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Love is not blind : eugenics, blindness, and marriage in the United States, 1840-1940

Marissa Leigh Slaughter Stalvey
University of Toledo

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A Thesis

entitled

Love is Not Blind: Eugenics, Blindness, and Marriage in the United States, 1840-1940

by

Marissa Leigh Slaughter Stalvey

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Liberal Studies Degree

Dr. Kim Nielsen, Committee Chair

Dr. Diane Britton, Committee Member

Dr. Liat Ben-Moshe, Committee Member

Dr. Patricia R. Komuniecki, Dean
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

May 2014

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An Abstract of

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The eugenics movement targeted people who were blind and visually impaired as part of "the unfit" members of society who needed to be prevented from passing on their blindness to successive generations. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, eugenicists, blindness professionals, and even other blind people believed that the best way to eliminate blindness was through the restriction of marriages between blind people. Ophthalmologist Lucien Howe repeatedly attempted to secure legislation barring blind people from marrying. Blindness professionals, especially educators, stressed the importance of the separation of the sexes in residential schools for the blind as the way in which to prevent blind marriages and intermarriages, and thus to prevent future generations of blind people. Blind people's assessment of their own marriageability was complex and sometimes contradictory. While some shirked contemporary views, most others accepted and promoted the eugenic idea that hereditary blindness should not be passed to the next generation. Many historians have previously overlooked the unique and rich history of blind people in the United States. This research hopes to illuminate an important aspect of that history.

To Memere and Pop Pop, who never doubted my abilities, and who nurtured my love of history.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Ruby Nelle Cole and William Glaser were in love. They had known each other for years and were childhood sweethearts. They wished to wed, but found resistance. Like many young couples in love, they decided to elope. They escaped from Indianapolis to Louisville, Kentucky, with the help of a friend. After being refused a marriage license in Louisville and Jeffersonville, Indiana, they were granted a license in Battle Creek, Michigan. Glaser's brother, who was his guardian, even though he was over the age of eighteen, pursued the couple. The brother said he would seek to have the marriage annulled. This was the story that appeared in the July 3, 1926 issue of the *Boston Herald*.¹ Why would a story with local interest make the *Boston Herald*, a newspaper over nine hundred miles away? And why was there so much drama surrounding the elopement of a young couple in love? Both Cole and Glaser were blind. The reasons for the newsworthiness of the story and the difficulties the couple faced stemmed from deep concerns about eugenics and the marriages of blind people.

¹ "Couple, Both Blind, Elope and Marry," *Boston Herald*, July 3, 1926, "Blindness" Scrapbook v. 26, 109. Perkins School for the Blind Archives; and "Eloping Blind Pupils Prove that Love Laughs at Locksmiths," *The Indianapolis News*, July 2, 1926, 1.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eugenicists, blindness professionals, and blind people used the marriageability of blind people as the vehicle by which to discuss eugenics. Eugenicists like Lucien Howe were very concerned with the hereditary consequences of marriages between blind people. Blindness professionals argued that strict separation of the sexes at residential schools was necessary to prevent marriages and the transmission of blindness to successive generations. Blind people themselves debated marriage, basing many of their arguments in eugenic language. The majority of all three groups felt strongly that marriage was not an option for blind people because of the probability of increasing the number of “defectives” in society.

Sir Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s cousin, first coined the term “eugenics” in 1883. Galton wrote that eugenics deals with “questions bearing on what is termed in Greek, *eugenes*, namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities.”² He contended that the present generation could influence the generations to come by better breeding practices. If society regulated the breeding of the “fit,” they would populate the world and pass down their good traits until the population was perfected.³

Eugenics is the pseudoscience of controlling human heredity as a way to improve society. Eugenics originated out of the idea that hereditary ailments—some of which we understand today as not linked to heredity—could be passed from generation to generation and would eventually degenerate society and the human gene pool. The goal of eugenicists was to prevent people they saw as having hereditary “defects” from

² Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), 24 as quoted in Nicholas Gillham, *A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207.

³ Mark A. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 8.

procreating. Eugenics taught that people with disabilities like blindness, nonwhites, the poor, people from Asia and eastern and southern Europe, and even drunks would pass their undesirable characteristics along to the next generation, polluting the gene pool, if not stopped. Eugenics is typically grouped into positive and negative forms. Positive eugenics promoted the reproduction of the “fit” members of society through better marriages and having more children. Negative eugenics, contrarily, sought to restrict the reproduction of “the unfit” through marriage laws, sterilization, and even murder in the guise of “mercy killings” or euthanasia.⁴ The eugenics movement began in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and lasted until the middle of the twentieth century. It reached its high water mark in the first decades of the 1900s, and lost much of its support during World War II when Hitler appropriated America’s eugenics laws for use in Nazi Germany.

Blindness was one “defect” eugenicists wished to eradicate. “Legal blindness” in the United States, as today defined by the Social Security Administration, is “best corrected visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye; or a visual field limitation such that the widest diameter of the visual field, in the better eye, subtends an angle no greater than 20 degrees.”⁵ “Low vision” is popularly defined as a visual acuity less than 20/70 but better than the legal limit of 20/200. Contrary to popular understanding, not all people who are blind experience the same level of vision. There is a wide range of ways in

⁴ Andrew Goliszek, *In the Name of Science: a History of Secret Programs, Medical Research, and Human Experimentation* (New York: Martins Press, 2003), 76.

⁵ “Definition of Legal Blindness,” Social Security Administration. Web: <http://lighthouse.org/about-low-vision-blindness/definition-legal-blindness/>.

which a person can see, anything from absolutely no light perception to substantial usable vision, and variations in between.

In biblical times, society viewed blindness as a curse from God for the sins of the parents. In the Medieval European era, blind people were spiritual “seers.” In early modernity, society saw “the blind” as pitiable beings who lived miserable lives and were in need of care and support. Some men, including Valentin Haüy of France, began promoting the education of blind people, which had before this time been written off as impossible or pointless. Although they were still viewed as pitiable, Samuel Gridley Howe and other nineteenth century U.S. reformers began to educate blind people and prepare them for viable occupations. However, the eugenic movement’s assertion that blind people were part of the “unfit” of society restricted their chances at equal access to education and employment. A blind civil rights movement formed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Advocacy, along with advances in technology, have led to better education, more career opportunities, and increased independence for people who are blind in the United States. Today, blind people still face employment discrimination and societal prejudice, but their situation has improved by leaps and bounds from the time of eugenics.

In the last two decades, historians have explored eugenics, its causes, ideology, and effects.⁶ The history of disability has come into its own within the last fifteen years,

⁶ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 2003); Elof Carlson, *The Unfit: a History of a Bad Idea*. (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001); Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: the Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Paul A. Lombardo, *Century of Eugenics in*

with landmark publications exploring the multifaceted experiences of people with disabilities throughout history, and the ways in which they have been treated by broader society.⁷ Some historians have discussed the history of disability as it relates to the eugenics movement.⁸ Fewer still have discussed blindness as a specific category of disability.⁹

This extensive historiography has informed this project in numerous ways. However, this project owes much to the historians who first explored the experiences of blind people in the eugenics movement, including Jennifer Free, James Ravin, and Alexandra Stern.¹⁰ Free examines the eugenics movement's use of segregation in the

America: from the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Phillip Reilly, *The Surgical Solution: a History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁷ Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 763-793; Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg, eds., *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁸ Douglas C. Baynton, "'These Pushful Days': Time and Disability in the Age of Eugenics," *Health and History* 13, no. 2 (2011): 43-64; Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of 'Defective' Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Pfeiffer, "Eugenics and Disability Discrimination," *Disability and Society* 9, no. 4 (1994): 481-499; Steven Selden, "Eugenics and the Social Construction of Merit, Race, and Disability," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 32, no. 2 (2000): 235-252; Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁹ Frances Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: a Social History of Blindness in the United States* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind Press, 2004); Catherine Kudlick, "Modernity's Miss-Fits: Blind Girls and Marriage in France and America, 1820-1920," in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, edited by Rudolph Bell and Virginia Yans (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Kudlick, "The Outlook of *The Problem* and the Problem with *The Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 187-213 (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Kudlick and Zina Weygand, *Reflections: the Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary France* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); David M. Lubin, "Losing Sight: War, Authority, and Blindness in British and American Visual Cultures, 1914-22," *Art History* 34, no. 4 (September 2011): 796-817; Brian Miller, "Speaking for Themselves: the Blind Civil Rights Movement and the Battle for the Iowa Braille School," diss., University of Iowa, 2013; Kim Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Jennifer Free, "Inherently Undesirable: American Identity and the Role of Negative

establishment of the Ohio State School for the Blind, and later in the creation of segregated classes in public schools for students who were blind. Ravin and Stern evaluate Lucien Howe's efforts to prevent blindness through restrictive marriage legislation. Catherine Kudlick expertly details the gendered ableism that abounded in the marriage choices available to blind women in France and America, and Kim Nielsen describes the eugenic fears present in Helen Keller's failed attempt at marriage. However, as yet no one has researched and elaborated upon the beliefs of "ordinary" blind people on marriage and eugenics, nor has anyone discussed in detail the eugenic concerns of blindness professionals and their attempts to restrict the contact between blind boys and blind girls in residential schools. This project seeks to fill this gap and add to the literature on blindness, eugenics, and disability history.

