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Declension Narratives, Literary Representations of Mental Disability, and New England Identity Construction: A Disabilities Studies Analysis of Northern New England Texts

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DECLENSION NARRATIVES, LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL DISABILITY,
AND NEW ENGLAND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION:
A DISABILITIES STUDIES ANALYSIS OF NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND TEXTS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

AMERICAN AND NEW ENGLAND STUDIES

BY

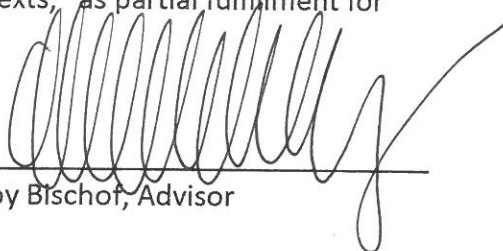
Marie M. Larson

2015

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

May 2015

We hereby accept the thesis of Marie M. Larson, entitled "Declension Narratives, Literary Representations of Mental Disability, and New England Identity Construction: A Disabilities Studies Analysis of Northern New England Texts," as partial fulfillment for the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.



Libby Bischof, Advisor



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Manuel Avalos, Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Acknowledgments

This thesis concerns itself with identity formation. At this reflective moment in my life, it is important for me to acknowledge my relationship with the University of Southern Maine as an integral factor in the development of my identity. The interdisciplinarity featured in my undergraduate courses at Lewiston-Auburn College facilitated my natural inclination to integrate multiple factors in drawing conclusions. The rigor and guidance of Bob Schaible, Eve Raimon, and Barry Rodrigue in the Arts and Humanities program provided a solid academic foundation for my graduate work. In the American and New England Studies (ANES) program, I found the intellectual demands of Joe Conforti, Ardis Cameron, and Kent Ryden to be both exhausting and exhilarating. In particular, I am indebted to Kent Ryden for his encouragement of my pursuit of disabilities studies and the potential for its application in considering regional identity.

My gratitude extends in unquantifiable measure to Libby Bischof of USM's Department of History and Political Science. She has been thoughtful and astute in all of her suggestions. Like Libby, Adam Tuchinsky and his enthusiasm for the intent of this thesis has been remarkable.

Undoubtedly, it is my children who have been the most influential in shaping my identity. They have been, without question, my most demanding teachers. They have also been the most patient and forgiving. It is to Ben, Kim, and Amy that I dedicate this work.

Foreword

While unconventional, I feel I need to begin this thesis with a confession: I didn't matriculate in the American and New England Studies (ANES) program at the University of Southern Maine with the intention of delving into and applying Disability Theory to northern New England texts - - far from it. ANES was intended to be a diversion from my primary occupations (and preoccupations) as both a mother of children with significant disabilities and health issues and as a special educator in the public school system. Imagined as a respite from labor-intensive, physical day-to-day caregiving and educational program development, I was drawn to the interdisciplinary nature of ANES - - the study of art, history, and literature, especially literature - - and how these aspects of culture might be considered in ways that created meaning and identity. I envisioned an academic interlude replete with theoretical abstractions and philosophical debate, something quite calculated to be disconnected from the realities of my life. What I got instead, was *disability* leaping from the texts, nagging for my attention. I couldn't ignore *it*, but I also didn't know what to do with *it*. Confounding that was my perception that disability within the text appeared to be nearly invisible to everyone else in my classes. I was puzzled.

In Creating New England II, one of two foundational and required courses in the ANES program, I recall being assigned to read poet Donald Hall's memoir of growing up on his family's farm in rural New Hampshire early on in my studies. In *String Too Short to be Saved: Recollections of Summers on a New England Farm* (first published in 1960), I

encountered Anson Freedom, a “half-wit”¹ employed - - and provided with room and board - - by Hall’s extended family off and on over the course of several decades, although his biological family lived nearby. Hall recounted that Freedom was “one of the few remnants of the flourishing low-life of former years,” but that he was “negatively good, for he didn’t steal or drink or lech.”² An unflattering description of Freedom’s physical characteristics seemed to be adequately captured in a sketch by Mimi Korach on a following page: sturdy, but stooped over with low-hanging arms carrying a pitchfork and an “empty-headed grin.”³ When Freedom arrived at the farm looking for work again after a twenty-year absence, Hall claimed he recognized him from his grandfather’s tales and imitations, although Hall and Freedom had not previously met. Hall wrote, “It was pathetic to think he had changed so little,”⁴ from his grandfather’s caricature. In the margins I penciled, “So little changed pathetic? What about his unaffected presence/reappearance being a sign of stability?” Clearly, this was a fledgling attempt to get at something on my part. Freedom, as a man with intellectual disabilities *could* be considered a trope for a lack of progress or change. Then again, *String Too Short to be Saved* was written as an ode to the unchanged bucolic farm life of several generations of Hall’s family, contributing to the sense of an enduring, timeless New England identity. As such, Hall’s denigrating attitude toward Freedom in the text seemed to work at cross-purposes. How could it be that the dependability of Freedom - - most likely intellectually disabled, but unaltered as a man and capable of the work he

¹ Donald Hall, *String Too Short to be Saved: Recollections of Summers on a New England Farm*, (Boston, MA: Nonpareil Books, 1960), 54.

² Hall, 41.

³ Hall, 42-43.

⁴ Hall, 44.

undertook - - was a plaintive thing while the dependability of the New England farm, representative of a traditional and timeless lifeway, was revered? Or, in linking Freedom to the family farm, was it possible that a subverted attitude toward New England farm life was lurking within the text, one that re-inscribed a vision of the New England farm in hopeless decline? How might one examine the creation and a re-creation of New England identity through the construct of intellectual disability? Freedom was never mentioned during the class. Perhaps, I concluded, his presence in the text was not significant, after all.

Shortly thereafter, we were assigned a collection of oral histories in *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City*, which documents the work, family and social life of millworkers in Manchester, New Hampshire from the early 1900s to the mid-1960s. In this collection I was introduced to former millworker Marie Anne Senechal. Senechal described a work arrangement for her brother in the 1930s, who she described as “retarded.”⁵ Her brother was provided both a job at the mill and flexibility in terms of his work schedule based on his health needs during a historical time prior to equal opportunity and other employment safeguards for individuals with disabilities. In a cursory manner, Senechal’s brief oral history also documented the demands and expectations placed on family members, as well as social attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities at that time. Although Senechal’s recorded history on her brother and the issue of intellectual disability was covered in less than two pages, I felt

⁵Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenback, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1978), 275.

her narrative illuminated something about disability and its relationship to economic security, family, and being part of the Franco-American millworker community. Again, class discussion never touched upon Senechal's brother. Could it be that I was simply reactive to this narrative because it pricked at sensitivities in my own life? I reasoned that the instructor and other students would not see these characters as germane to the historical or literary analysis of the text. I remained silent and it never became part of our class discussions.

At the end of this course we read Ernest Hebert's *The Dogs of March*. Set in the fictional town of Darby, New Hampshire, *The Dogs of March* centers on the encroachment of city people from other states who purchase land, farms, and quaint capes cheaply in the 1970s. The newcomers are intent on re-creating Darby in their image of small town New England, often in contrast to the living culture of people whose families had resided there for generations. Here I found Ollie Jordan, patriarch to the poorest folk in Darby, living in squalor at the edge of town. Ollie's two sons, Willow and Turtle, were characters marked by intellectual and physical disability; they were "defective,"⁶ but both were treasured by Ollie. When the professor asked whether anyone had noted Ollie Jordan and his two sons in the text, my ears perked up. I listened as the professor linked the two characters with disabilities to nature. Their given names were things found in nature and, the professor asserted, the characters' 'defective' status linked to nature was a literary representation supporting the notion of the New England landscape as degraded and of little value; it underscored a New

⁶ Ernest Hebert, *The Dogs of March*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 24.

England in regional decline. A much respected classmate followed this up by stating that every small town in New England had a Jordan family, “with a bunch of retarded kids.” My internal reaction to this analysis was emotional given my personal experience and evolving point of view about disability. It sparked a line of questioning and research into the field of Disabilities Studies, which was previously unknown to me. As I progressed through the program I continually encountered literary representations of persons with disabilities who escaped notice or commentary by others. In addition, I began to more thoughtfully evaluate the role of those figures within the text and their relationship to perceptions of New England as a region.

I begin this thesis by relating these experiences for two distinct reasons: first, they aptly illustrate the seemingly inconspicuous quality bestowed upon representations of disability by academics and society, alike, and second, they mirror the impetus for the formation of Disabilities Studies and Disability Theory. I am not suggesting that the ANES faculty were willfully obtuse about disability and its relationship to the region or the larger culture, nor do I believe my peers to have been inconsiderate.⁷ Despite being persistently drawn to characters with disabilities and their potential meaning, I lacked any kind of framework for considering ways in which their impairments or the connotation of disability might be used as a stabilizing, reinforcing, or disruptive presence in the texts I was studying. The theoretical structure available

⁷ At the time of this writing, the American and New England Studies program is being dismantled and the faculty eliminated as part of cost-cutting measures at the University of Southern Maine. It is important for me to state that as I became interested in pursuing representations of disability, Dr. Kent Ryden was extremely supportive and encouraging. In addition, as I improved my ability to relate concepts of disability and Disability Theory, my peers invited discussion regarding literary representation, historical evolutions, and theoretical bases; they consistently challenged me and provided thoughtful commentary.

through Disabilities Studies was necessary to support my own understanding and ability to apply Disability Theory to the construct of regional identity. Most importantly, the existence of Disability Studies and the scholarship available to me as I began pondering the meaning of disability gestured toward the plausibility of meaningful interplay between disability and regional identity – the subject of this thesis.

