are generated; the exception makes the rule. By rendering the normal as the intended aim of nature, he places it on an elevated foundation that does not require defending or elaboration and that escapes critique. He raises it to the status of a rhetoric that denies its own rhetoricity, positioning it as that which goes without saying.

Constructing the abnormal body as unnatural ultimately attached very negative connotations to disability. Monsters were considered "sub-human," imperfect beings not deserving of the rights of other citizens, and Aristotle argued in the *Politics* there should be a law "to prevent the rearing of deformed children."<sup>37</sup> When interpreted later through the Christian worldview that dominated Europe in the middle ages, developing beliefs about teratology coupled biological explanations for congenital deformity with religious beliefs. Generally, in these times the occasion of monstrous births was linked with sin and unholy activities. As Ottavia Niccoli has explained, the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries were marked by a widespread belief and well published theory that linked abnormal births with conception during a woman's menstrual period. Because such intercourse was deemed sinful and unclean (an interpretation of Leviticus 16 and the apocryphal Ezra 4), such births were deemed punishment for irresponsible sexual activity. Even works by physicians like Lievin Lemnes and Ambrose Paré contained this view, and the scientific aura surrounding their work helped validate the idea. In this period, infants and people described as monstrous were treated as Satan's offspring, and it was standard practice for midwives to terminate the life of "monstrosities" at birth.<sup>38</sup> This practice makes very clear the ableist implications of the rhetorical warrant "normal is natural."

## Conclusion: A Case For Strategic Neologism

Identifying ableism requires rhetorical invention, for to critique a rhetoric that goes without saying requires new words. Neologism, strategically used, can help uncover the unexamined assumptions of a way of seeing the world. Burke explains:

We learn to single out certain relationships in accordance with the particular linguistic texture into which we are born, though we may privately manipulate this linguistic texture to formulate still other relationships. When we do so, we invent new terms, or apply our old vocabulary in new ways, attempting to socialize our position by so manipulating the linguistic equipment of our group that our particular



additions or alterations can be shown to fit into the old texture.<sup>39</sup>

Similar work has been done to establish the concept of "sexism." Until the word came into being and use, what it described operated in the open as acceptable patterns of thought. Oppressed women certainly might find such thinking objectionable, but without the word their critique lacks a specific target. In such a situation they may target another related concept, such as the institutions generated and protected by the attitude, as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with the hegemonic oppressive orientation. The target may be chosen because it is closely linked with the attitude, because it is deemed a particularly heinous practice, or because it lies close to the border of acceptable behavior and is thus easily accessible. Once chosen, the target becomes the receptacle for dissatisfaction with the unnamed orientation, and efforts to remove the practice become closely aligned with repudiating the offensive perspective.

Because attacking the target requires forging coalitions with those who may oppose the target for other reasons, this strategically important move can actually help protect the underlying oppressive orientation from discovery, and eliminating the target can be confused with eliminating the oppressive view. Continued dissatisfaction with the still unnamed premises of the oppressive system can lead to the acquisition of new targets, and the cycle begins anew. Yet naming and calling into question *the view itself* raises the possibility of altering the very strands out of which the oppressive institutions are spun. Identifying the view as problematic adds a critical dimension to the struggle by denying the simplistic perspective that sees altering a few target structures as a solution to the problem. Naming the view exposes its pervasiveness, assumptions, and implications to criticism.

The struggle against sexism generally fits this pattern. Dissatisfaction with gender inequality has led to the removal of a number of oppressive measures but has yet to eliminate the ideological practice now named sexism. Early targets included the right to vote and property rights allowed to women, yet even once these institutional targets were eradicated, women still faced an oppressive attitude. The feminist movement made a critical step when it identified the lack of words that could identify the oppression of women. Betty Friedan addressed this issue specifically in 1963, and aptly described "The Problem that Has No Name."<sup>40</sup> While Friedan's name for the problem ("feminine mystique") does not survive in contemporary nomenclature, she identified the impetus for naming the problem "sexism," a term that appeared a few years after her groundbreaking book.<sup>41</sup> Giving the name sexism to the regime of gender oppressive behaviors, and exploring its extensive saturation of our paternalistic culture, has motivated and shaped feminist thought, critique, and action ever since. Grounded in the name, awareness of sexism can continue to evolve as social critics and activists expand our society's understanding of what the terms mean and how it continues to influence our culture.