Chapter 2 describes the life and work of ophthalmologist-turned-eugenicist Lucien Howe, who sought to prevent the spread of blindness to successive generations by restricting the marriage of blind people. Chapter 3 examines the writings of professionals in the blindness field, including the first four directors of the Perkins School for the Blind. These men believed blindness needed to be eliminated, and the separation of the sexes in residential schools was a key way in which they attempted to obtain the end of hereditary blindness. Chapter 4 uncovers the debates blind people themselves had on the subject of their marriage and intermarriage. Many blind people used gendered arguments along with eugenic ideology to claim that blind people, especially women, should abstain

Eugenics in the Education of Visually Impaired and Blind Students in Ohio, 1870-1930," diss., University of Toledo, 2012; James Ravin and Alexandra Stern, "Lucien Howe, Hereditary Blindness, and the Eugenics Movement," *JAMA Ophthalmology* 128, no. 7 (July 2010): 924-930.

from marriage. Chapter 5 illustrates how the public is still fascinated with the marriages of blind people, although the discussion has moved away from eugenics.

Chapter 2

Eugenicists and Blindness

Eugenicists counted blind people among the “defectives” of society who polluted the gene pool and drained the state’s economic resources. The ophthalmologist-turned-eugenicist Lucien Howe spent much of his life advocating for the prevention of blindness, first by drastically reducing the occurrence of ophthalmia neonatorum, and then, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, by attempting to secure the passage of legislation preventing the marriage of blind people.

The ophthalmological community highly regards Lucien Howe for his medical research and reforms. The American Ophthalmological Society names one of its highest honors after Howe, given to physicians and scientists who, through their contributions, enhance the field of ophthalmology. The American Medical Association has awarded the Lucien Howe Prize Medal in Ophthalmology since 1926. Additionally, Howe founded the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, now known as the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School. Several other awards and honors are named after him. He published dozens of journal articles and was the chair of numerous committees, including the Section of Ophthalmology of the American Medical

Association.¹¹ Howe was very active in the American eugenics movement and worked for the majority of his life on ways, both medically and legislatively, to prevent blindness. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, he was the single most important figure in the medical community on concerns of eugenics and blindness.

Lucien Howe (1848-1928) was born on September 18, 1848 in Standish, Maine. He graduated from Bowdoin College in 1870 and received his medical degree from Bellevue Hospital Medical College in 1872. He helped found the Buffalo Eye and Ear Infirmary in 1876. He practiced medicine for the next five decades, and is responsible for some of the most important discoveries in ophthalmology in the twentieth century.¹²

Howe first became interested in transmittable eye diseases in the early 1880s. He thought that blindness in infants due to infections seemed to be rising. He traveled to Egypt and Syria to study infectious eye diseases. Around the same time, Carl Credé, a German physician, discovered that a few drops of silver nitrate in the eyes of newborns would cure ophthalmia neonatorum, blindness at birth caused by the transmission of gonococcus from a mother with gonorrhea to her newborn. Howe lobbied unsuccessfully for years to get legislation passed that would require doctors, nurses, and midwives to report such cases immediately, as well as requiring them to use the silver nitrate solution. His attempts were finally successful in 1890 when New York passed the “Howe Law,”

¹¹ James Ravin and Alexandra Stern, “Lucien Howe, Hereditary Blindness, and the Eugenics Movement,” *JAMA Ophthalmology* 128, no. 7 (July 2010). Web: <http://archophth.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=426069>.

¹² For a description of Howe’s discoveries outside the scope of this project, see Ravin and Stern, “Lucien Howe, Hereditary Blindness, and the Eugenics Movement,” *JAMA Ophthalmology* 128, no. 7 (July 2010): 924-930.

and many states soon adopted the same legislation.¹³ Nevertheless, twenty years later, in 1910, those interested in preventable forms of blindness like ophthalmia neonatorum were still lobbying for additional states to pass such legislation and for physicians and the public to follow the existing legislation.¹⁴

Lucien Howe spent the last two decades of his life actively engaged in the eugenics movement, promoting and lobbying for legislation to prevent hereditary blindness. In 1915, Howe wrote to Charles Davenport, the leader of the eugenics movement in America, to ask for the pedigrees of families known to have hereditary blindness. Through this correspondence, he became acquainted with Harry Laughlin, Davenport's assistant, who was very interested in prevention by means of compulsory sterilization. Historian Edwin Black notes that Laughlin and other eugenicists believed preventing blindness through legislation prohibiting the marriage of people who were blind was a small part of a much larger picture. If they were successful in passing this legislation, then they could move on to preventing the procreation of other categories of "the unfit."¹⁵ In fact, Harry Laughlin's initial goal was to prevent the procreation of ten percent of the American population.¹⁶

In 1918, Howe became a member of the Eugenics Research Association. That year, he presented a paper at the annual conference of the American Medical Association Section of Ophthalmology, which later appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical*

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Russell Sage Foundation, "A Brief Account of Organized Work for the Prevention of Blindness in Four States, NY, MD, Ohio, Mass," 1910. Pamphlet File, Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

¹⁵ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 2003), 145-146.

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

Association (JAMA). In his paper, Howe argued for measures to prevent hereditary blindness. He first noted that eugenics meant “improvement of a race by selective breeding.”¹⁷ He then argued, “It is unjust to the blind to allow them to be brought into existence simply to lead miserable lives.”¹⁸ Howe also argued that letting people who were blind procreate was unfair to taxpayers who would bear the financial burden of caring for these people, who would doubtless become public charges. In subsequent discussions, F. Park Lewis, Buffalo ophthalmologist and co-founder of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, concurred with Howe’s assessment by stating his belief that putting blind people together in institutions only led to marriages and more blind people. In the New York School for the Blind, Lewis described one couple who caused thirty-four children in successive generations to return to the school. Lewis estimated that these children cost the New York State taxpayer approximately \$50,000 for their education and “maintenance.”¹⁹ As will be shown, Howe and Lewis’s assessment of the dangers of congregating blind people together in institutions was shared by many directors of schools for the blind.

Howe suggested some possible means of preventing such financial and social burdens. A large part of “misery could be eradicated by sequestration or sterilization, if the transmitter of the defect preferred the latter.” Howe believed blindness to be a miserable, useless existence. Moreover, blindness caused the misery of family members and the state, which would bear the burden of caring for those “inflicted” with blindness.

¹⁷ Lucien Howe, “The Relation of Hereditary Eye Defects to Genetics and Eugenics,” *JAMA Ophthalmology* 70, no. 26 (June 29, 1918): 1994.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1997.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1998.

Howe argued that sequestration would be perfectly fine for blind people if they were given a suitable job. He pointed to the “success” of colonies for the “feebleminded” already in existence. If all blind people in a state were congregated in one place, Howe argued, their burden on the state would be reduced. Assumedly, schools for the blind would become unnecessary if all the blind people in the state were in a “colony.” Finally, he added that blind inmates of these colonies would only feel “slight restraint.”²⁰ Howe did not elaborate on the other aspects of these colonies, such as whether children would be educated or somehow trained for the jobs that he proposed to occupy them. This proposal is eerily reminiscent of concentration camps under the Nazis.

Howe and Laughlin continued to gather data on hereditary blindness. They sent a survey to institutions for the blind inquiring about the cost of tuition, the number of students enrolled, and the nature of the students’ blindness, especially whether or not it was hereditary or congenital. The fourth question on the survey asked

Do the family histories of hereditary or of congenital blindness, or both, furnish data as to the existence of ‘dominant’ or ‘recessive’ tendencies in those families, sufficiently well marked to warrant the legal prohibition of a marriage or the sequestration or sterilization of either the man or wife?²¹

As Ravin and Stern indicate, eugenicists wished to determine how a trait transmitted to offspring, but their understanding of genetics and heredity was simplistic.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 1997.