The many times that literary figures escaped notice and critical inquiry in my courses was not unusual. My personal experience of living with people with disabilities and its influence on heightening my awareness and consideration of the possible functions of representations of disability was quite typical. Paul K. Longmore, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, all pioneers of The New Disability History and Disabilities Studies, are also academics with physical disabilities⁸ who originally pursued academic disciplines and research unassociated with

⁸ Preceding Disability Studies and The New Disability History is a history of advocacy by and for people with disabilities. One of the primary tenets of such advocacy is to use *people-first language*. That is, to place the emphasis on the person and secondarily the quality that describes that person's impairment, i.e. 'a woman living with visual impairment' is preferred over the term 'blind woman.' Advocates of people-first language believe that this practice avoids essentializing the individual into the characteristics or connotations of his or her condition of having a disability. Although it may be tedious for the reader to continually encounter this lengthened and prescriptive manner of linking an individual to disability or a disabling condition, I strive to use people-first language throughout this thesis. However, even that practice is not without some controversy. As the reader will discover, *disability* in concept and societal response is multivalent. Many people with hearing impairments prefer to be called *deaf*, i.e., 'deaf man.' This is largely because those individuals and groups do not perceive being deaf as a disability, but rather as a different way of being and interacting with the world. For them, *Deaf Culture*, is as vibrant and valid as any other culture, which they often seek to preserve. Just as a woman with Irish ancestry may wish to be referred to as 'an Irish-American woman,' because she views it as an essential component of her identity, so, too, feel some individuals with hearing impairments. They assert that the condition of being hearing impaired or deaf is a core part of their identity. Similarly, the last couple of decades have seen the advent of *Crip Culture* (for individuals living with physical disabilities) and *Aspie Culture* (for people living with Asperger's Syndrome). Crip Culture and Aspie Culture have adopted practices of *othering* mainstream culture in their efforts to present alternate points of view on the variation in human difference. For instance, in recognizing that physical disability or disfigurement may come to anyone at any time through disease, accident, or aging, Crips may refer to those currently living without perceptible disabilities as *TABs* or *Temporarily Able-Bodied*, while Aspie Culture refers to those with more accepted

disability. Parents of children with disabilities, Lennard J. Davis, Penny Richards and Michael Berube, have risen in prominence within the field due to a shift in their own academic focus as a result of their personal relationships with disability. Similar to the formation of other cultural studies such as Women and Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and African American Studies, Disabilities Studies came into being as a previously marginalized group of people began to find historical evidence related to their sense of self as individuals and as a class of people. Disabilities Studies evolved as scholars who had an intimate connection with disability found a kinship with literary or historical figures and sought to document or bring attention to their presence, as well as to explicate the overt and nuanced cultural meanings that disability conveys.⁹

Similarly, my own personal experience of both disability and New England drive my interest in considering New England's relationship and use of mental disability within its regional texts. I admit that it is born, in part, of a defensiveness against labels or designations and the resulting cultural practices that have directly impacted my life, as well as the lives of people I care about and admire. My view of disability continues to evolve through my deepening appreciation of individuals with disability and their many

forms of cognitive processing as *NTs* or *Neurotypicals*. The practice of appropriating a practice of labeling the 'other' serves to underscore the arbitrary nature of categorizing human difference.

⁹ It is no small matter to state that Disability Studies also emerged as more people with disabilities were granted access to colleges and universities, found the means to complete doctoral degrees, and had a reasonable likelihood of being employed as academics. Paul Longmore's essay "Why I Burned My Book," in his book of the same name poignantly recounts the many challenges he faced in the 1970's and 1980's as a man with physical disabilities who relied upon public support to survive. Governmental regulations actually made it more difficult to use that support to become financially independent and to contribute meaningfully to society. Longmore explains the many ways in which social programs created to support people with disabilities seldom considered the 'abled' qualities in the individual in their actual implementation. In addition, The Americans with Disabilities Act, which provides wide-ranging safeguards against discrimination of people with disabilities, was not put into effect until 1990.

unacknowledged capabilities by the general population. New England's regional texts, it seems to me, also have an intimate relationship with mental disability and have used its latent capacity to carefully craft and advance notions of New England's inimitability.

Abstract

This thesis employs the framework of Disabilities Theory, particularly the Social-Constructivist Model, to examine the literary figure of mental disability as a robust and reflexive trope in the construction of New England's regional identity at the turn of the twentieth century through the late-twentieth century. In conjunction with an analysis of declension narratives, which have been commonly accepted as a means to wrestle with perceptions of a degraded regional identity through historical and social change in New England, consideration of associated literary figures with mental disabilities exposes the contested and constructed nature of New England identity. Interpretational analysis of regional declension narratives using mental disability have generally depended upon common understandings of mental disability as an undesirable condition, predicated on notions of deviance from the norm or a diseased state. As a region, however, New England has also held fast to beliefs in its exceptionality. Cultural responses in New England to mental disability over time demonstrate its mutability which, when extended to the narrative subject, provide alternate interpretational possibilities. This thesis posits that the presumed alterity of mental disability has been utilized inventively in northern New England texts as a means for responding to its perceived failures and for promoting its regional distinctiveness.

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Introduction

The fictional literature of northern New England is populated with a rural underclass that serves as a foil to the industrious and proper ideal of village life, replete with tidy capes and roomy clapboards centered about the old meetinghouse converted to the stalwart church, whose gleaming spire signifies order and morality as it reaches perpetually toward the heavens. From the mountainfolk of Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) to Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (1956), a number of regional texts make use of a class of New Englanders struggling for competency at the edges of normative communities or altogether out of sight - - but established and identified - - in the deep recesses of the mountains or other remote rural enclaves. These marginalized populations are frequently characterized not only by their poverty, disease, and questionable social standing, but also by perceived sub-cultural modes of behavior connected to classifications of moral degeneracy and sexual immorality. In typical interpretations of regional texts, these are based upon familiar, indelible tropes in support of narratives of New England declension.

Declension discourse has become a popular way of understanding New England identity throughout historical changes in the region, which cast doubt upon New England's pre-eminence within the national narrative. Not only does the narrative of New England in decline rely heavily on the fixture of a rural underclass in regional texts, since the early twentieth century there has been a strong inclination to link alleged degenerate outliers with mental disability. Earlier regional texts, however, do not explicitly connect mental disability to a lower socio-economic or deviant class within the

narrative of declension. This indicates that the alterity of mental disability has been an effective vehicle for grappling with controversies associated with New England identity. Heretofore, declension narratives of the region using mental disability have generally depended upon common understandings of mental disability as an undesirable condition, predicated on notions of deviance from the norm or a diseased state. On the one hand, this has been a useful way of explaining the cultural work of mental disability and regional identity in the declension narrative. On the other, closer readings of regional texts suggest that this may be an indiscriminate application. Why then, has the singular meaning of literary representations of mental disability been so persistent in the literary analysis of northern New England texts?

One way of answering that question is to recognize that Disabilities Studies is a relatively new academic discipline. Without the discursive framework provided by disability theory, it is daunting to contextualize the multiple meanings of disability as a category open to literary interrogation. Despite the heavy cultural labor performed by disability in regional texts, mental disability has been relatively overlooked as a complex dynamic in the construction of New England identity. Prominent Disabilities Studies scholars David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, and the late Paul Longmore have commented upon the apparent invisibility of characters with disabilities within texts; or, more precisely, the lack of commentary about the meaning of such characters within literary and academic discourse. Longmore asserted that the apparent screening out of characters with disabilities results from social conditioning that views disability as an

isolated and individualized state of being human.¹ That is, in general, disability is not perceived as being connected to the larger social body. As a consequence, disability and its representational qualities have been subconsciously deemed unworthy of examination, although its meaning, as I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis, is woven almost imperceptibly into the cultural fabric.

Other scholars posit that as people with disabilities became absent “from the streets and public gathering spaces”² in the nineteenth century through the movement towards institutionalization in this era, they were excised from the social body and disability became squarely located within the private family sphere. As a result, the general public and scholars alike did not know what to make of characters with disabilities when encountered in a literary text because of their relative social invisibility in day-to-day life. Implicit social codes suggested it that it was perhaps too impolite or invasive to recognize, let alone discuss, disability. Only when considering that supposition can one fully begin to contemplate how powerful cultural conventions have been in marginalizing, silencing, and erasing individuals with disabilities, and, how formidable a task it has been to not only locate and make visible people with disabilities in a text, but also to embark upon a productive conversation about their cultural work within the narrative.

Indeed, as their research on *narrative* and *disability* was becoming recognized both nationally and internationally, Mitchell and Snyder continually emphasized that the

¹ Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 131-142.

² David T. Mitchell and Snyder, S. L., *Cultural Locations of Disability*, (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 45-46.

pervasive nature of disability in literary texts frequently caught “even the most knowledgeable scholars unaware.”³ Without cultural permission to acknowledge, regard, or engage disability in a public space, disability has proliferated in literary and social narratives unchecked until recently. In the absence of a discursive framework, analytical models or theory for examining the purpose, function, and meaning of representations of disability, most readers, including literary and social theorists, have been culturally conditioned to sift past these images uncritically, thereby disavowing them of their cultural capacity.

Teasing out the cultural capacity of disability is fraught with complications, which disability theory attempts to redress, but seldom resolves definitively. The persistent conundrum is the failure of disability theory to effectively define ‘disability.’ Although it may seem straightforward, with disability commonly understood by legal definitions or medical diagnoses, disability also operates as a concept or social construct. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, disability is a legal term rather than a medical one. Legally, a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. An excerpt from the webpage of the *National Network: Information, Guidance and Training on the Americans with Disabilities Act* demonstrates how confounding the term can be as the legal definition, “includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a [medically recognized] disability but are

³ David T. Mitchell and Snyder, S. L., *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 51.

regarded as having a disability."⁴ The first instance might include an individual diagnosed with a physical impairment like Cerebral Palsy or with a mental impairment like Attention Deficit Disorder, but whose ability to participate in most daily life activities is not affected in the ways the medical condition manifests itself. The latter could include an individual with extensive eczema, not typically considered a disability, to the arms and hands in a degree that it significantly limits his or her ability to participate in major life activities such as performing job-related tasks or attending to meal preparation. As these examples suggest, the lack of fixity about what constitutes a disability legally or medically facilitates the understanding of disability as simultaneously conceptually-based.

Recognizing disability as a socially-mediated phenomenon is a foundational tenet of Disabilities Studies and theory; it is likewise critical to the textual analyses within this thesis. Although the anecdotes shared in the "Forward" about my early experience of finding disability in various texts suggests that identifying disability was clear-cut, it was not. In all but one instance, I concluded that the individual or character was disabled based on inferences made -- like other contemporary readers -- through *my* cultural knowledge. The text in *String Too Short to be Saved* never explicitly stated that Anson Freedom was a man with intellectual disabilities. Instead, I used written descriptors such as 'half-wit,' and 'empty-headed grin' to support my identification and analysis of his disability. In addition, I utilized a socially-constructed, but commonly understood, connection between bestowing characteristics of a beast upon an individual with an

⁴ <<https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>> accessed February 2, 2015.

apparent intellectual disability to suggest that he or she was innately primitive or less than human. I understood through the cultural experiences of my time and place, that these have been ways of identifying an individual with a mental disability, even as they may not be included in the legal or medical definition of disability.

Willow and Turtle from *The Dogs of March* were similarly understood to be disabled by their odd hand mannerisms, gibberish or lack of coherent verbal speech, and physical limitations. Furthermore, the association of Anson Freedom, Willow and Turtle with poverty, hereditary degeneracy, and also social marginalization signified that they were likely to be representations of intellectual disability through my knowledge of how twenty-first century New England culture reacts to and accommodates human difference associated with mental disability within the larger social narrative. Only in *Amoskeag* did Marie Anne Senechal use the term retarded, which today is still the legal and medical term to denote a mental or cognitive disability determined by purportedly objective IQ tests.⁵ Even so, as the previous discussion of contemporary legal and medical definitions of disability suggests, their use does not definitively resolve issues related to the presence or identification of a disability within a given text.