When we first encounter the name "ableism," we understand it by analogy to words like sexism, by our knowledge of its apparent roots ("able" and "ism"), and by the rules for combining roots into words. A possible referent at this stage is hate crime against, abusive or mocking behavior toward, or Nazi Germany's genocide of people with disabilities. Targeted here, many find ableism easy to reject and use the term to describe a distasteful way of acting. Ableism becomes problematic when individuals come across a case where their own seemingly benign opinions might be labeled "ableist." Using the label to identify an act or an opinion that fits within one's own orientation requires individuals to reconcile their own sense of self worth and their judgment of the issue in question.

This neologist method of critiquing an antirhetorical rhetoric has certain

advantages over other alternatives. In this approach empathy and understanding become tools in the struggle against ableism, for recognizing in oneself motives behind actions previously ascribed solely to the Other generates far more pressure to examine and explain those motives than when they can be quickly dismissed as somebody else's problem. We can think of the Other as a two-dimensional being, driven by indiscernible, illogical, and unrealistic ideas, but we resist thinking about ourselves in this way. Finding similarities between our thoughts and those we ascribe to Others not only allows us a measure of empathy and understanding, it expands our awareness of our own unexamined biases. Furthermore, this method maintains a process perspective of language and its relationship to thought. It is not necessary to have a complete understanding of ableism before beginning to recognize it, for that understanding can grow and evolve. Finally, this explanation puts the emphasis on one's perspective, orientation, or worldview. Naming ableism in these terms allows us to recognize it as a rhetorical construct, sustained by articulation and iteration, and open to transformation by these same techniques.

This perspective can also suggest ways to align the struggle against ableism with the emancipatory projects of other oppressed populations. Focusing on specific rhetorical norms one can observe their use as warrants for other cultural prejudices, which reveals ways that questioning their validity and authority can challenge other discriminatory orientations as well as ableism. In contemporary society the norm "deviance is evil" is often applied to claims about fatness, where a cultural obsession with obesity declares it the greatest physical malady facing the current generation. Similarly, "body is able" appears in ageist discrimination against the elderly, and the natural process of living across time is equated with the social process of aging in which conventional devices regularly used as part of everyday life cease to work for a person with changing physical capabilities. The ability to use the phone or stairs depends on the social norms that make these devices acceptable and useful at least as much as it depends on physical capacity. Finally, the warrant "normal is natural" has played an overt and vocal role in discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations as heterosexual activity is described as normal and therefore the only natural form of sex. In each case, activists and scholars confronting ableism can find support, complementary theories, and political alliances with these groups, particularly as they struggle against a common rhetorical foe.

Finally, focusing on ableism as rhetoric makes rhetorical responses more attractive. Political rhetoric seems much less empty when one understands that the problems confronted are also rhetorical in nature. The problem is not that deviance is bad, it is that ableism teaches seeing it that way. The problem is not that being abnormal is unnatural, it is that ableism teaches valuing normalcy that way. The problem is not that ability resides in the body, and that a body with different skills is inherently unable to function in society, it is that ableism teaches knowing ability that way. Confronting ableism as visual, ideological, and epistemic problems does not require us to set aside efforts to change the material order of society—such as working to provide access to public spaces—but it does empower disability literature, art, slogans, and protests as crucial to the effort to change what disability means.

If we locate the problem in disability, then the ableist absolves his or her responsibility for discrimination and may not even recognize its presence. If we locate the problem in ableism, then the ableist must question her or his orientation. The critic's task is to make ableism so apparent and irredeemable that one cannot practice it without incurring social castigation. This requires substantial vigilance, for ableist thinking pervades the culture. For example, as I write this, I am tempted to use medical metaphors to explain the task and script something

like "we cannot simply excise the tumor of ableism and heal the culture, for it has metastasized and infiltrated every organ of society." Yet this metaphor relies on an ableist perspective that motivates with the fear of death and turns to medical solutions to repair a body in decay. Using it, I would endorse and perpetuate ableist rhetoric, just as I would by using deafness as a metaphor for obstinacy ("Marie was deaf to their pleas for bread") or blindness to convey ignorance ("George turned a blind eye to global warming"). The pervasiveness of these and similar metaphors, like the cultural ubiquity of using images of disabled bodies to inspire pity, suggest the scale of the work ahead, and the ease with which one can resort to using them warns of the need for critical evaluation of one's own rhetoric. Yet the task can be accomplished. Just as feminists have changed Western culture by naming and promoting recognition of sexism, the glass ceiling, and patriarchy—admittedly a work in progress, yet also one that can celebrate remarkable achievements—we can reform ableist culture by using rhetoric to craft awareness and political action.

## Endnotes

1. Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington DC: Gallaudet UP, 1999).

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2. Jay Dolmage, "'Breathe Upon Us an Even Flame': Hephaestus, History, and the Body of Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 25 (2006): 122.

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3. James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, eds., *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2001).