²¹ “Suggested form of a circular letter to Superintendents of State Schools or Asylums for the Blind,” [letter from Howe to Laughlin dated July 19, 1918], *Eugenics Record Office Records, Series X, Manuscript Collection 77*. Philadelphia, PA, American Philosophical Society Library, as quoted in Ravin and Stern, “Lucien Howe, Hereditary Blindness, and the Eugenics Movement.”

²² Ravin and Stern, “Lucien Howe, Hereditary Blindness and the Eugenics Movement,” web: <http://archophht.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=426069>.

In 1921, Howe, in conjunction with the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), drafted an “Act for the Partial Prevention of Hereditary Blindness,” which was sent to ophthalmologists in the American Medical Association mailing list.²³ The proposed law read in part:

When a man and woman contemplate marriage, if a visual defect exists in one or both of the contracting parties, or in the family of either, so apparent that any taxpayer fears that the children of such a union are liable to become public charges, for which that taxpayer would probably be assessed, then such taxpayer...may apply to the County Judge for an injunction against such a marriage.²⁴

The County Judge would then appoint a two-person panel of experts to review the case. If the experts found that the marriage would cause the birth of “at least one child who might have more or less imperfect vision,” then the judge could refuse to grant the couple a marriage license.²⁵ The proposal was very ambiguous and broad. “A child who might have more or less imperfect vision” could encompass anyone who did not have an exact visual acuity of 20/20. Practically everyone over the age of forty and the majority of people under the age of forty could come under the proposed law’s jurisdiction.

Howe and the ERO received 40 no’s and 88 yes’s from ophthalmologists.²⁶ Some responded negatively because they believed the law put too much power in the hands of potentially nosy neighbors and would be rife with abuse.

Nevertheless, in April of that year, bill #1597 was introduced to the New York state senate to amend the Domestic Relations Act with aforementioned procedures for

²³ Letter to Arps, June 6, 1921, as quoted in Black, *War Against the Weak*, 150.

²⁴ Quoted in Black, *War Against the Weak*, 150.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ERO “List of Fellows of AMA Registered in the Section of Ophthalmia, 1919” ca. 1921, American Philosophical Society 77, series 5.

preventing the marriage of people who were blind.²⁷ The measure failed. The overarching ideology behind the bill—that blindness should be prevented—was supported by legislators. However, many legislators had qualms about the legality of such a measure.

This setback did not deter Howe or Laughlin. In letters between the two men, they discussed their desire to “hunt down defectives.”²⁸ In 1922, twenty of the forty-two state schools for the blind responded with answers to another ERO survey. It is unclear why less than half of the schools responded. Possibly, the superintendents did not have such specific information as the ERO requested, or did not have sufficient time to gather the information. As will be shown, there was not a lack of interest in eugenics among contemporary blindness professionals. In any case, Howe was able to glean from the data received that there were 2,388 blind students that cost taxpayers between \$28 and \$34 a month, as opposed to the \$18 a month prisoners cost taxpayers.²⁹ In light of this calculation, Howe wrote Laughlin and Davenport, “If the hereditary blind whose intended marriage has been adjudged to be dangerous, prefer to go to prison at the expense of the taxpayer, that would probably be cheapest for the community and kindest to possible children. . . and a better protection against future defectives.” He does not elaborate on why a person who was blind would want to go to prison, other than the altruistic reason to save the state some money. It is highly doubtful that many, if any, blind people would agree to Howe’s offer. Furthermore, he proposed that blind children

²⁷ “*To Amend the Domestic Relations Law in Relation to Prevention of Hereditary Blindness*,” New York, Bill #1597 (1921), American Philosophical Society 77 series X, HHL Box #3, Hereditary Blindness.

²⁸ Letter, Harry H. Laughlin to Lucien Howe, August 7, 1922, American Philosophical Society 77, series I.

²⁹ Black, *War Against the Weak*, 153.

would be better off raised in prisons. This was a very drastic and controversial proposal, and did not have support outside of hard-line eugenicists like Laughlin and Davenport.

Howe continued:

It is desirable to have some law, even an imperfect one, which will emphasize the desirability of marriages which are eugenic. . . in as much as very many surgeons and the majority of legislators are still opposed to sterilization the next best thing is this bonding principle.³⁰

Howe realized that many of his ideas, such as sending blind people—including children—to prisons, and sterilization, was not widely supported. In 1926, he tried, and once again failed, to secure the passage of legislation to prevent people who were blind from marrying.³¹ In theory, many legislators, blindness professionals, and eugenicists agreed with Howe. Nevertheless, there was not enough consensus on the best way to put the theory into practice.

Just months before his death, Howe was still lobbying eugenicists to help him achieve his goal of preventative legislation. He had become president of the Eugenics Research Association in 1927, and in 1928, he addressed the group on “The Control by Law of Hereditary Blindness.” He declared that it was the “opportunity or even the duty of students of genetics to unite in an effort to obtain the control by law of hereditary blindness.” He estimated that in 1929, there would be 52,567 blind people in the United States, and 2,500 of those were blind from hereditary “defects.” Eugenicists and blindness professionals repeatedly estimate the number of hereditarily blind people to be

³⁰ Letter, Lucien Howe to Harry Laughlin and Charles Davenport, February 10, 1923, American Philosophical Society 77, series I.

³¹ “*To Amend the Domestic Relations Law in Relation to Prevention of Hereditary Blindness,*” New York State Assembly, Bill #605 (1926), American Philosophical Society 77 series X, HHL Box #3, Hereditary Blindness.

quite small, but this fact did not assuage their fears. To them, the number was constantly growing, and any number was too many. Howe argued that these people were a total loss to the community because they did not earn a wage and therefore had to be taken care of by the rest of society.³² He did not support this claim with any data. Rather, he implied that blindness was in and of itself a barrier to viable employment, regardless of a person's desire to work or an employer's discriminatory attitude. To Howe, being blind automatically labeled a person as "dependent" and in need of care. Each generation of blind people cost the United States approximately \$37 million, according to Howe.³³ He lamented that the public did not seem to understand eugenicists, and that many eugenicists themselves talked of ideas, but never applied those ideas practically.³⁴

This time, Howe advocated for the bonding principle that he had mentioned to Davenport and Laughlin in 1923. He stated that anyone requesting a marriage license should provide in writing an assurance that neither father, mother, brother, sister, or cousin was blind from birth. If the prospective couple refused, they would have to submit a \$1,000 bond against the possibility of their having "defective" offspring. Interestingly, Black notes that Howe had previously recommended a bond of up to \$14,000, which, in today's currency, would be about \$130,000, effectively making the marriage impossible.³⁵ After Howe read his paper, he moved for its approval. Dr. Clarence G. Campbell seconded. Finally, Howe stated that the law was meant as a deterrent and to

³² Lucien Howe, "Presidential Address of the Eugenics Research Association: the Control by Law of Hereditary Blindness," reprinted from *Eugenical News* 13 (July 1928), 1. Pamphlet File, Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Black, *War Against the Weak*, 155. Black also writes that Howe supported the interstate deportation of people who were blind.

place the responsibility of “defective” blind children on the blind parents. He expected no legal troubles.³⁶ His life’s work was never realized, however, as he died on December 27, 1928.

Although Howe’s attempts at preventing blindness through legislation restricting the marriages of blind people, the underlying beliefs behind these attempts were shared by many professionals in the blindness field, including directors at schools for the blind. Before Lucien Howe was even born, Samuel Gridley Howe began arguing against the marriage and intermarriage of blind people. During Lucien Howe’s lifetime, blindness professionals and blind people themselves vigorously debated the subject.

³⁶ Lucien Howe, “Presidential Address,” 3.

Chapter 3

Blindness Professionals and the Marriage and Intermarriage of Blind People

Professionals who worked to educate people who were blind rarely called themselves “eugenicists” or “eugenists.” Yet, their writings, speeches, and activities reveal concerns about the reproduction of blind people that mirrored the concerns avowed eugenicists like Lucien Howe and Harry Laughlin had about the reproduction of “the unfit” and the deterioration of the gene pool. Years earlier, Samuel Gridley Howe had exhibited views that foreshadowed eugenics, while his successors at the Perkins School for the Blind and other professionals spoke in eugenic terms to indicate their worries over the marriage and intermarriage of blind people.