Unlike a physical disability, the imprecise nature of mental disability presents a glaring impediment to identifying or locating it in the Northern New England texts I have

⁵ *Retard*, *Retarded*, and *Mentally Retarded* are currently falling out of favor due to the negative connotations associated with the terms, particularly as they have become used as derogatory expressions in daily discourse. Since the early-2000s a “R-Word: Spread the Word to End the Word” has become a national campaign to eliminate the use of the R-Word (Retarded) and to replace it with the less hurtful terms of intellectual, cognitive or developmental disability. It is interesting to note that the terms *moron*, *imbecile*, *idiot*, and *feeble-minded* were originally medical terms coined in the nineteenth century, which are no longer used due to their now offensive meanings. For a more thorough understanding of the fallible nature of intelligence or IQ tests, see Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1981).

selected with certainty. Explicit monikers like, 'fool,' 'simpleton,' or 'mad,' may make it easier to distinguish a literary character as having a mental disability, as Patrick McDonagh suggests.⁶ Rosemarie Garland Thomson cautions, however, that due to the relative invisibility of some forms of disability, the reader must read the text closely and infer disability from the margins.⁷ In my attempts to locate characters with mental disabilities in texts within the following chapters, the means with which they may qualify as either intellectually disabled or mentally ill vary. Often, this required comprehending other cultural markers of the time or culture within which the text is situated to make a case for disability as it might be understood by that culture.

Although physical or mental impairments of typical human functioning have existed throughout time and can be found in every culture, disability as a social construct is mutable. Perhaps the most difficult culture in which to identify mental disability was the Penobscot, whose native conceptualization of disability does not exist in a form consistent with Eurocentric viewpoints. Locating disability, impairment or disability within Penobscot culture required looking at practices toward the aged, physically impaired and death in an effort to make linkages to mental disability as potentially perceived within their culture (see Chapter 2). Similar efforts were required, though to a lesser degree, in the other northern New England texts when examining depictions of literary characters and associated behaviors that gestured toward mental disability in a manner that would be commonly understood today.

⁶ Patrick McDonagh, *Literature and the Notion of Disability*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 268.

⁷ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.

The depression and subsequent suicides of generations of farming patriarchs, for instance, as found in *The Hereditary Barn* are suggestive of what today's reader is likely to understand as mental illness (see Chapter 1). Yet, the narrative was crafted at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century and is imbued with the terminology, implications, historicity and meaning associated with mental difference as generated from its own time and place. In considering the behaviors of the characters, the communal response to the behaviors, and the narrative outcomes, a plausible case can be made for the identification of mental illness or intellectual disability. Nevertheless, this identification is contingent on a variety of factors that, while well-considered, may not wholly account for the cultural work it was intended to accomplish in its milieu. Defining a character with mental disability due to plausible cultural markers can become a starting point, however, for more thoughtful analyses and enlightening propositions for how mental disability, as an acknowledged difference in mental functioning, and disability, as a culturally-mediated structure, have worked in tandem to create identity and meaning in northern New England texts.

Just as I acknowledge flaws in the procedures or guidelines used to identify disability within northern New England texts, Disabilities Studies theorists have more recently embarked upon conversations and inquiries about weaknesses in the various theoretical models employed to date. When Disabilities Studies emerged in the late-1990s, scholars borrowed heavily from the theory of other academic disciplines in illuminating, but sometimes uncritical ways as they lobbied for traction and their

nascent field's legitimacy.⁸ Steeped firmly in interdisciplinarity, approaches to understanding disability have included theory from history, law, literature, art, and the social sciences. The debate regarding fissures in the application of theory continues to be dynamic and unresolved as scholars persist in struggling with what precisely constitutes disability. For example, The Individual Model emphasizes the body, the individual, and pathology, but does not account for the influence of professional or medical power in the formation of disability. The Materialist Model focuses on socioeconomic factors, barriers, and discrimination created by a culture, but fails to account for the lived experience of individuals with disabilities whose conditions cause real bodily pain and limitations separate from cultural constructs. The Social-Constructivist Model views disability as created through discourse, language, and social norms. Additionally, The Social-Constructivist Model considers impairment the result of a specific biological or psychological condition, but argues that disability occurs when cultures react to individuals with impairments in ways that deny access, restrict self-determination, ascribe lower social value to, or similarly fashion the individual with an impairment as an 'other.'⁹ Put more succinctly, "people are impaired, but society disables."¹⁰

Like The Materialist Model, a Social-Constructivist approach does not necessarily take into account the reality experienced by an individual with a disability. A common

⁸ Marten Soder. 'Tensions, Perspectives, and Themes in Disability Studies.' *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Studies*, 11, no. 2 (2009), 69.

⁹ The 'other' or 'othering' in literary criticism references Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a theory that examines the cultural creation of the 'other' through race formation made by the dominant culture or colonial power structures.

¹⁰ David Bolt. *A Brief Introduction to Post-Disability Literary Criticism*. Presented at Keele University September 21, 2004.

example used to highlight the weaknesses of The Materialist and The Social-Constructivist models involves an individual with mobility impairments who uses a wheelchair. That individual may be able to participate in his or her major life activities if they live in a community that is fully handicapped accessible: single-story dwellings and businesses, no stairs, wide hallways, ramps on sidewalks, and wheelchair lifts on public transportation, for instance. Without these things, it is society who disables the individual with a physical difference by preventing his or her full, independent access to the community; a culture's response reflects attitudes and norms that result in the creation of disability. Nevertheless, if the individual with a mobility impairment is placed in a natural environment, like a forest, the environment does not disable the individual and the physical limitations of his or her disability are singular and unto themselves. Despite its limitations, The Social-Constructivist Model is the model I most closely adhere to in my examination of northern New England texts because this thesis primarily concerns itself with disability as a social construct. The model's considerations of themes of language, literature, and socio-cultural responses are the most applicable to studying mental disability as an essential element in the construction of New England identity from the late nineteenth century to the present day in regional texts.

Tom Shakespeare argues that, "disability is the quintessential post-modern concept because it is so complex, so variable, so contingent, so situated. It sits at the intersection of biology and society and agency and structure."¹¹ That is, while the concept of disability can be mutable across cultures and time, its relationship to other

¹¹ David T. Mitchell and S. L. Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 19.

cultural categories like gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status is integral to the way disability may be used to advance specific cultural understandings or interpretations of the various social categories and their symbiotic relationship to each other. I would add to these culturally constructed categories, region and regional identity.

The texts of northern New England analyzed throughout this thesis reflect social and historical changes through the presence of mental disability and attempt to ameliorate underlying concerns through their construction of mental disability. The authors and texts provide social commentary as they employ mental disability and connect it to New England identity. Like all literature, northern New England texts are cultural products that play an arguably significant role in both reflecting and constructing cultural attitudes about disability and identity formation. "Literary narratives," posit Snyder and Mitchell, "begin an explanatory compensation wherein perceived 'aberrancies' can be rescued from ignorance, neglect, and misunderstandings for their readerships."¹² The reliance of cultural narratives upon disability promotes a premise that the literary narrative functions to compensate for a socially perceived limitation or anomaly. Contemplated thusly, disability and representation of disability become the narrative devices "par excellence"¹³ for promulgating that which is antithetical to the perceived social norm. Therefore, the narrative use of mental disability advances a subtextual concern that locates it the furthest from cultural norms

¹² David T. Mitchell and S. L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 51.

¹³ Mitchell and Snyder, 51.

-- and, when considered in these selected northern New England texts, becomes the fertile, stimulating ground for exploring the construction of regional identity.

Unlike literary representations of individuals whose disabilities are solely of a physical nature, representations of mental disability are debatably the ultimate 'other.' Mental disability is, as Berube explains, "irreducibly alien, and self-representation depends on one's capacity to distinguish oneself from those incapable of self-representation."¹⁴ Characters imbued with mental disability are literally and figuratively of an utterly different mind. The narrative subject who is mentally different is an incomprehensible alterity, which encompasses inexhaustible interpretational possibilities that may simultaneously result in identities of social resistance and identities of cultural compliance. Representations of mental disability are therefore powerful loci for mediating identity confusion.

New England has a history of wrestling with its regional identity, frequently, as Joseph Conforti argues, "revising explanations of regional distinctiveness."¹⁵ The unique and varied possibilities available through narrative use of mental disability accommodate New England's regional need to understand, defend, and promote its exceptionality. At first glance, as the region's stature and viability was frequently considered to be in decline, literary representations of mental disability with their supposed negative connotations and undesirable associations have appeared to be *the*

¹⁴ Berube, M. "Disability and Narrative," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, Vol. 120, no. 2 (March 2005), 576.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Conforti. *Imagining New England*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 2001, 2.

valid interpretational option. Upon closer examination, however, these selected northern New England texts do not so readily submit to such conclusions.

Chapter 1, "Perceptions of New England Declension at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and Mental Illness: A Familiar Trope Reconsidered," analyzes "The Hereditary Barn" and *Alexander's Bridge* to consider mental disability and regional identity as cultural constructs. As New England's agrarian lifestyle and rural economies were imperiled, so too, was New England's political and social dominance in a nation expanding westward. Both texts rely upon the literary trope of mental illness to probe at the constructed nature of regional identity. While "The Hereditary Barn" and *Alexander's Bridge* acknowledge the narrative of regional decline, they successfully employ mental disability to rescue New England identity from fatalistic pronouncements about the region's future at the turn of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2, "Complicating New England Literary Conventions: Penobscot Tales of Mental Disability," examines representations of disability in traditional Penobscot folklore in conjunction with what is known about cultural practices toward members with disabilities. It reinforces a cultural construction of disability as found within Penobscot culture that differs distinctively from mainstream New England conceptions. At the same time, it considers the ways in which Penobscot folklore and societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities may have become influenced over time by mainstream practices toward both Native Americans and persons with disabilities. Beyond a survey of traditional Penobscot folklore, this chapter emphasizes the work of Penobscot author Molly Spotted Elk. In particular, it posits that her use of disability as a

trope consistent with early twentieth century non-native attitudes, was appropriated to powerfully communicate the plight of Native Americans and to suggest a vision that advocated for appreciation of human difference and inclusivity.

Chapter 3, "Northern New England Neo-Regionalist Texts and The Narrative of Declension: Potential Limits on the Literary Representation of Intellectual Disability and New England Identity," closely considers the historical presence of applied eugenics theory in New England and its persuasive presence in twentieth century regional texts. As the twentieth century progressed, fears about changes in New England prompted political and social responses aimed at preserving a specific regional identity. Building upon regional literary tradition and eugenics theory, regional texts like *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* bring the reader to the hearth of New England's poor and disenfranchised. Among the family members represented in these texts are individuals with intellectual disabilities. The construction of the individuals with intellectual disabilities harkens back to the colonial period, when such persons were included within community life. Nonetheless, from the late-nineteenth century through the late-twentieth century, institutionalization had become the preferred location for disability. *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, however, arrive in the midst of political efforts to de-institutionalize persons with disabilities. Therefore, the texts concern themselves with the potential impact of community re-integration. At the same time, their re-inscription of the narrative of regional decline is imbued with new meaning, one for which the heretofore commonly understood alterity of mental

disability may have no longer been sufficient to resolve qualms regarding New England identity.