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4. Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees," in *Critical Studies in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996) 26.

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5. Hall 27.

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6. Lawrence Grossberg, ed., "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Critical Studies in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996) 137.

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7. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984) 35.

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8. Burke 35.

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9. Michael Calvin McGee and John R. Lyne, "What Are Nice Folks Like You Doing in a Place Like This?" in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) 389.

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10. McGee and Lyne 393.

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11. Edward M. Panetta and Marouf Hasian, Jr., "Anti-Rhetoric as Rhetoric: The Law and Economics Movement," *Communication Quarterly* 24 (1994): 58.

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12. Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning* (New York: Macmillan, 1984) 46.

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13. Toulmin, et al. 29, 37-38.

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14. Toulmin, et al. 45.

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15. Toulmin, et al. 17, 271-421.

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16. Toulmin classifies such warrants as "field-invariant," but most of his work focused on the field-dependent warrant. I find the former term somewhat unwieldy and necessarily dependent on the fields that it renders irrelevant, so I choose the term "rhetorical norms" to emphasize their rhetorical function and commonplace appearance. Toulmin, et al. 17.

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17. Paul K. Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987) 66.

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18. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages: Volume One: Text* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 121.

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19. Mellinkoff 113.

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20. James L. Cherney, "Disability as the Mark of the Devil: Cotton Mather's 'Memorable Providences,'" Rhetoric and Public Address Division, Southern States Communication Association, Memphis, Tennessee, March 28, 1996, presentation.

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21. James L. Cherney, "Sport, (Dis)ability, and Public Controversy: Ableist Rhetoric and Casey Martin v. PGA Tour, Inc." *Case Studies in Sport Communication*, ed. Robert S. Brown and Daniel J. O'Rourke III (Westport, CT: Praeger 2002) 81-104.

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22. Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) 5.

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23. Abby L. Wilkerson, *Diagnosis Difference: The Moral Authority of Medicine*

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) 81.

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24. Garland 4, 141, 152-53; A. L. Peck, "Preface," *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle, trans. A. L. Peck, 1942 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) vi-xx.

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25. Garland 141; Peck xix-xx. Harvey produced the first significant modern exploration of the subject, which he named *Exercitationes de Generatione Animalium* after Aristotle's work. Nancy Tuana describes the entire medical profession until modern times as followers of "The Aristotelian Tradition" and describes Aristotle's influence on physicians from Galen to ParÉ. Nancy Tuana, *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993) 21-25.

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26. Peck v-vi.

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27. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). The four causes appear throughout Aristotle's studies and philosophy, as he argued that to know a thing was to know each of its four causes. The Final Cause is the end or purpose of a thing, the Motive Cause is the agent responsible for initiating the process that creates the thing, the Formal Cause or form identifies the course which that process follows, and the Material Cause or matter is that out of which the thing is made. For a house, the Final Cause is to provide shelter, the Motive Cause is the carpenter who built it, the Formal Cause is the blueprints, and the Material Cause is the lumber and supplies out of which it is built. See Peck xxxviii-xlii.

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28. Garland 156.

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29. Garland 1.

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30. Aristotle's elevation of the human male as the highest form of life has understandably drawn criticism from several feminist scholars. See Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Aristotle and Woman," *Journal of the History of Biology* 9 (1976): 183-213; Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 3-4, 32-35, 42-43; Tuana 18-21. Rosemarie Garland Thomson further suggests that Aristotle's move unites the political struggles of women and people with disabilities by associating female and disabled bodies. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 19-21.

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31. Garland 1.

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32. Aristotle, GA 101.

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33. Aristotle, GA 401.

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34. Aristotle, GA 425.

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35. Aristotle, GA 475, emphasis added.

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36. Aristotle, GA 481-3.

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37. Aristotle, *Politics* 7.1335b 19-21.

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38. Ottavia Niccoli, "'Menstruum Quasi Monstruum: Monstrous Births and Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century," trans. Mary M. Gallucci, *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 1-25.

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39. Burke 36.

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40. Betty Friedan, "The Problem that Has No Name," *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) 15-32.

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41. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first publication of the word "sexism" with this meaning occurred in 1968, in a speech by Caroline Bird that was delivered before the Episcopal Church Executive Council in Greenwich, CT, and subsequently published in *Vital Speeches of the Day*. She wrote: "There is recognition abroad that we are in many ways a sexist country. Sexism is judging people by their sex where sex doesn't matter. Sexism is intended to rhyme with racism. Both have been used to keep the powers that be in power" (90). Caroline Bird, "On Being Born Female," *Vital Speeches of the Day* (15 Nov. 1968): 88-91. See "Sexism," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. 15 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989) 112.

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