3.1 Samuel Gridley Howe and the Perkins Directors

Nineteenth century Romantic reformer Samuel Gridley Howe is one of the world’s most famous educators of people who are blind. He was the first person in the United States to believe that people who were blind could indeed be educated. He also devised a way to communicate with Laura Bridgman, who was deaf-blind. The Perkins School for the Blind, the residential school for people who were blind that Howe pioneered in 1832, blazed a path for dozens of other institutions for people who were

blind in the United States. In many ways, Howe's ideas about blind people were revolutionary. In other ways, his beliefs placed him squarely in his own time. Although he lived and died before the heyday of eugenics in America, Howe's understanding of hereditary blindness was based on an early incarnation of the pseudoscience. His discussions of the marriage and intermarriage of people who were blind illuminate these proto-eugenic ideas.

Samuel Gridley Howe³⁷ was born on November 10, 1801 in Boston, Massachusetts. He attended Brown University, and later graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1824. After fighting in the Greek War of Independence, Howe returned to Boston unwilling to set up a medical practice. Dr. John Dix Fisher approached Howe and offered him the directorship of what was then known as the New England Asylum for the Blind. Howe accepted the position. By the time of his death in 1876, the Perkins Institution for the Blind³⁸ was a world-renowned educational institution and Howe, the most famous educator of blind children.³⁹

As historian James Trent highlights, Howe's views on the marriage of his students became known early in his tenure as director. His first student, Thomas Takes, married a sighted woman. Howe believed this kind of marriage was acceptable because it would dilute the hereditary blindness in the next generation. Furthermore, Howe was more amenable to the idea of a blind man marrying than he was to a blind woman marrying.

³⁷ Of no known relation to Lucien Howe.

³⁸ The name changed from the New England Asylum for the Blind to the Perkins Institution for the Blind in 1839 to reflect the school's principle benefactor, Thomas H. Perkins. The current name is the Perkins School for the Blind or just Perkins.

³⁹ "Inductee: Samuel Gridley Howe," the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field, Web: <http://www.aph.org/hall/bios/howe.html>.

Soon thereafter, Sarah Clough and Charles Morrill, both students, wished to wed. Howe strongly opposed this union, fearing that the couple would pass on their blindness to their offspring and successive generations. He eventually gave up after numerous attempts at blocking the nuptials failed.⁴⁰

Howe described the intermarriage of blind people as “forbidden by God’s law, under the pains and penalties of transmission of weakness and infirmity to successive generations.”⁴¹ He wrote that this law “forbids the sin of entailing an infirmity upon posterity.”⁴² As Ernest Freeberg explains, “He replaced the idea that God blinded people because of their sin with the idea that blindness was caused by the violation of one of the Creator’s natural laws of health.”⁴³ These “laws of health” governed body and mind. One obeyed these laws by showing temperance, exercising, and generally living a clean life. If one disobeyed these laws by intemperance, laziness, marrying close relatives, or sexual uncleanliness, one risked transmitting a faulty body and mind to his children. Howe’s hereditarian ideas were fluid in the years before Mendelian heredity. He and others like him interchanged nature and nurture, which, as Freeberg notes, the public tends to keep separate today. Freeberg asserts that Howe was the “nation’s most influential proponent of hereditarian thought in the decade before Darwin published his *Origin of Species* (1859).”⁴⁴ Howe believed that science could be used to better humanity. Therefore,

⁴⁰ James W. Trent, *The Manliest Man: Samuel G. Howe and the Contours of Nineteenth-Century American Reform* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 62-63.

⁴¹ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 18 (1850), 16. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁴² Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 27 (1858), 15. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁴³ Ernest Freeberg, *The Education of Laura Bridgman: First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 200.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

although his understanding of heredity was not exactly the understanding eugenicists had, his views on inherited traits and heredity represent an earlier incarnation of eugenic thought.

Howe's views on preventing the transmission of blindness to the next generation through the separation of the sexes foreshadowed later eugenic concerns about the intermingling and reproduction of "defectives." He, like blindness professionals for generations after him, believed that separation of the sexes was an integral duty of schools as a means to prevent intermarriages and therefore to prevent more children born blind. In 1849, he set forth his opinion on the separation of the sexes:

There must be a separation of the sexes. Surely, little need be said to prove this. In view of the present condition of society, and in view of the various objections to intermarriage among blind persons, it seems to be an imperative necessity. I am aware that there is a difference of opinion among intelligent managers of similar public establishments with respect to the necessity of a separation of the sexes. Waiving, however, all arguments respecting the best mode of preserving a healthy state of feeling among the inmates, whether by entire separation or moderate indulgence in each others' society, I maintain, that, in the case of the blind, and all those who have a marked hereditary tendency to a physical infirmity, there is a stern moral duty to use every precaution against a perpetuation of such tendency through successive generations. Marriage in cases where one of the parties has such hereditary predisposition is generally unwise, often wrong; intermarriage between two persons so predisposed is always wrong, very wrong. . . This is a most unpopular doctrine to preach; it is an odious one to enforce in practice; but no one fully impressed with respect for the immutable will of God, as manifested in his natural laws, can hesitate between incurring the odium and doing the wrong.⁴⁵

Again, note the mixture of arguments based in hereditarian thought and the arguments based on God's natural laws. He argued that blind people themselves disapproved of intermarriage. As will be shown, there is some truth to this statement. However, two

⁴⁵ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 17 (1849), 20. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

sentences later, Howe notes that other professionals do not agree with this policy, and he wished to waive all arguments concerning the contentedness of the students. This seems to be in direct contrast to his assertion that blind people themselves did not favor intermarriage. If they did not favor intermarriage as completely as Howe seems to say, then blindness professionals and students would not argue that separation of the sexes is not good for the happiness of the students. Moreover, he wrote that it is an “odious” doctrine to enforce. Furthermore, Howe located his argument for separation squarely in eugenic terminology. He wrote that it is the “moral duty” to ensure that “all those who have a marked hereditary tendency to a physical infirmity” do not perpetuate their own kind in successive generations. Intermarriage between two blind people is “always wrong, very wrong.” He even went so far as to say that two blind people who married each other were “authors” of their child’s blindness as if they had “gouged eyes out after they were born.”⁴⁶ Howe, as his remarks show, was very concerned with the consequences of intermarriages as it pertained to heredity and future generations.

Around 1858, Howe began showing less confidence in the success of his attempts to prevent the marriages of blind people. In that year’s *Annual Report*, Howe noted that, despite his efforts, his students still married anyway. He wrote that, like “common marriages,” blind marriages result from “propinquity in time and space.”⁴⁷ Along these lines, Howe recommended separation from each other, but integration with the community, in his address to the New York State Institution for the Blind on the opening of their new school in Batavia, New York. He told the audience that congregating blind

⁴⁶ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 16 (1848), 50. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁴⁷ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, 1858, 15.

people together was unwise, and that the best course of action was to let blind students interact with the broader community, but still keep a separation of the sexes within the school.⁴⁸ Two years later, in 1868, he reconfirmed his views on the separation of the sexes by stating that the sexes should be in two entirely separate buildings, “out of ear shot of each other.”⁴⁹ Although it is a myth that all people who are blind have exceedingly good hearing, many people who are blind, though they may not have medically better hearing, are more aware of sounds around them. Howe wished to keep blind boys and blind girls completely unaware of each other’s presence.

In 1874, two years before Howe’s death, his belief in the separation of the sexes still held firm, but his opinions on the marriages of blind people to sighted people had shifted. Howe formerly thought that people who were blind should “crucify themselves, and abstain from marriage.” However, due to “reflection and experience,” he understood that, although some people are “heroes,” most are not and would marry.⁵⁰ The sexes should still be separated, he maintained, but students should be allowed to make acquaintance with “ordinary” youth to promote “favorable marriages.”⁵¹

Though his tenure as director ended with his death in 1876, Samuel Gridley Howe’s philosophies on intermarriage and the separation of the sexes at residential schools for blind children lived on. The next three Perkins directors held similar beliefs. Writing a year after Howe’s death, his immediate successor, Michael Anagnos, said that

⁴⁸ Samuel G. Howe, “Address to the New York State Institution for the Blind,” September 6, 1866. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁴⁹ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 37 (1868), 9-10. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁵⁰ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 43 (1874), 106. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁵¹ Ibid., 111.

the two biggest causes of blindness were intermarriage and intemperance, a common refrain among Progressive Era reformers and eugenicists.⁵² In his 1886 *Annual Report*, Anagnos copies almost word for word Howe's statement on the separation of the sexes from 1849. He wrote that the separation should be "strict and absolute."⁵³ In fact, Anagnos wanted to separate blind boys and girls from each other "by a distance of several miles, if possible."⁵⁴ Remarkably, Anagnos felt so strongly about keeping boys and girls separated that he held classes on different days for boys and girls so that students who rode in on the trains would not have occasion to interact.⁵⁵

Anagnos' successor, Edward Ellis Allen, who came to Perkins in 1907, held the same beliefs as his predecessors, but he was the first to use the term "eugenic" in his descriptions of his philosophy. In 1912, writing on the rebuilding and updating of Perkins in the cottage system, Allen wrote that there were "economic and eugenic" reasons to keep boys and girls separate "at all times and places."⁵⁶ Allen compiled pedigrees of Perkins students and families for the Eugenics Record Office. These pedigrees show the families of students, the occurrence of blindness in the families, and approximate the cost of each student to the state.⁵⁷

⁵² Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 46 (1877), 97. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁵³ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 55 (1866), 80. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁵ See Edward Ellis Allen, "Dr. Allen Says: On the Intermarriage of the Blind," *Teachers Forum* 11, no. 2 (November 1938): 30, and Frances Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: a Social History of Blindness in the United States* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind Press, 2004), 410-411.