From New England's earliest days, mental disability has been a cultural construct that has generated a range of meaning used in the region's constant conversation with itself to conceptualize unique and pleasing aspects of its identity, as well as to confront and counter attempts to malign its reputation. Representations of mental disability in the region's literary texts have not been fixed; they have been shaped and utilized to create distinctive meaning related to regional identity. The persistence of narrative subjects with mental disability in northern New England texts attests to the enduring influence they have had on the construction of the region's continuously evolving identity. In order to fully understand constructions of regional identity in New England, we must take into account literary representation of mental disability and the cultural work it has performed in the context of social and historical change.

Chapter 1

Perceptions of New England Declension at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and Mental Illness: A Familiar Trope Reconsidered

Narratives of a declining New England have become so common and integrated with regional identity that they are seldom questioned. The cultural work of northern New England's texts has often been to examine the region's understanding of itself and to find its place in the national discourse. The familiar trope of mental disability has been employed with regularity to explore regional identity and to offer pronouncements regarding New England's role throughout real and imagined changes. This chapter explores two texts that were published at the turn of the twentieth-century and utilized mental disability as a means to consider regional identity. "The Hereditary Barn," and *Alexander's Bridge* employ the trope of mental disability to consider regional identity and exceptionalism during a time when New England's prospects may have seemed bleak in contrast to the vibrant inspiration of westward expansion. The texts, however, strongly advocate for New England's centrality in the national narrative. It is noteworthy that *Alexander's Bridge* and "The Hereditary Barn" feature mental disability prominently in the narrative. While the nomenclature that describes or suggests mental difference is varied and sometimes colorful within the texts, the literary representations associated with mental disability are not found within the margins, nor are they effectively obscured. Instead, they dominate the narratives within both texts as they confront prevailing associations between mental instability and regional decline. Furthermore, they use representations of mental disability in complex ways that provide

for a multi-faceted consideration of what mental disability *might* mean, for both texts gesture toward the very nature of mental illness as culturally constructed. The mutability of mental disability allows it to be powerfully employed within both texts as they undertake the cultural work of understanding and continually re-creating New England identity in response to the real and perceived vicissitudes of their times.

“The Hereditary Barn” and *Alexander’s Bridge* have been selected for several reasons. As New England entered the twentieth century, it began to grapple with two distinct questions: first, the economic potential of its agrarian lifestyle and second, its ability to hold political and social influence over the expanding nation. “The Hereditary Barn” is located in rural Maine, illustrating pastoral New England and contending with claims of stymied progress, which included not only perceptions of failing local economies, but also of unrefined, vitiated populations. In contrast, *Alexander’s Bridge* is centered in Boston, a hub of business and political activity. The urban setting of Boston highlights progress, commerce, and civil influence; it is also closely associated with the nation’s formative years. As such, when New England’s pre-eminence on the national and international scene appears to be threatened, Boston was effectively used to advocate for the region’s exceptionality. A comparison of the two distinctive settings is integral to addressing queries of regional identity, as is the consideration of how mental disability is employed within the narrative. In addition, it is important to consider not only the constructed nature of regional identity, but also that of mental disability. In order to understand the cultural response to mental disability at the turn of the twentieth century, a review of New England’s perception of and response to mental

disability from the colonial era to the period under consideration in this chapter is warranted.

The earliest New England texts alluding to individuals with mental disability are the 1693 Poor Laws of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where those individuals historically referenced as an “idiot” or “distracted *person*”¹⁶ can be compared to twenty-first century conceptions of intellectual disability and mental illness, respectively.¹⁷ According to “An Act for the Relief of Ideots [sic] and Distracted Persons,” which was incorporated into the colony’s poor laws of 1693, an idiot was “any person to be naturally wanting of understanding, so as to be incapable to provide for him or her self.”¹⁸ Alternatively, a distracted person was defined as someone who “by the Providence of God, shall fall into distraction, and become *Non compos mentis* [not of sound mind].”¹⁹ The poor laws were predicated upon English statutes, but also incorporated biblical mandates as understood by the Puritans, as well as practical considerations necessitated by the realities of colonial life in North America.

One over-arching departure from English law concerning individuals with mental disability is that colonial Massachusetts permitted them the right to “convey property with the approval of the General Court,”²⁰ an entitlement which was also extended to

¹⁶ Parnel Wickham. “Conceptions of Idiocy in Colonial Massachusetts,” *Journal of Social History*, 35, no. 4 (Summer 2002), 935-954.

¹⁷ For a broader understanding of how colonial New England differentiated between *idiots* and *distracted persons*, see Wickham’s “Conceptions of Idiocy in Colonial Massachusetts” and “Idiocy and Colonial Law” in *Mental Retardation*, 35, no. 2 (April 2001). It appears the two terms are legal, rather than medical, concepts and do not necessarily correlate precisely to the range of mental disability as we understand them today.

¹⁸ Wickham, “Conceptions of Idiocy in Colonial Massachusetts,” 940.

¹⁹ Wickham, 939.

²⁰ Wickham, 939.

married women and children. By contrast, English law forbade this class of individuals from any transference of assets. While English law was written so as to facilitate the conveyance of inherited wealth to the king, Puritan law provided an avenue for those with mental disability to exercise some agency with respect to earned or inherited property, ostensibly with the protective oversight of the General Court. Effectually, this served to include individuals with mental disability into the economic life of their communities, albeit in a circumscribed manner, suggesting underlying notions that individuals with mental disability were members of their communities who should be afforded certain rights and were perceived as being capable of acting in their own interests despite a socially acknowledged cognitive impairment.²¹

Although references to individuals with mental disability in colonial era texts tend to be rather scant, they likewise do not convey an essentially deleterious attitude toward their presence in society, nor their perceived difference. To be sure, the term “idiot” was employed as an insult in colloquial discourse,²² but for the spiritually concerned Puritans, those with mental disability could be effectively employed as metaphor in liturgical texts and sermons to understand their own tenuous relationship to God. To this end, Parnel Wickham explains: “On the one hand, it [idiocy] stood for

²¹ Wickham notes that the vague language of surviving court documents obscures full understanding of whether an individual had a mental disability. In court records that more clearly involve persons with mental disability, “idiots” were most commonly represented in civil actions on their behalves by friends or relatives. In the few cases of litigation that were recorded, the person with a disability was considered a victim of a predatory individual. Documents limiting decision-making or what we might consider partial or full guardianship today do not appear in the surviving records, although the fact that civil actions were initiated by someone close to the person with a mental disability suggest that *de facto* guardianship was commonplace in the colonial era.

²² Cotton Mather, for example, referred to his political opponents as “idiots and fuddle-caps and men that love and make a lie,” in a personal letter written in 1720. See Kenneth Silverman’s *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

the supremely pure and innocent nature of God's chosen people, while on the other hand idiocy symbolized the ignorant and spiritually incompetent who were hopelessly estranged from God's kingdom."²³ The trope of mental disability was effectively used to mirror the plight and experience of even the most faithful Puritan, who might never be entirely certain whether he or she would be among God's elect.²⁴ To this end, the metaphor of a person with a mental disability, as employed in Puritan spiritual understanding, undergirded notions of social-acceptance and human kinship with those who were mentally different in everyday colonial New England practice. Thus, any kind of cultural disenfranchisement of those with cognitive difference was not ineludibly a form of 'othering,' since any Puritan might also readily find a commonality in his or her transitory alienation from God. This is not to say that individuals with mental disabilities or their conditions were not sometimes perceived as loathsome, but legally, they were afforded specific rights and protections. In addition, the poor laws articulated a social responsibility to provide for the welfare of these men and women, and evidence exists of individuals with mental disability being considered capable of contributing to the economic life and wellbeing of their communities.²⁵ This relatively positive and inclusive approach to persons with mental disabilities appears to have extended well into early nineteenth century New England.

²³ Wickham, "Conceptions of Idiocy in Colonial Massachusetts," 942.

²⁴ Colonial Puritans believed that a select few would be among God's chosen or 'elect' for spiritual afterlife. Even the most apparently faithful could not be certain of their status in God's eyes as they acknowledged their inability to fully comprehend the mind of God. For a representative discussion of the Puritan ethos, please see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1954), Stephen Foster's *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) and Joseph Conforti's *Imagining New England*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

²⁵ Wickham, "Conceptions of Idiocy in Colonial Massachusetts," 942.

For example, the journalist and Transcendentalist women's rights advocate Margaret Fuller frequently took a special interest in the care and education of her younger brother, Lloyd, who appears to have had an intellectual disability. In 1837 Lloyd Fuller attended an ordinary neighborhood school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where mental disability was not a routine rationale for excluding children from receiving an education or community life.²⁶ In fact, "an adult son or daughter with mental retardation," argues Penny L. Richards, "provoked no shame in these families,"²⁷ prior to the mid-nineteenth century. Margaret Fuller wrote both fictional and thinly-veiled references to her family life that included depictions of individuals with mental disability as worthy and spiritual beings who induced beneficial influences on, and elicited responses from those around them.²⁸ Indeed, it may well be that conceptions of *idiocy* and *distracted persons*, as well as the socially approved responses extended to the class of individuals with mental disability in Puritan New England, were employed to foster literary representations into the early nineteenth century that advanced affirmative, inclusive practices and considerations. This comparatively stable and lengthy influence may also serve to support a somewhat more complex interpretation of literary figures with mental disability as a number of socio-historical evolutions occurred in mid-nineteenth century New England.

²⁶ Penny Richards, "Beside Her Sat Her Idiot Child," in Steven Noll and J.W. Trent, Jr., eds. *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 67.

²⁷ Richards, 67.

²⁸ Richards, 69.

“The Hereditary Barn:” Deconstructing the Narrative of New England Declension

The potential heritability of mental illness may have whispered through colonial New England and the post-Revolutionary War period, but it unquestionably gained strength throughout the nineteenth century. As medicine became more formally practiced, the theories of European scientists, such as Paul Broca, Pieter Camper, Arthur de Gobineau, and Francis Galton began to influence medical and social practices in New England. In a growing awareness of the anthropological science and genetic theory used to advance notions of racial hierarchies and supposedly inherited characteristics that supported a human ‘ideal,’ New Englanders contended with medical discourse espousing the hereditary transmission of mental illness. In the wake of medical and scientific pronouncements about the heritability of mental illness, as well as other ‘undesirable’ conditions, cultural response to persons with mental disability changed, not only through new social policy, but also in the way that New England perceived or understood mental illness.

By the 1880s, American physician William Goodell began advocating for the sterilization of the mentally ill to decrease their assumed genetic contamination and the burden their care placed on society.²⁹ At the same time, “houses of confinement,”³⁰ such as the hospital, the mental institution, and the asylum became *en vogue* as the socially approved place for individuals with mental difference to reside, thereby

²⁹ William Goodell, “Clinical Notes on the Extirpation of the Ovaries for Insanity,” *The American Journal of Insanity*, 38 (1882), 295.

³⁰ Shelley Tremain. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 134.

disenfranchising identified individuals from their communities, unlike previous decades. In the late-nineteenth century, the threat of their perceived “irrationality”³¹ was considered a contagion that needed to be restricted, if not eliminated, for the overall benefit of society.