⁵⁶ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 63 (1894), 30. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁵⁷ Frances Koestler, *The Unseen Minority*, 410, and "Blindness Pedigrees from the Records of the Perkins Institution," images #234 and #236, 1928, American Philosophical Society, Eugenics Archive,

Although Allen retired as director of Perkins in 1931, he continued to write and teach in the blindness field. Writing to the *Teachers Forum for Instructors of the Blind* in 1938, Allen praised Howe's and Anagnos' dedication to eugenic values, and claimed he felt a "special responsibility to society" to keep his students from intermarrying.⁵⁸ The following year, Allen elaborated upon his eugenic assertions. He told the story of two former students who had a "nearly blind" son. "Him they later heroically forbade their house and home because he insisted on marrying a fellow student of ours." Although Allen disapproved of the marriage, he applauded the couple's disownment of their son for marrying a blind girl. Allen continued by saying that he had no patience for "ignorant sentimentality" of those who argued that blind people should be happy.⁵⁹ Finally, he concluded by saying that, if he had to do everything over again, he would choose the same profession but devote all his energy to making schools unnecessary "through lack of pupils."⁶⁰

Today, Allen is remembered as an innovator in the field of blindness education. As the director of the Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, he encouraged the independence of his pupils by designing the campus in such a way that students could travel by themselves. Allen built playgrounds and constructed swimming pools for his students. He founded the first training course of teachers of the visually impaired at Harvard College in 1920. Allen's greatest contribution, according to others in the field of

Dolan DNA Learning Center, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, New York, Web:
<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/>.

⁵⁸ Allen, "Dr. Allen Says," 30.

⁵⁹ Edward Allen, "Dr. Allen Says: Some Experiences and a Prophecy Which Seem to Prove Wise and Right the Perkins Tradition of No Coeducation of Blind Boys and Blind Girls," *Teachers Forum* 11, no. 3 (January 1939), 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

blindness, was his devotion to child-centered teaching, or teaching to the individual and unique needs of each learner. In 2011, Allen was inducted into the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field.⁶¹

Gabriel Farrell succeeded Allen as the director of Perkins in 1931. Again, Farrell did not veer away from the philosophies of his predecessors. In fact, in 1932, Farrell, along with a teacher, Miss Langworthy, with the assistance of Clyde E. Keeler of the Howe Memorial Laboratory of Ophthalmology—the laboratory that Lucien Howe founded—compiled data for an exhibition at the Third International Congress of Eugenics. The exhibition on the relation of heredity to blindness was on display at the Museum of Natural History in New York City, where the Third International Congress of Eugenics was held. There were three parts of the exhibition. The first part listed the ten most common causes of hereditary blindness, along with pictures of affected eyes. The second section was comprised of pedigrees of families with two or more students that attended Perkins, compiled by Miss Langworthy. The third section described the work in prevention of blindness and the work that remained. Farrell wrote, “On the basis of our data, the eugenicists claim that if the marriage of those afflicted with the three chief causes of hereditary blindness could be prevented for one generation, one third of the present blindness would be eliminated. The exhibit is attracting much favorable comment and will be on exhibit here at the time of the centennial.”⁶²

Farrell also promoted eugenics in the classroom. In 1933, he wrote, “Physiology is one of our strongest and most essential courses, planned to meet the needs of every girl

⁶¹ “Inductees: Edward Ellis Allen,” Hall of Fame for the Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field. Web: <http://www.aph.org/hall/bios/allen.html>.

⁶² Gabriel Farrell, “Eugenics Exhibit,” *The Lantern* no. 4 (September 13, 1932).

before it is too late. A growing desire for eugenics has become manifest.”⁶³ In addition to illustrating a clear gender bias in relation to eugenics and blindness, as will be discussed, Farrell’s comment also demonstrates that he did not just keep the students separated. He actively taught eugenic tenants to his students. Finally, Farrell estimated that congenital blindness cost the country \$50 million a year. He argued that people with hereditary blindness should take “full responsibility” and refrain from passing on their blindness to future generations.⁶⁴

From 1832 to 1951, these four men—Howe, Anagnos, Ellis, and Farrell—led the most famous school for the blind in the United States. All four were respected leaders in the fields of education and blindness. As such, they had enormous influence. Other professionals heeded and adopted the Perkins directors’ views on the marriage and intermarriage of blind people and the need for the prevention of hereditary blindness.

3.2 Other Blindness Professionals

The directors of Perkins were by no means the only blindness professionals who promoted eugenic philosophies. The superintendent of the Missouri School for the Blind proposed having two schools for the blind in Missouri: one for boys near Kansas City, and one for girls in St. Louis, separating the sexes by the entire length of the state.⁶⁵ In Tennessee, the separation of the sexes was written into the school’s bylaws as of 1903. The bylaws read, “It shall be considered an essential feature in all arrangements of the

⁶³ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 102 (1933), 25. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁶⁴ Annual Report of the Perkins School for the Blind, vol. 106 (1937), 29. Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

⁶⁵ John T. Sibley, “Our Girls,” Eleventh Biennial Convention of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind, Jacksonville, Illinois (1890): 76.

School that provision be made for an entire separation of the sexes, excepting in the presence of the officers for the purpose of instruction.”⁶⁶ Howard Hilton, the managing officer of the Illinois Industrial Home for the Blind, applauded the Superintendent of Charities in Illinois for recommending legislation restricting marriages of blind people. He described these people as “the problem” with which social workers and other state officials had to contend. To illustrate his point, Hilton told of a woman who was the third generation in her family to be blind. This woman married another hereditarily blind man. He added that the woman was still “of childbearing age,” seeming to point to the distinct possibility that more blind children would be brought into the world.⁶⁷ Writing in 1928, the ophthalmologist of the Missouri School for the Blind, H. D. Lamb, called for schools to keep better statistical records of their students and the students’ families. He believed that “there is no question that in time legislation will obliterate it [blindness].” He argued that keeping more and better statistics on the rate and cost of hereditary blindness would help forward the cause in legislatures.⁶⁸ Striking a slightly different tone, the superintendent of the New York State School for the Blind noted that separation was “a universal practice” at schools for the blind, but that this separation exacerbated the difficulty of adjusting socially after graduation.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ 30th Biennial Report of the Trustees and Superintendent of the Tennessee School for the Blind, January 1903, 40.

⁶⁷ Howard Hilton, “Hereditary Blindness and Marriage,” *The Institution Quarterly* X, no. 3 (September 1919): 85-86.

⁶⁸ H. D. Lamb, “Hereditary Blindness and Eugenics,” 29th Biennial Convention of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind (1928), 419.

⁶⁹ 50th Annual Report of the Board of Managers and the Superintendent of the New York State School for the Blind for the Years 1917-1918.

The situation at the Iowa Braille School was somewhat less restrictive than at Perkins or other schools. As Brian Miller describes, male and female students at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School—known as the Iowa Braille School—were kept apart as much as possible. Dating was “not officially allowed” until the 1950s.⁷⁰ However, in 1882, Thomas McCuan became the superintendent. He allowed for more social interaction between the students at supervised events such as dances. McCuan wanted the school to be closer to the co-educational model of schools for sighted children. According to Miller, “McCuan did not overtly express hostility to the idea of blind men and women eventually forming romantic relationships after leaving school.”⁷¹ In 1912, this general policy continued under the leadership of Frances Eber Palmer, who integrated seating in class and at mealtime. Moreover, during a thirty-minute morning recess, male and female students in high school could walk up and down the walkway in front of the school. Although these outings were tightly supervised and the students were not allowed to touch in any way, this interaction was unheard of at Perkins and other schools. Miller notes, “Palmer’s limited allowances for mixed gender activities were more progressive than most schools at that time.”⁷²

Discussion of hereditary blindness and eugenics was not limited to educators in schools for the blind. Dr. Frances Burke Brandt, professor of pedagogy at Central High School in Philadelphia, presented a paper entitled “The State in Its Relation to the Defective Child” to members of the Department of Education for Deaf, Dumb, Blind, and

⁷⁰ Brian Miller, “Speaking for Themselves: the Blind Civil Rights Movement and the Battle for the Iowa Braille School,” diss., University of Iowa, 2013, 131n28.

⁷¹ Ibid., 136.

⁷² Ibid., 144-145.

Feeble-minded at the 1891 convention of the National Educational Association. Brandt argued that, when blindness was caused by heredity, the duty of the state was clear: “The physically diseased can only beget the physically diseased.” A policy of “progressive elimination and annihilation” was needed. Brandt argued for the sterilization of the so-called “physically diseased.” “In the sterilization of the sexes, it [the state] has a remedy as simple as vaccination – easy, harmless, sure, and benevolent.”⁷³ These sentiments echo those of Lucien Howe, Harry Laughlin, and other eugenicists. It is noteworthy that none of the employees of schools for the blind openly and publicly promoted such aggressive measures as sterilization. It was clearly not a popular doctrine, yet it seems unlikely that Brandt was the only educator to hold such views.

3.3 Professionals and Gendered Ableism

In the early twentieth century, educators of the blind and others with vested interest communicated with each other in the pages of the journal *Outlook for the Blind*. As Catherine Kudlick discusses, there was an obvious lack of material on preparing blind girls for marriage, something that one would have seen in every issue of other journals dealing with young adults at that time. Kudlick highlights two articles in particular. In one, a girl is pictured standing in a chicken coop. (Nothing says “marriageable material” like a girl covered in chicken droppings.) In the second case, some young women are standing in a dining room, exhibiting their table-setting skills. As Kudlick points out, the books in the room are in print, not braille, New York Point, or another system of raised letters. The girls are prim and look stern. It seems as if the girls are setting the table for a

⁷³ *Boston Transcript*, July 10, 1891.

sighted family member, not for a husband. Furthermore, Kudlick notes that none of the girls in either of the two photographs are making eye contact with the camera. She describes eye contact as the first step in seduction. No eye contact means that these girls are not meant to be desired. They are not available.⁷⁴ Society viewed women with disabilities as perpetual pre-pubescent girls, no matter their age. As Kudlick indicates, blindness professionals depicted the young women in these photographs as asexual. If these women were undesirable, they could and should not be mothers.

Their supposed incapability to be mothers further signified their uselessness to eugenicists. As Wendy Kline argues, “the mother of tomorrow” was a central figure in building and reshaping the human race along eugenic lines.⁷⁵ Women had two important roles according to eugenics. First, women should be committed to staying at home. By resisting outside temptations, they showed their moral valor. In so doing, they also reinforced the dominance of the man. Second, women should choose a mate wisely and eugenically, and choose to have big families.⁷⁶ Eugenicists were concerned that the “wrong” types of people were having numerous children, while the “right” kinds of people were having fewer children. Women could change this situation by choosing to have as many children as possible with a eugenically “fit” man. However, only appropriate women should be mothers. Blind women, who were already “unfit,” were prohibited from becoming mothers. Thus, they were doubly marginalized. They were

⁷⁴ Catherine J. Kudlick, "The Outlook of *The Problem* and the Problem with *The Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 205.

⁷⁵ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

“unfit” because they were blind. Furthermore, as women who could not be “the mothers of tomorrow,” they could not help further the eugenic cause. Essentially, eugenicists saw blind women as not “real” women, hence their constant depiction as children.

Other blindness professionals exhibited this same gendered ableism. Kudlick discusses Dr. John Sibley’s paper on “Our Girls” at the eleventh biennial meeting of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind, which met in Jacksonville, Illinois in 1890.⁷⁷ Dr. John T. Sibley was the superintendent of the Missouri School for the Blind. It was at this meeting that Sibley promoted the idea of separating the sexes in two schools at opposite ends of Missouri. Sibley described the young girl’s dream of a man coming along, sweeping her off her feet, and making her his wife. “I do not believe that this dream of the coming young man is altogether confined to girls that see; but, as a rule, the intelligent blind girl dreams of something more substantial, and this is an advantage to us.”⁷⁸ In one respect, Sibley is praising young blind women for having dreams other than marriage. However, he also notes that only the “intelligent” young woman who is blind has these higher aspirations. Furthermore, he neglects to understand that, if some blind women do not dream of marriage, it may be because they are constantly told that marriage is not for them. Sibley then goes on to declare that blind women cannot do housework as well as seeing women, and thus would not make good wives and mothers. Yet, he seems to approve of blind women marrying sighted men. He encouraged blind girls to look for mates on summer breaks, but not while at school. Inter marriages between

⁷⁷ Catherine J. Kudlick, “Modernity’s Miss-Fits: Blind Girls and Marriage in France and America, 1820-1920,” in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, edited by Rudolph Bell and Virginia Yans (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008): 208.

⁷⁸ John T. Sibley, “Our Girls,” 11th Biennial convention of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind, Jacksonville, Illinois (1890), 74.

blind people, he asserted, was “disastrous” and furthers the rise in population of blindness.⁷⁹ If separation in two entirely different schools was not possible, Sibley recommended that schools should “prohibit all social intercourse between blind boys and blind girls. Blind girls are human and sometimes fall in love. . . . Sad to report,” they fall in love with blind men.⁸⁰ Sibley’s concerns about the intermarriages of blind people leading to a rising blind population reflected contemporary concerns among eugenicists about the rising population of “the unfit” in contrast with the decreasing birthrate among middle- and upper-class white Americans.⁸¹

Blind women were not the only ones who had to contend with gender ideals defined by disability. Writing on “The Marriage and Intermarriage of Blind Persons,” C. F. Fraser, the superintendent of the Halifax School for the Blind in Nova Scotia, himself blind since early childhood, declared that only one couple from his school had ever married.⁸² He continued, “Victims of congenital blindness” should not marry. If they do, they bear responsibility for the likelihood of bringing more blind people into the world. A blind man marrying a blind woman, he said, was detestable because the woman would “wreck the man’s life.” Describing proper manhood, Fraser claimed, “A manly man would give these matters his earnest consideration. A manly man would hesitate before

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁸¹ As an aside, Sibley’s views on marriage for blind people were reflective of the time, but he also held views far ahead of his time. He noted that “the same unjust world that makes a seeing woman do more work for less pay than a man will not suspend the rules, even in the case of blind girls.” His cognizance and seeming disapproval of wage inequality was very progressive for an Industrial Revolution-era American white male.

⁸² C. F. Fraser, “The Marriage and Intermarriage of Blind Persons,” *Outlook for the Blind* 6, no. 4 (January 1913): 86.

adding to the woman's handicap of blindness a burden greater than she can bear."⁸³

Fraser described "manly" men as men who do not make decisions lightly, do not overly burden a woman, and do not pass their blindness on to their children and successive generations.

Blindness professionals used the separation of the sexes as the way in which they could ensure that blind men and women did not marry and pass their blindness on to successive generations. Although these professionals desired that neither men nor women married, they were especially concerned with blind women. Blind girls could not take care of a household, nor could they be proper eugenic mothers. Some men and women who were blind agreed with professionals' assertions, while others attempted to refute these views.

⁸³ Ibid., 87.

Chapter 4

Blind People's Views on Eugenics and Marriage

In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, views on marriage and intermarriage held by blind people were not one-dimensional. They were multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory. These views were sometimes a reflection of the views held by broader society and blindness professionals. Often, though not always, the arguments against marriage and intermarriage held by blind people were based on eugenic philosophies and fears. Moreover, arguments for marriage sometimes included eugenic thought. Blind men and woman also based their arguments on ideas of the proper gender role of women and men.