As the belief in medical and scientific claims led to new social and political responses to people with mental disability, New England as a region - - and New England’s regional identity - - was undergoing transformations, as well. The regional distinctiveness and accomplishment associated with Puritan morality, Yankee heartiness and the thriving industriousness of small New England community life began to dissipate under flourishing industrialization, a rapid rise in immigration and the alluring, abundant possibilities associated with the West. According to Joseph Conforti, the “left behind farmsteads that were stark reminders of change in rural New England,”³² once the iconic representation of New England’s vitality, the farmstead now became symbolic of a degraded, unviable region. In this moment of regional identity crisis, literary representations of mental disability in the texts of northern New England provided one vehicle for wrestling with cultural changes and for articulating a response.

Written by Maine native Noah Brooks, *Tales of the Maine Coast* is a collection of short stories published in 1894. Brooks, born in 1830, was the youngest in the large family of a seafaring captain and his native-born Maine wife. The Brooks family resided in the small coastal town of Castine, Maine, where Brooks reportedly enjoyed a happy

³¹ Tremain, 135.

³² Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 211.

childhood despite the deaths of his parents when he was seven years old. Brooks was raised by an older sister in his hometown until he joined siblings who had relocated to Illinois in the mid-1850s; nearly a decade later he moved to California. A close and lifelong friend of both Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, Brooks was employed as a journalist and writer for most of his life. Although he did not return to Maine to live, a familiar theme in many of Brooks' short stories was that of a happy New England boyhood and the charms of rural life.³³ Brooks was a champion of rural New England; his earnest depiction of northern New England and its people evidence an affection for the region that had not waned over time.³⁴

"The Hereditary Barn," is arguably the most somber of the short stories found in fictional *Tales of the Maine Coast*. In this tale, Brooks offers a shrewd analysis of the evolving narrative of New England declension, which arrived at the intersection of sociocultural change and regional instability. The tale begins in 1807 on "the old Joslin farm...on the road from Fairport to Penobscot, near the head of the Northern Bay. It is a ragged and hilly piece of upland, yielding good grass, and capable of great possibilities."³⁵ While the text describes a lush and colorful landscape populated with "marigolds, hollyhocks, love-lies-bleeding, and China asters,"³⁶ in addition to a variety of medicinal herbs, it also reveals that the "spruces and firs, never very cheerful, were black and mournful indeed, in winter."³⁷ The obscured view of nearby farms due to the

³³ Brooks died in Pasadena, California in 1903. He is buried in Castine, Maine.

³⁴ No Author, "Noah Brooks," *The Wilson Museum Bulletin*, 1, no. 26 (Spring, 1973), Castine, Maine. Accessed online <http://www.wilsonmuseum.org/bulletins/bulletinVol1No26.html> on February 28, 2015.

³⁵ Noah Brooks, "The Hereditary Barn," in *Tales of the Maine Coast*, (New York: Bookfinger, 1980), 93.

³⁶ Brooks, 94.

³⁷ Brooks, 94.

mountainous, tree-laden terrain invokes a sense of isolation, so much so that “one might almost fancy it an untrodden wilderness.”³⁸ In this way, Brooks paints a picture of New England that performs like an optical illusion in the mind’s eye, creating a sense that keenly gazing upon the landscape would not produce a fixed view. Rather, the text implies that comprehending New England was a matter of dual perspectives. Brooks plays upon the theme of alternating viewpoints throughout the text through the Joslin family and their community.

Like many coastal Maine farms of the period, the Joslin family’s agricultural economy was supplemented by maritime pursuits. An “adventurous”³⁹ son might make a voyage on a local coasting or fishing vessel and the first Joslin patriarch encountered in the text, Elkanah, owned shares in two merchant ships and a schooner in Portland’s harbor. Despite the diversification of his assets, a well-stocked cellar, a devoted wife of 40 years and a large family, the farmstead appeared “very gloomy and poverty-stricken,”⁴⁰ to old Elkanah when the reader first encounters him in the text. Although his wife, “Brisk Marm Joslin,”⁴¹ points out all of the positive aspects of their present situation in response to Elkanah’s complaints, he nonetheless removes to the massive and seemingly oppressive barn. There he completes the evening chores, including milking their cows, and summarily hangs himself from one of the sturdy beams. Other Joslin men residing on the farm in following generations meet a similar end, taking their

³⁸ Brooks, 94.

³⁹ Brooks, 93.

⁴⁰ Brooks, 96.

⁴¹ Brooks, 97.

lives on the same “historic timber.”⁴² The beginning of text mentions one exception, the second Amzi (Elkanah’s great-grandson), who did not go the way of the other “self-destroyers.”⁴³ All the same, by the 1880s the old barn had “acquired a name and repute throughout the region that was unenviable,”⁴⁴ much like that of the New Englander. In other words, the tale of Elkanah and his descendants can be read to mirror the emerging discourse of a once esteemed and prosperous rural New England, now in decline and circumscribed to a wretched narrative that foreshadowed only a tragic conclusion.

Brooks’ construction of Elkanah as a man who apparently struggled with a brief bout of depression and had a mental illness is noteworthy. First, in contrast to predominating interpretations involving mental disability, which tend to link the impairment with other perceived social ills or character flaws, “The Hereditary Barn” quickly establishes Elkanah as an upstanding member of his community. In spite of suffering economically because of Thomas Jefferson’s embargo of 1807, which prevented Elkanah from moving and selling surplus crops or from reaping the financial rewards of his merchant vessels now lying idle, he refused to engage in smuggling. Brooks ensures the reader understands the finer points of his character, noting that Elkanah was “an uncompromising church-member. He would sooner starve than break the law of the land.”⁴⁵ His son Jotham, who hung himself ten years after his father’s

⁴² Brooks, 108.

⁴³ Brooks, 108.

⁴⁴ Brooks, 108.

⁴⁵ Brooks, 96.

suicide was also known to have been “a consistent church-member.”⁴⁶ Jotham’s son, Amzi (the first), had “taken to drink,”⁴⁷ but the text asserts that this was not necessarily unusual, but “as many another poor fool does, hoping that in this he might drown his sorrows.”⁴⁸ The other Joslin men who committed suicide are also portrayed as hard-working farmers and upright community members who struggled, but eventually “succumbed to the depressing influence of the big barn”⁴⁹ where they spent so much of their time.⁵⁰ It is important to note that the text does not explicitly link mental illness with moral failings, opening up the potential use of mental disability as a literary representation that permits a nuanced rebuttal to prevailing narratives of regional decline during the turn of the twentieth century.

The description of the Joslin farm and the lifestyle of its inhabitants is consistent with historical records available on New England hill farms. Farming families in this region were noted for their industry and self-sufficiency, but the monotony of such a

⁴⁶ Brooks, 104.

⁴⁷ Brooks, 106.

⁴⁸ Brooks, 106.

⁴⁹ Brooks, 104.

⁵⁰ In “Mood Disorders and the Brain: Depression, Melancholia, and the Historiography of Psychiatry,” *Medical History* 55(3), July, 2011, 393-399, Asa Jansson notes that drawing a direct correlation between today’s understanding of depression and nineteenth century understandings of melancholia and neurasthenia is faulty as both medical and cultural understandings about the nature of these disorders differed. In the nineteenth century, ‘affective insanity,’ presumed to be the root of suicide, was brought on by a sudden emotional response, triggering imaginings in the brain that produced a bodily response. At the time of publication of “The Hereditary Barn,” the term ‘depression,’ as a mental disability did not exist. Suicide, however, was considered to be the result of emotions that became diseased. Construction of mental illness within the text fits this understanding and while it may be suggestive of a personal failing to control emotions to negate a ‘diseased state,’ psychiatric theory did not link mental illness to moral failings. The complex neuro-chemical response understood to be the cause of depression as understood in the twenty-first century did not exist.

life, according to an 1820 farm report, was so burdensome that “only hard cider, drunk often and heavily, lifted the gloom”⁵¹ of day-to-day living. In addition to the challenges of eking out an existence on a northern New England farm, once the region moved toward industrialization in the mid-1800s and urban centers grew, upland farmers encountered difficulty in supplying the city populations with sufficient food.⁵² In the face of this, many New Englanders abandoned family farms for the prospects of the vast, fertile ground of the west, leaving behind a stock of people who, by popular consensus, seemingly lacked fortitude or initiative. In 1869 a writer underscored these notions of New England declension when he wrote, “We are ever felicitating ourselves that the West is being peopled in great measure by the hardy citizens of Maine, but we are continually forgetting what sort of effect this is likely to have upon Maine,”⁵³ implicating the Maine folk who remained as a “pathetic lot.”⁵⁴ While “The Hereditary Barn” makes use of what had been perceived as historically accurate and commonly accepted as a narrative on regional change and identity, it also attempts to refute such claims. Through use of the familiar narrative, the text’s critical cultural work serves not only as an affirmation, but also simultaneously as a rebuttal to the declension discourse of New England. Thus, it positions regional identity to be viewed from an alternate perspective as it progressively unveils the constructed aspects of regional identity and mental disability.

⁵¹ W.F. Robinson, *Abandoned New England*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 39.

⁵² Robinson, 40.

⁵³ Robinson, 43.

⁵⁴ Robinson, 45.

The text effectively asserts a more realistic, perhaps even positive, picture of the New England hill farm, as well as promoting an idea that contemporary reports of New England farm life could be as much perceptual as they were factual. For example, the Joslin farm is alternately described as “forlorn and lonely”⁵⁵ and as a place where “the hollyhocks and sunflowers drank in and yielded again, with a rapturous gladness of life,” while the bees, “buzzed a cheery and satisfied hymn of peace and comfort.”⁵⁶ In addition, Elkanah’s diversification into maritime trades demonstrates an enterprising nature, as does generational use of seafaring as a means to supplement the farm economy. Life on the Joslin farm may have been hard, but the text suggests that it exceeded subsistence living by illustrating the many ventures that were simultaneously possible while living on a northern New England farmstead. Diversification or investment in small industries in conjunction with farming was common in Maine, to include logging and ice-harvesting, as well as marine-based economies. In illustrating the varied economies of agrarian New England life, the text not only combats the narrative of a meager existence, but also confronts the construction of the northern New Englander as inherently weak, ailing, and unambitious. Instead, “The Hereditary Barn” reflects the historical reality of rural New England as nimbly responsive in combining economic mechanisms based on available resources. Depicting northern New England as practical, inventive and capable enables “The Hereditary Barn” to contradict the declension narrative. The narrative, however, had become complicated by the

⁵⁵ Brooks, 96.

⁵⁶ Brooks, 112.

incorporation of popularized conceptions of heredity and mental illness, which “The Hereditary Barn,” adroitly disarticulates.