In the January 1891 inaugural issue of the Perkins School for the Blind Alumnae Association publication, *The Mentor*, it is noted that the publication is open to all views and discussions, whether on the merits of New York Point versus braille—“the war of the dots”—or on the separation of the sexes versus the coeducation of the sexes in schools for the blind.⁸⁴ Such prominent placement alongside one of the biggest debates in the

⁸⁴ *The Mentor* 1, no. 1 (January 1891): 6.

history of blindness in America indicates how important and divisive an issue the separation of the sexes was.

In the following issue, Emilie Poulsen set forth her description of “the Ideal Blind Woman.” Just as Victorians understood that ideal femininity encapsulated certain characteristics, so too were there certain characteristics that signified the “ideal” blind woman. Among other things, Poulsen describes the “ideal blind woman” as a woman who is not overly cheerful, but who does not take herself or her blindness too seriously. She does not “pass off bad Braille” to her friends. Furthermore, “she will not marry. She can endure blindness, but she will not propagate it.”⁸⁵ Samuel Howe and Edward Allen both discussed the heroic sacrifice of blind people who abstained from marriage. The “ideal blind woman,” according to Poulsen, was happy in abstaining from marriage. Poulsen did not indicate an economic or religious reason for her assertion that women should not marry. Although she did argue that women could perform other domestic tasks admirably, she couched her argument against marriage entirely in eugenic language of fear of perpetuating blindness through generations to come.

The following year, Clara Aldrich took to the pages of *The Mentor* on the question of the marriage of blind people. She asks, “Should the Blind Marry?” Aldrich began by quoting nineteenth century Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond, stating that “the world does not want more of us, but a better brand of us.” Furthermore, “Those, and those only should marry who are likely to transmit a healthy physical and mental organism, and to maintain a suitable home.” She further lamented that “the frail

⁸⁵ Emilie Poulsen, “Extract from a Familiar Talk to the Alumnae Association of the Perkins Institution,” *Mentor* 1, no. 2 (February 1891): 51.

consumptive,” inebriates, criminals, the insane, and cousins were allowed to marry and procreate.⁸⁶ Aldrich’s views reflect the positive eugenics tenant that encouraged the marriage of physically and mentally healthy individuals believed to make the human gene pool better, not cause its deterioration.

Somewhat surprisingly, she wrote, “Granting now that blindness is worse than alcoholism, imbecility, lunacy or depravity. . .”⁸⁷ She did not elaborate on why she believed blindness to be worse than the aforementioned “ills” in society. She further contends, “The blind should be kept under stricter discipline than the rest of humanity.” To the modern-day reader, these views seem incredibly self-destructive and harsh, but Aldrich’s views show just how widespread and accepted eugenic ideology was in America.

Speaking to those whose blindness is hereditary, Aldrich said they should certainly abstain from marriage, but they should adopt an orphan, which would “give you something to live for.”⁸⁸ In this way, women could maintain traditional gender roles as mothers, while at the same time not polluting the gene pool. To blind women whose blindness was not hereditary, she cautioned that they should only marry unless they could take care of a house. Finally, on the subject of intermarriage of the blind—whether caused by heredity or not—she was firm in her belief that blind people should not marry each other for fear of increasing the population of the blind.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Clara Aldrich, “Should the Blind Marry?” *The Mentor* 2, no. 5 (May 1892): 182.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

To illustrate her points, Aldrich told the reader of two separate instances of a blind woman marrying a sighted man. In the first case, the woman in question worked for a living for twenty years. She met a widower on the train one day, and soon after they married, she used her life savings to buy a house for them. Though Aldrich does not say as much, it is assumed that the woman was beyond childbearing age when she married, and the couple did not have children. To Aldrich, this was the best outcome possible. In the second case, a young woman eschewed assertions that no one would marry her, and ran away with a man who pretended to be a minister. This ne'er-do-well took the girl to the frontier, causing her much misery and hardship. In the end, the girl secured a divorce and went to live with her father. She had a child, though, and the child had to stay hidden because no one would believe that the woman had been legally married and thought the child was illegitimate. The mother and daughter lived dependent, miserable lives all because the woman was prideful and wanted to marry.⁹⁰ In answer to her initial query, Aldrich seems to argue that blind women should be wary of marriage, even if their blindness was not caused by heredity. If it was caused by heredity, then under no circumstances should they marry. It appears that Clara Aldrich was married to a William Aldrich, and wrote religious material for blind people, but little else is known about her.⁹¹

H. A. Hall of Rutland, Vermont, responded to Aldrich's article a few months later in November 1892. Hall agreed with Aldrich's point about intermarriages: "That blind men and blind women should not marry each other is too self-evident to admit of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 185-186.

⁹¹ Based on a basic search of Ancestry.com and an article in the February 10, 1910 issue of the *Kansas City Journal* found on the web:
<http://www.vintagekansascity.com/100yearsago/labels/doctors.html>.

argument; and, if necessary, strict laws should be enacted to prevent it.”⁹² Again, he shares these feelings with prominent eugenicists of the time like Lucien Howe and Harry Laughlin.

Hall disagreed with some of Aldrich’s assertions. He stated that most men do not marry to perpetuate the species or some other “lofty” idea, but instead, they marry to be happy with a good and honorable woman with whom they can share their lives. He negates Aldrich’s stories of the two blind women by positing that those stories only prove blind women and men have the same trials and problems as sighted people. Furthermore, he argued, blind children born to blind men are such a rarity that it does not deserve to be factored into the argument.⁹³ Here, Hall uses eugenics as a reason in support of marriage for blind people, arguing that heredity plays a very small role. Finally, he derisively comments that Aldrich’s statement on blindness being worse than imbecility and so forth “is utterly untrue.”⁹⁴

This conversation in the pages of *The Mentor* is interesting for several reasons. Both Clara Aldrich and H. A. Hall use eugenics language to support their own argument. Aldrich cites the desire for only healthy, “fit” members of society to procreate in her declaration that blind men and women should not marry. Contrarily, Hall argues that heredity plays a very small role in blindness. Therefore, the argument against marriage because of propagating blindness has no merit. Aldrich’s comments are particularly interesting in light of a policy that Edward Allen described in 1938. He wrote that both the Perkins Institution and the Overbrook School for the Blind alumnae associations had

⁹² H. A. Hall, “Should the Blind Marry? No. 2,” *The Mentor* 2, no. 9 (November 1892): 352.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 355.

a rule that expelled any blind woman who married a blind man.⁹⁵ Note the gender disparity here: blind women were expelled for marrying blind men, but Allen does not say that blind men were expelled for marrying blind women. Both Aldrich and Hall agree that intermarriage is forbidden and should be controlled by law, but Aldrich's views may have reflected the broader views of the alumnae association and the associated schools.

Helen Keller, arguably the most well known blind woman in history, felt the constraints of being a blind woman during the eugenics movement. As historians Kim Nielsen and Catherine Kudlick describe, Keller briefly encountered the prospect of marriage.⁹⁶ Kudlick describes Keller's remembrance of her conversation with Alexander Graham Bell on the subject of love and marriage. Keller told Bell that love "is like a beautiful flower which I may not touch, but whose fragrance makes the garden a place of delight just the same."⁹⁷ Bell responded, "Do not think that because you cannot see or hear, you are debarred from the supreme happiness of woman. Heredity is not involved in your case, as it is in so many others."⁹⁸ Here, Bell argued that Keller could obtain proper womanhood because her blindness and deafness was not hereditary. She would not pass her blindness and deafness on to her children because they were acquired through sickness, not through heredity. Yet, in this conversation, Keller contended that she could

⁹⁵ Allen, "Dr. Allen Says," 30.

⁹⁶ Kim Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 40; Kudlick, "Modernity's Miss-Fits," 206-207.

⁹⁷ Helen Keller, *Midstream: My Later Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., Inc., 1929), 133.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, as quoted in Kudlick, "Modernity's Miss-Fits," 206.

not imagine marriage. “I can’t imagine a man wanting to marry me. . . I should think it would seem like marrying a statue.”⁹⁹

In 1916, the thirty-six-year-old Keller met Peter Fagan, her assistant in the absence of Anne Sullivan Macy and her husband. Nielsen describes Keller’s interview in June 1916, in which she alluded to a romance with Fagan. As Nielsen details, Keller described her ideal mate as “handsome,” which was necessary for “eugenic reasons.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Keller added, “there was no greater gift to the state than a woman’s gift of a child.”¹⁰¹ Keller described the eugenic woman’s role as “mother of tomorrow,” which blindness professionals and other blind women agreed was not meant for blind women. In this interview, Keller appropriated eugenic language in defense of her romance with Fagan. Perhaps she remembered her conversation with Bell, in which he told her that, since her deaf-blindness was not hereditary, she could one day marry.

Unfortunately for Keller, her relationship with Fagan was exposed when the two attempted to apply for a marriage license. Keller’s mother and Macy both strongly disapproved of the union. Keller was forcibly taken back to her mother’s home in Alabama. In *Midstream*, Keller concluded that the affair with Fagan was “a little island of joy surrounded by dark waters. I am glad that I have had the experience of being loved and desired. The fault was not in the loving, but in the circumstances.”¹⁰² Keller’s mother and others around her felt strongly that a sexual relationship for Keller was out of the question. The “circumstances” Keller mentioned did not make a relationship viable

⁹⁹ Ibid., 134 as quoted in Kudlick, 206.

¹⁰⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 1916, as quoted in Nielsen, 40.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Keller, *Midstream*, 182.

because blindness professionals, other blind people, and the public in general all believed that blind women should not marry. Although Keller's deaf-blindness was not transmittable to her offspring, she still ran against fears of transmission in addition to the belief that "blind girls" could not be proper eugenic mothers and wives.

Men also felt the restraints placed on blind people by eugenically minded blindness professionals. Robert Marks, who graduated from the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, felt adamantly about the dangers and lifelong consequences strict sex segregation in the residential schools could have on a person who was blind. In 1938, he wrote that "rigid segregation" was the rule in all schools for the blind. There was no communication allowed between the sexes and, even more problematic, no sex education curriculum. Students at residential schools were "virtual prisoners."¹⁰³ Educators wished to prevent intermarriages, but Marks noted that in one-hundred years, the system of segregation has not stopped intermarriages and has only led to "sexual guilt."¹⁰⁴ The restrictions placed on blind people by educators, then later in life, social workers, "hampered social development."¹⁰⁵

Blind people at that time, according to Marks, did not like publicly discussing the "sex problem" because they believed it would cause sighted people to be even more interested in their private lives. They believed that economic stability and equality would lead to the end of the "sex problem." However, Marks argued that "sex adjustment"

¹⁰³ Robert Marks, "The Blind Demand the Right to Marry," *Physical Culture* 79, no. 2 (February 1938): 36.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 34.

should come first, and if it did not, other problems, including economic instability, arose.¹⁰⁶

Marks explained the differences between the way a sighted child learned about sex differences and the way a blind child learned—or did not learn—about sex differences. A sighted child, Marks described, could visually recognize anatomical differences in pets and other people around her. She may have even witnessed animals mating. She would notice anatomical differences in statues and pictures. Furthermore, she could freely associate with boys of her own age. Interestingly, Marks believed that a sighted woman in 1938 “may learn of certain pitfalls, but actually she enjoys as much freedom as do her male companions.”¹⁰⁷ In retrospect, historians know this not a correct assessment, but his experience growing up was so restricted that it may have skewed his understanding of the restrictions placed on women at that time.

Unlike the sighted girl, the child who was blind, according to Marks, could not make these visual associations. The child who was blind would use sound and smell to delineate sexual differences. However, this could be problematic as women sometimes smoked cigars, a practice, which Marks said, would confuse the young boy who was blind. Consequently, he may not believe that all bodies are not exactly like his own.

Marks experienced these problems firsthand. In college, his classmates thought he had an odd obsession with sexuality. One classmate practically kidnapped him and took him to a prostitute against Marks’ wishes. When he realized where he was, he screamed and was eventually taken home. After college, he met a nurse and in their first

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 36.

conversation told her what he was thinking about—reading in between the lines, having sex with her—and they married two years later.

As a psychologist specifically dealing with adolescents and adults who were blind, Marks witnessed the devastating effects of sex segregation in the schools on a regular basis. He asserted that “prudery” was widespread among blind teenage girls because they would not divulge their sexual fantasies to him. Just as his understanding of the freedom women enjoyed, his understanding of social norms, especially in regards to private details, regardless of sight, is distorted.¹⁰⁸

Finally, Marks argued for the need for a sex education curriculum in the schools, as well as the desegregation of and free association between the sexes. Although the title of his piece was “The Blind Demand the Right to Marry,” the article itself speaks very little of marriage rights. In fact, he stated, “marriage is rarely the solution to a sex problem.”¹⁰⁹ Although he believed that blind people should be allowed to make decisions freely on romances and marriages, he thought the root of the problem—the segregation in the schools—needed to be fixed, which would then lead to more marriage freedom. One wonders if the editors of the magazine, due to the sexual content of the article, changed the title to make it more socially acceptable to the broader public, who would likely be shocked to read an article dealing with the sexuality of blind people.

During the heyday of eugenics, blind men and women debated the issue of marriage and intermarriage of people who were blind. Some, like Emilie Poulsen, attempted to claim womanhood, while at the same time agreeing with eugenicists that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 35.

marriage was impossible. Others, like Clara Aldrich, claimed that intermarriage was unthinkable because of eugenic fears of heredity. Contrarily, Hall argued that heredity had little to do with blindness, so therefore blind people should not be barred from marriage. Helen Keller dealt with these issues firsthand, and, although she believed that she could marry and be a “mother of tomorrow,” those around her held the same fears and prejudices as blindness professionals and blind people like Aldrich. There was no simple answer to the question of marriage for blind people in this era. Some mirrored broader societal beliefs, while others denied them.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In August 2013, the story of the engagement of two blind people broke and soon rocketed around the internet. News outlets all over the United Kingdom and the United States, including the “Today” show, Huffington Post, *The Guardian*, and local newspapers, covered the captivating story of two people whose dog guides brought them together. The couple met at an intensive training camp for guide dog users. Their dogs, no matter how much the handlers tried to keep them apart, kept finding each other and snuggling. The two handlers, both in their 50s, started having coffee together after graduating. Coffee led to lunch, lunch led to dinner, and then eventually to an engagement.¹¹⁰

Although there was no discussion of eugenics, the fact that this story quickly gained worldwide attention and coverage demonstrates the public’s fascination with blind people and sexuality. Millions of marriages occur each year. Few receive an announcement in the newspaper or online. Still fewer receive viral attention. One hundred years after the height of discussions on whether or not blind people should

¹¹⁰ Laura Coffey, “Guide dogs, then blind owners, fall in love,” Today.com, August 8, 2013. Web: <http://www.today.com/pets/guide-dogs-then-blind-owners-fall-love-6C10871653>.

marry, and it is still a subject worthy of news coverage. The coverage is now much more benign, but the fact remains that many sighted people are inquisitive about the marriages of blind people.

While discussions about blindness and marriage are more curious than accusatory in the twenty-first century, efforts to prevent blindness have not stopped. Researchers spend millions each year on ways to cure blindness or prevent its occurrence. Recently, scientists have been making headway in the effort to bring sight back to people who are blind from retinal diseases through the use of gene therapy.

Furthermore, eugenics has not disappeared. It has simply shifted to a different kind of genetics. For a price, anyone can have his or her DNA tested for the probability of having all sorts of diseases. Prenatal blood tests and gene counseling can reveal the likelihood of a child being born with disabilities or diseases. Some doctors advise women to abort the pregnancy if the baby born would have a disability.

There is room to build upon the research already done on the history of blindness and people who are blind. More could be written on gendered ableism as it specifically pertains to blindness. Furthermore, women's unique experience of blindness and the dual aspects of gender and disability could be elaborated upon. In 2013, a former student of a school for the blind claimed to have been sexually assaulted at the school. The student claimed that school administrators swept the charge under the rug. Sexual assaults unfortunately go unreported or unprosecuted on a daily basis. However, people who are blind and others with disabilities are especially liable to be assaulted because of their vulnerability. Although it is a controversial and difficult subject, more could be done to explore the abuse experienced by students in residential schools for the blind. Finally,

sterilization laws were passed in many states during the eugenics era. Lucien Howe and Harry Laughlin advocated for the sterilization of blind people. Anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that blind students in residential schools were sterilized, but little, if any, written evidence exists. This area demands further research.

Eugenics was a popular ideology in America during the latter years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. Eugenic thought inundated society so much so that blind people themselves believed in their own “unfitness” for marriage. Although some voices argued against eugenics, most blindness professionals and blind people internalized these beliefs. Blindness professionals who are now heralded as innovators and visionaries were once so concerned with the spread of blindness to successive generations that they went to great lengths to keep blind boys and blind girls separated at all times. Today, these views seem almost barbaric, yet at the time, they were perfectly acceptable. A full understanding of one’s history requires that one recognize every aspect of that history, the positive and the negative.

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