Front and center in this narrative, as implied by the title as well as its obvious textual work, is the confluence of mental disability, heredity, and regional identity. The predominating discourse of a degenerate New England population certainly influenced “The Hereditary Barn,” but it did not lead the text to position itself in firm interpretation with respect to these linkages. To the contrary, “The Hereditary Barn” is a complex text, which ingeniously refutes the declension narrative through a progressive examination of the constructed natures of regional identity, mental illness, and finally, of narrative, itself. At the outset, the text promotes the earliest Joslin settlers as hearty and wholesome. The potential genetic taint is not originally suggested to have come from the Joslins, but from the Philbricks. Old Marm Joslin was a Philbrick, whose members had been known to go off “on declines,”⁵⁷ but of an invalid nature, such as consumption, rather than mental illness. Marm Joslin herself is characterized as a resolute, healthy, and sensible woman who continues on the farmstead after Elkanah’s suicide and eventually dies of old age. Furthermore, when the text considers Elkanah’s son, Jotham and the potential for mental disability to manifest within him, it does not link Jotham’s mental disability to his mother and the Philbricks, but to his father: “Others said that the son was certain sure to go in the way his father went. ‘Sorter runs in the family,’ the aged Captain down the road remarked.”⁵⁸ This is a curious development in the text. Whereas the text hints at a predisposition to poor health in

⁵⁷ Brooks, 98.

⁵⁸ Brooks, 105.

Jotham's maternal line, it is the suicide of his father that begins the narrative of mental illness, heredity, and by extension, regional decline. The text makes no mention of melancholy, depression or suicide running through the Joslin clan prior to Elkanah, in spite of the venerable captain's statement.⁵⁹ Regardless, the text explicitly links mental illness in the Joslin family to Elkanah, rather than Old Marm Joslin. Elkanah becomes the familial point of origin for mental disability in this text, due to his suicide, even as he was simultaneously cast as intelligent, moral, and persisting on his family's thriving farm for at least forty years. Thus, the text reinforces, albeit uneasily, that mental illness is a heritable condition. The figure of the family barn, however, is critical to unravelling the quandary of the text and of New England. Remarkably, the text infers that the structure of the Joslin barn and whatever is contained therein is *also* the source of Elkanah's mental instability. As the barn retains that capacity for generations of Joslin men, the text becomes speculative and considers whether mental disability was the product of environmental influence or heredity. By extension, the Joslin barn operates as a stand-in for the constructed nature of New England's identity. Therefore, the literary figure of mental disability and its relationship to regional identity can be analyzed within a recognizable and apparently durable framework.

The text of "The Hereditary Barn," continually concerns itself with mental illness and genetic influence. The commonly assumed predilection of the Joslins to mental disability caused local folk to forecast that within two generations of Elkanah's death, a

⁵⁹ It is unclear whether the captain has knowledge of prior Joslin family history in this regard or if his claim is intended to launch the connection between the Joslins and mental disability as issuing from Elkanah.

"dying out of the Joslins"⁶⁰ would occur. The Joslins proved to be vigorously tenacious, however, and as they proliferated -- and suicide continued among its male members in the "ancestral tomb,"⁶¹ as the barn became known, the narrative of New England declension is further probed. Amzi (the second), Stephen, and ultimately Charlie, are all Joslin men whose industry, robust health, and positive attitudes are portrayed within the text and who do not commit suicide. In addition, other Joslin men mentioned in the text also displayed the same characteristics up to the point of their suicides. The depictions of the Joslin men challenged the popularized late nineteenth century belief that northern New England was populated by those who were frail in mind and body. Compounding the declension narrative, was the integration of consanguinity as a contributing factor to regional degradation, which "The Hereditary Barn," also endeavors to invalidate.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, New England degeneracy was not only perceived as the result of anemic genetic stock, but also as a consequence of inbreeding between the few supposedly wretched families who remained behind. In his discussion of perceived declension throughout New England, William F. Robinson relates the observation of a visitor to Auburn, Massachusetts, in the 1890s:

Nearly everyone you meet is a Glenn-Glenn: so were his parents, and theirs, and theirs. Accordingly, the town abounds in 'characters.' ...one of our families is 'muffle-chopped' [harelipped]. Another whole family is deaf and dumb. The proprietor of the sawmill stands three feet two and one-half inches with his boots on. Israel Glenn is a giant, measuring seven feet in height...Glenns should stop marrying Glenns...what has

⁶⁰ Brooks, 106.

⁶¹ Brooks, 114.

happened in the hill country of Alabama and Tennessee is happening in the hill country of New England.⁶²

In response to such an insistent narrative about New England declension at the turn-of-the-century, the text of "The Hereditary Barn" takes care to convey a different New England reality. Women who marry into the Joslin family, for instance, serve an important function in de-bunking the myth of interbreeding in northern New England. Amzi the second's wife brought in 'new blood,' as an "importation from Deer Isle,"⁶³ while Old Marm Joslin and Stephen's widow are specifically stated to be from other families: the Philbricks and Gardners, respectively. It is clear that these relationships within the text are integral to presenting an alternative viewpoint on the subject of New England identity and hereditary degeneration. Notwithstanding the careful attention the text gives to supporting prevailing notions of northern New England heredity and mental disability, while concurrently presenting conflicting evidence, "The Hereditary Barn," continues to grapple with the contradictions therein for the majority of the tale before offering a clever and, perhaps more realistic, take on the narrative of regional decline.

As the tale reaches its denouement, circa 1890 in the life of the Joslin family, readers are introduced to Charlie Joslin, who is cast as the "prime favorite through the country-side. None so stalwart and lithe as he."⁶⁴ Brooks asserts that he was not "the least bit tetched [touched]. He was sound as a dollar."⁶⁵ Still, the elders of the

⁶² Robinson, 45.

⁶³ Brooks, 106.

⁶⁴ Brooks, 110.

⁶⁵ Brooks, 111.

community worried that he “might get a twist in his mind,”⁶⁶ as had so many of his Joslin forefathers. Even so, Charlie became the object of many of the local girls’ fancies who, though well aware of the fateful story of the ancestral barn, “forgot it all”⁶⁷ whenever Charlie was in their presence. Charlie, therefore, is textually positioned to redeem New England identity from the declension narrative. Although Charlie was favored among the female villagers, there was, of course, one important exception: the only fair maiden whom Charlie wanted for a bride: Nelly Webber, who had come down from Blue Hill to work on the Joslin farm. She was “merry and winsome,”⁶⁸ but also possessing intelligence and independence, for she had left her father’s farm to earn money to pursue an education at the Normal School⁶⁹ – something her father would not support. Nelly could not be persuaded to accept Charlie’s offer of marriage, despite his ardor, communally-acknowledged charms, and the prosperity of the Joslin farm. Her refusal was due only in part to Nelly’s relatively modern-thinking and plans for her life. Despite her intellect and practicality, the perception of the Joslin heritage was a significant impediment. As a New Englander, the text posits, Nelly was “strongly infected with superstitious notions, and she had a morbid aversion to the Joslin barn, and that aversion feebly extended to the Joslin family.”⁷⁰ Describing Nelly’s reticence to associate with the Joslin family as feeble bears consideration, for it subtly implies that an ineffective aspect to New England’s declension narrative exists. The strong inclination to extricate regional identity from the prevailing discourse of declension may be

⁶⁶Brooks, 111.

⁶⁷Brooks, 110.

⁶⁸Brooks, 115.

⁶⁹Normal schools were colleges or places to train to be a teacher.

⁷⁰Brooks, 115.

present, but the text insinuates that an aversion to the narrative of regional decline need be neither absolute nor desirable.

The Joslin barn is the main character and, as a literary representation, forms the primary concern of this text. An iconic structure, the barn is a building on the New England landscape; it is a literal construction created by human beings with a design distinct to its purpose and structure. As a metaphor, the Joslin's barn is a stand-in for the narratives of northern New England, as purposefully crafted and as durable as any authentic barn. In the beginning of the text, Brooks describes the Joslin barn as "black with age, but substantial and more suggestive of wealth and comfort than even the old farmhouse itself."⁷¹ Yet, when viewed objectively, their barn was "honest-looking and commonplace,"⁷² although it did have two glass windows, which for its time and place were considered "an uncommon architectural vanity in a barn."⁷³ This description appears to imply that the narrative of regional exceptionality that permeated the New England identity prior the narrative of New England declension, may have had some basis in historic reality, but also that it may have been overly self-important - - a vanity. Its two glass windows suggest the fervent appeal for the construct of regional exceptionality and the comparison of the barn to a house permits the barn to transform into a regional dwelling. There New Englanders resided contentedly, perhaps even smugly, within the remarkable narrative structure of regional preeminence, gazing out upon the newly formed nation and the world. Those windows and the attention they

⁷¹ Brooks, 95.

⁷² Brooks, 105.

⁷³ Brooks, 105.

solicited, conversely, allowed others to peer in and assert a new narrative as other historical evolutions impacted once prosperous northern New England.

It is true that many small New England hill farms changed or were abandoned throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century. It is also a fact that farming in northern New England had its challenges with long winters and shortened growing seasons.⁷⁴ Still, the portrayal of the Joslin family and their neighbors in “The Hereditary Barn” suggests that the reality of those who remained in northern New England was not necessarily the blighted existence conveyed under the developing narratives of declension. In fact, the text repeatedly emphasizes the constructed nature of the narrative when it overlays the perception of the Joslin barn upon that narrative. Although no one “had ever seen or heard anything supernatural about that time-stained building,”⁷⁵ once a symbol of regional vigor, it was deemed haunted a short time after Elkanah’s death by mere “common consent.”⁷⁶ As if acquiescing to the predominant narrative of regional decline, the text appears to grant that “something ailed the place,”⁷⁷ for it had a “peculiarly wicked and sinister expression.”⁷⁸ The strength of this narrative construct as it was brought to practical effect is bolstered by Nelly Webber’s ready acceptance of the Joslin barn as an unwholesome, defiled place. The stigma of the barn’s reputation extended to Charlie as one whose day-to-day occupations found him

⁷⁴ For more information on the challenges of farming in Northern New England in this era, see: Day, Clarence Albert. *Farming in Maine, 1860-1940*. (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1963) and Day, Clarence Albert. *A History of Maine Agriculture, 1604-1860*. (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1954).

⁷⁵ Brooks, 105.

⁷⁶ Brooks, 105.

⁷⁷ Brooks, 109.

⁷⁸ Brooks, 105.

firmly ensconced within the familiar structure. That is, Charlie represents the northern New Englander entrenched within the narrative of regional decline and all of its concomitant implications.

"The Hereditary Barn" may appear to concede to popular late-nineteenth century perceptions of northern New England and its descending trajectory. Although it utilizes the tropes common to its readership, a closer reading of the text provides an alternate consideration. To begin, when the text details ways in which the local community created a pointed and deleterious conception of the Joslin barn through "gossiping"⁷⁹ and "neighborhood whispering,"⁸⁰ Brooks begins to reveal the constructed quality of regional narrative based on a few historical events and burgeoning notions not always grounded in fact. Like the declension narrative, perceptions of the barn were based upon a shadow of reality, which eventually took on a life of its own. "The Hereditary Barn," faintly integrates sentiments about the Joslin barn that diverge from the community at large. Elkanah's daughter, for instance, did not find anything "fearsome or weird"⁸¹ within the walls of the ancestral barn and generations later, Charlie found the barn to be both a "wholesome"⁸² and "cheerful"⁸³ place in spite of the "dark frown"⁸⁴ of its history. Still, the discourse of the Joslin barn, like the narrative ascribed to New England, unsettled its community members, who continued to heap all form of morbid pronouncements upon the barn, such as "death-warnings [and]

⁷⁹ Brooks, 110.

⁸⁰ Brooks, 110.

⁸¹ Brooks, 101.

⁸² Brooks, 112.

⁸³ Brooks, 112.

⁸⁴ Brooks, 112.

omens.”⁸⁵ The villagers viewed the barn as a threat to the community, as well as the Joslin family. Unaffected by the dire predictions of his neighbors and firm in his own affection for his heritage through its representational edifice, Charlie, in contrast, thought “the world-and-all”⁸⁶ of the ancestral tomb until he realized that it kept him from his heart’s desire. So long as the barn and the ruinous discourse existed, even intelligent, pragmatic people like Nelly would have difficulty in accepting a narrative of a confident, prosperous and enduring Joslin line. This analysis of “The Hereditary Barn,” posits that New England and its changing identity can be understood through the Joslins and their relationship to the heirloom barn. Indeed, the narratives of hereditary and regional degeneracy had become so central to New England’s identity that their potency severely threatened the region’s viability, just as neighborhood myth imperiled Charlie’s prospects and aspirations with Nelly. Therefore, as Brooks’ tale comes to an end, the old Joslin barn - - the subject of ongoing community fears and instability - - burns to the ground, presumably by a precipitous lightning strike.

In “The Hereditary Barn,” the menace of regional decline, as understood through the Joslin barn’s destruction, appeared to be thwarted by a natural force. Thus, the text suggests that vigor and exceptionality are restored to New England’s identity organically and without guile. The community’s assumption that the barn was destroyed by lightning suggests that just as the narrative of regional decline appeared to lie outside human control, so did the dissolution of that discourse. However, the text reveals that this is not the case, for Charlie, in his own frustration and despair, set fire to his beloved

⁸⁵ Brooks, 113.

⁸⁶ Brooks, 113.

barn. It is in this way that the text acknowledges the culturally created aspects of the declension narrative. The barn did not inherently possess the qualities bestowed upon it by Charlie Joslin's neighbors, the neighbors of preceding generations of Joslins and indeed, some of the Joslin's themselves. The narrative of regional decline, much like the old Joslin barn, was merely a structure upon which New England sought to comprehend or challenge its place in the world. Even though the Joslin barn was not alive, alluding to it as a 'hereditary' barn supported the text in its position that cultural narratives are propagative for they continually give birth to - - and re-form - - identity.

A straightforward interpretation of "The Hereditary Barn," and its use of mental disability would assert that the old Joslin barn represented the regional narrative of New England decline as understood throughout the mid- to late- nineteenth century and that those Joslin men who committed suicide capitulated to that narrative in the face of contradictory indicators. Conventional use of mental illness as a literary representation for weak or disturbed thinking is a plausible application in this narrative. "The Hereditary Barn," however, is far too perceptive, far too judicious, in its own construction and analysis on the narrative of regional decline. To be sure, the text implies that those who committed suicide were likely "tetched,"⁸⁷ but the Joslin men are generally portrayed as moral, hardworking, strong, and of sound mind up until the point of making and employing the noose. Additionally, the Joslin men who perished by their own hands are not the only ones whose minds are called into question by the text.

⁸⁷ Brooks, 111.

Once again, "The Hereditary Barn," labors to expose the constructed nature of regional identity, as well as culturally created conceptions of mental disability.

When the text exposes how the local community bestowed so many ruinous qualities upon the barn, it unflinchingly reveals how they did so without logic. Brooks makes note of the "sturdy survival of all the old English provincial traditions and superstitions"⁸⁸ and the import the villagers ascribe to "signs in the sky or on the waters, strange noises in the woods, charms, love-potions."⁸⁹ The imagined influence or meaning given to these culturally sanctioned inventions was all that might be needed for the community to act upon. While Brooks does not overtly link the locals to mental disability in the same way the connection is made between mental illness and the Joslin men who commit suicide, he nonetheless lays bare the utter irrationality that directs their activity. In fact, throughout the story, those who create and perpetuate such "gossip,"⁹⁰ as the declension narrative appears to be considered in "The Hereditary Barn," are perceived as far more contemptible and culpable. For example, the Widow Joslin derisively exclaims, "If I was a Joslin, instead of a Gardner...I just believe that these everlasting tattle-tales would drive me to hanging myself."⁹¹ Similarly, even Charlie's alleged soundness of mind does not escape the text's scrutiny.

Up until the very end of the tale, Charlie is impervious to the vicious characterization of the barn; he sees the barn in a different light and has no cause to destroy it. Charlie was not inclined to take up any action, for "He was not only sure that

⁸⁸ Brooks, 113.

⁸⁹ Brooks, 113.

⁹⁰ Brooks, 110.

⁹¹ Brooks, 110.

he wouldn't take the fatal leap from the traditional beam, but that nobody else ever would."⁹² Instead of being reassured by Charlie's confidence, the local community continues to urge him to take the barn down and it is here that the text pricks at the soundness of his judgment. When Charlie does not submit to his community's entreaties, the text claims, "he would not listen to *reason*."⁹³ Inexplicably, the text suggests that Charlie's refusal to comply with the absurd demands of his community is an indication of his own irrationality. When the text reveals nearly everyone in "The Hereditary Barn," displays some form of illogical belief, it exposes the multivalence of mental disability. Therefore, in "The Hereditary Barn," a 'distracted person,' or a 'self-destroyer,' is not necessarily the literary figure characterized by mental illness. Indeed, the text denotes irrational behavior and thought as affecting nearly all its characters.

In the end, is "The Hereditary Barn," proclaiming that all of New England was mad? Perhaps, but that conclusion is doubtful given all of the supportive and positive characterizations that counter-balance its more disreputable aspects. The heavy emphasis on the concept of New England declension was more likely meant to illuminate the constructed and systematic nature of narrative. Cultural narratives are indeed creative tales, but they are not built indiscriminately and they have the potential to become inordinately powerful. As they gain momentum, they snowball and have the capacity to be all encompassing, oppressive structures that can lead to death – in this instance, regional death. For the culture, such narratives serve a purpose, just as superstition and lore brought forth some comprehensibility out of change for the

⁹² Brooks, 113.

⁹³ Brooks, 113. Italics by the author.

Joslin's community. For some, like the Joslin men who committed suicide, cultural narratives held enough reality to become suffocating. For others, like Charlie, the narratives were so far from their lived realities that they held little sway and appeared to require no confrontational response. Undeniably, mental disability is employed as a symbol of regional decline in "The Hereditary Barn," but when considered alongside the representations of other forms of irrational thinking or practice as suggested within the text, mental disability is not wholly deleterious.

"The Hereditary Barn," most emphatically indicts New England itself in the construction and persistence of narratives of regional decline - - and questions the sanity of those who either created and sustained these narratives or those who failed to challenge and destroy them. The text, however, does not link those classes to mental disability. Instead, the text utilizes mental disability as a different way of perceiving or experiencing the weight of those social structures and expectations. Thus, the end result is unfortunate, but understandable, when viewed through a different lens. In "The Hereditary Barn," it is the irrationality of the narrative of regional decline that drives New Englanders to desperate acts and encourages the false beliefs that resulted in the region's demise. When the imposing narrative's falsity is exposed and the notion that New England's ruin resulted from an inherent debilitation is contested, the region's identity gains an opportunity to recover its once-assumed incomparability.

Alexander's Bridge: Reclaiming the Influence of New England's Good Breeding and Restraint

While "The Hereditary Barn" wrestles with regional decline as the result of failing landscapes, unfeasible rural economies, and a population of people with poorly equipped mental dispositions, *Alexander's Bridge* attempts to redress conceptions of regional decline by asserting New England's good breeding, mental stability and other desirable qualities once associated with its regional identity. Post-Civil War New England had enjoyed a brief renaissance as an incomparable region due in large part to the North's victory over the South. By the 1870s that distinction was on the wane with the accelerated expansion of industrialization, urbanization, and the impact of ethnic immigration. As Conforti explains, post-bellum New England was perceived as "a society of urban squalor, industrial strife, class conflict, and the human offscourings of undemocratic governments. Indeed, progress, vitality, a village-centered order...appeared to migrate from New England to the emergent Midwest."⁹⁴ The out-migration, coupled with the narrative of biological degeneration among those New Englanders remaining on native soil, diminished confidence in Yankee exceptionalism well into the early twentieth century. At this moment in the erosion of New England's confidence came Willa Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, published in 1912, to challenge prevailing notions of regional decline and to assert New England's preeminence in regard to the fate of the nation as a whole.

⁹⁴ Conforti, 205.

Willa Cather initially seems an unlikely defender of New England exceptionalism as her affection for the landscape and the people of the Midwest dominate her most well-known novels, *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* Cather, however, acknowledged New England's contributions and potential. Cather was born in 1873 in Virginia to parents whose families had long resided in that locale.⁹⁵ When she was nine years old, Cather's family moved to Nebraska where she remained through her early adult years.⁹⁶ It seems reasonable to presume that Cather had some familiarity with the narrative of New England decline, though she had very little connection to geographical New England prior to pursuing a literary career in Pittsburgh in 1896. One might consider, as Conforti suggests, that the exodus of hale New Englanders to the Midwest left an imprint upon that developing culture, which heavily favored a sense of New England exceptionalism and may have predisposed Cather to regard New England in a more favorable light. In addition, when Cather was hired by *McClure's Magazine* in 1906, noted regionalist and Maine native, Sarah Orne Jewett, became her mentor. Jewett was ever regarded by Cather to be a dear friend and a distinguished, talented writer; *My Antonia* is dedicated to her.⁹⁷ Still, Cather spent very little time in New England prior to the publication of *Alexander's Bridge* in 1912. For brief periods of time, Cather visited Boston between 1907 and 1910; she made one visit to Jewett's family home in South

⁹⁵ Ahearn, Amy. "Willa Cather: Longer Biographical Sketch," *The Willa Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln*. <<http://cather.unl.edu/life.longbio.html>>. Accessed online March 10, 2015.

⁹⁶ Ahearn, n.p.n.

⁹⁷ Ahearn, n.p.n.

Berwick, Maine in 1908.⁹⁸ While Cather's proclivity to portray the mid-west with tenderness and in high regard is unquestionable throughout most of her literary works, her motivation for the construction of New England - - and use of its regional identity - - in *Alexander's Bridge* is intriguing. It is worth considering that she may have been persuaded by respect and affection for the region. At the same time, the cultural work of the novel is primarily concerned with confronting and containing the perceived threat of the wieldy West. Cather's beloved mid-west seemingly did not possess the necessary characteristics required to undertake such a task without support. Despite decades of being relegated to the status of 'has-been,' perceptions of New England apparently retained enough promise and luster to succeed in this endeavor.

Cather appears to have understood Van Wyck Brook's assertion that Boston "wished to believe in itself, rather than did so"⁹⁹ during this era. Disassociating in "proud reserve"¹⁰⁰ from the country folk represented in "The Hereditary Barn," and with a distaste for the West, Boston appeared to have withdrawn into itself. Many of Boston's prominent families felt the loss of political leadership and regional ascendancy they once enjoyed.¹⁰¹ *Alexander's Bridge* is constructed to simultaneously re-affirm Boston's import within the national narrative and to provide a roadmap of sorts with

⁹⁸ "Mapping a Writer's World: A Geographic Chronology of Willa Cather's Life," *The Willa Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln*. < <http://cather.unl.edu/geochron/>>. Accessed March 10, 2015.

⁹⁹ Van Wyck Brooks. *New England: Indian Summer, 1865-1915* (E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), 1940, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Brooks, V. W., 142.

¹⁰¹ See Van Wyck Brook's *New England: Indian Summer, 1865-1915*, for more information related to the region's perception of its own decline and the literary evolutions, particularly through Henry James and local color authors like Sarah Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Brooks also asserts that throughout this period there was a 'feminization' of Boston, which is bolstered through Winifred Alexander as a literary representation for Boston.

which to navigate New England's relationship to the flourishing West through literary representation of mental disability.

Alexander's Bridge first appeared in serial format in *McClure's Magazine* as *Alexander's Masquerade*,¹⁰² and therefore had a wide initial readership. The protagonist of the novel is Bartley Alexander, an ambitious, ingenious, and vigorous bridge architect from the West. Bartley Alexander is also the antagonist. The duality of his character's purpose within the text is continually re-inscribed through his struggle and inability to reconcile the opposing sides of himself. Cather's original title, *Alexander's Masquerade*, is suggestive of the two-faces or split in personality that the main character attempts to resolve within the plot line. It is these "enervating reveries,"¹⁰³ - - the mental disability - - that he cannot seem to hold in check. In Cather's novel, Alexander represents the West, the newest frontier of the American imagination. While Alexander, like the West, holds promise and invites adventure, he appears to be in need of a civilizing influence in order to succeed--that influence comes in the form of his wife, Bostonian Winifred Pemberton, who symbolizes New England.

Cather provides an introduction to Bartley and Winifred Alexander through the eyes of Dr. Lucius Wilson, a Professor of Philosophy from a "Western university"¹⁰⁴ who has come to Boston to attend the "Congress of Psychologists."¹⁰⁵ The text makes use of Dr. Wilson as representative of the newfound authority of medicine with respect to the interior workings of the human mind and is constructed to be both expert and objective.

¹⁰² Ahearn, n.p.n.

¹⁰³ Willa Cather. *Alexander's Bridge*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), 88.

¹⁰⁴ Cather, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Cather, 6.

Dr. Wilson first encounters the young Winifred at the couple's residence and describes her with a discerning eye: "She was a person of distinction he saw at once, and, moreover, very handsome. She was tall, carried her beautiful head proudly, and moved with ease and certainty."¹⁰⁶ Wilson's impersonal glance takes in Winifred's fine clothing; the poise with which she attends to the ritual of serving tea; the polite, but subtly mirthful, reserve with which she replies to his inquiries; and the refined, heirloom-quality of the home's furnishings. Winifred's connection to old Boston society is referenced and much is made of her relationship to the now-deceased Aunt Eleanor, who introduced Winifred to Bartley Alexander. Like Aunt Eleanor, Winifred was a Yankee woman known for being forthright, intolerant of "stupidity,"¹⁰⁷ and possessing high moral standards. Cather, however, implies that Winifred is a somewhat softer and potentially more passionate woman than her aunt. Whereas Aunt Eleanor was of an earlier generation of New Englanders, known for their practicality and disdain for frippery, Winifred represented an evolving New Englander. Aunt Eleanor was interested in "the army and in politics and she had a great contempt for music and art and philosophy,"¹⁰⁸ declaring that the "newfangled"¹⁰⁹ appreciation for such things was an importation from Europe. In a departure from her aunt's pragmatic austerity, Winifred had studied in Vienna and was a pianist of a "standard really professional."¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Wilson noted, Winifred had "the suggestion of stormy possibilities in the

¹⁰⁶ Cather, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Cather, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Cather, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Cather, 25.

¹¹⁰ Cather, 18.

proud curve of her lip and nostril. Without that, he reflected, she would be too cold."¹¹¹

In this way, Cather puts forth a portrait of New England drawn from a robust, enduring, and stalwart lineage now freed from an undeniable stodginess. This construction was integral to suggesting Winifred - - and New England - - as an alluring, complementary, and plausible match for Bartley Alexander and the mesmerizing West. It was also necessary for suggesting the benefit of a regional identity and ethos known for restraint in contrast to the perceived freedom of the West.

Bartley Alexander serves as a quintessential example of the West. "Glowing with strength and cordiality and rugged, blonde good looks,"¹¹² his form encompasses the near entirety of his charming Boston home's doorway. His appearance was unrivaled and embodied the evidently unmatched qualities of the West as a representative of the nation's future. As Cather explains:

There were other bridge-builders in the world, certainly, but it was always Alexander's picture that the Sunday Supplement men wanted, because he looked like the tamer of rivers ought to look. Under his tumbled sandy hair his head seemed as hard and powerful as a catapult, and his shoulders looked strong enough in themselves to support a span of any one of his ten great bridges that cut the air above as many rivers.¹¹³

However fulsome and indelibly depicted as a harbinger of great things to come, Alexander's long-term viability comes under scrutiny immediately. For one, Alexander does not have an established past or tradition to build from. He looms large, like the West on the American imagination and psyche, but his influences and motivations are

¹¹¹ Cather, 9.

¹¹² Cather, 11.

¹¹³ Cather, 11.

not obvious; he is unpredictable. The text does not reveal much about Alexander's past and in fact, states it unlikely that Alexander himself recalls anything of his boyhood.¹¹⁴ This apparent loss of memory does not directly link Alexander to mental disability, but it does begin to gesture toward the possibility. No family members are mentioned and anything gleaned of his formative years comes from his teacher, Dr. Wilson. A poor scholar, seldom given to introspection, and with a predilection to respond to his environs rather than to impose order upon them, Dr. Wilson asserted that the youthful Alexander was inimitable, but lacking in endurance and stability: "No past, no future for Bartley; just the fiery moment."¹¹⁵ In spite of the positive influence ten years of marriage to Winifred had on his former pupil, Dr. Wilson perceived that there were "unreasoning and unreasonable activities going on in Alexander all the while."¹¹⁶ Throughout the novel, the text continues to suggest that Alexander's mind is unravelling and his viability as an influential architect of the national narrative is continually called into question.

Alexander's Bridge does not put Winifred and Alexander in direct contrast or confrontation with each other. To be sure, the differences created between them serve a purpose in considering the assumed ascendancy of the West and the perceived exceptionality of New England. The text, however, posits that stolid New England may have some beneficial effect on the unruly West. Among the many objects in Winifred's familial home that reflected "at once the harmony of beautiful things that have lived

¹¹⁴ Cather, 9. This also builds upon the classic trope of the West and the possibilities of self-invention as considered in more well-known texts like *The Great Gatsby*.

¹¹⁵ Cather, 10.

¹¹⁶ Cather, 17.

long together without obtrusions of ugliness or change,"¹¹⁷ Alexander did not appear to be out of place. To the contrary, their Boston home appeared as a radiant backdrop to his imposing fervor and Boston Society seemed to provide direction and purpose to Alexander's life, something Dr. Wilson believed was lacking prior to Winifred's ameliorating influence. Alexander now managed his wife's money, not only in personal matters, but also in public endeavors and charitable contributions; he was involved in philanthropic pursuits to benefit society. In addition, as Dr. Wilson noted, the old Puritan notion of competency seemed to have rubbed off on his former pupil as he now appeared to operate with moderation, deciding to "leave some birds in the bushes,"¹¹⁸ when he used to want them all. Cather continually constructs a favorable view of New England through the character of Winifred and suggests through her that New England possessed intrinsic qualities and customs, which carried the potential to act as a stabilizing factor for the capricious, excessive West, as embodied by Alexander.

If the West was a source of anxiety to New England and the nation, *Alexander's Bridge* appears to take an unequivocal stance on New England's ability to resolve that disquiet as it repeatedly positions Winifred as the answer to any question relating to Alexander's mental instability. During a private conversation with Alexander, Dr. Wilson confesses to his apprehension about the young man's ability to persist and flourish:

'The more dazzling front you presented, the higher your façade rose, the more I expected to see a big crack zigzagging from top to bottom,' – he indicated its course in the air with his forefinger, – 'then a crash and clouds of dust. It was curious. I had such a clear picture of it.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Cather, 12.

¹¹⁸ Cather, 15.

¹¹⁹ Cather, 15.

Witnessing Alexander in Boston, participating successfully in its traditions and cultural practices, Dr. Wilson believed the internal disquiet he had previously noted had now vanished. More to the point, Dr. Wilson asserted he no longer feared that Alexander would suffer an astounding collapse for he boldly proclaimed, "I am sure of you."¹²⁰ In a moment of self-awareness, which Dr. Wilson did not anticipate, Alexander pointedly retorted, "Nonsense! It's not I you feel sure of; it's Winifred. People often make that mistake."¹²¹ In this way the text most forcefully advocates for confidence in Yankee values and a regional exceptionalism that imbue the New England identity with regulatory and redemptive qualities.

Indeed, once Alexander goes abroad for an architectural convention and is physically and geographically separated from Winifred, he embarks upon pursuits that bring about internal anguish and a spiraling mental decline. In London, one of Alexander's old acquaintances is the Englishman, Maurice Mainhall, a literary man who was "often unable to distinguish between facts and vivid figments of his imagination,"¹²² and who also held "preconceived ideas about everything."¹²³ In addition, Alexander reunites with Hilda Burgoyne, whom he had known prior to meeting Winifred. Of Irish descent, Hilda has become a stage actress and has secured the lead in a new comedy, *The Bog Lights*. Although Hilda has her charms upon her entry into the story, the text suggest that she will have no staying power, conceding that she was "apt

¹²⁰ Cather, 15.

¹²¹ Cather, 15.

¹²² Cather, 27.

¹²³ Cather, 27.

to grow a bit stale after a time. The ones who have any imagination do.”¹²⁴ In direct contrast to Winifred, Alexander admits that there was always “something utterly wild and daft,”¹²⁵ about Hilda. Rounding out Alexander’s multi-ethnic circle of friends abroad is Hilda’s French maid, Marie, who supports her mistress’s vanities and excesses - - as well as Alexander’s--once he and Hilda engage in a torrid romance. Almost certainly these characters are utilized to represent various classes of individuals who had historically represented a threat to New England and America. The repression of old England’s preconceived notions and its depiction as “the ultimate repository of mortality,”¹²⁶ as well as the ‘scourge’ of Irish immigrants who infiltrated New England are simultaneously linked to a lack of grounded thinking and mental instability as personified through Alexander’s European friends. These re-activated connections begin to affect his thinking and actions in unsettling ways. To be sure, the text suggests that Alexander is returning to old, destructive patterns without the beneficent influence of his New England-bred wife. As Alexander reflects upon the previous decade he acknowledges that, “After he met Winifred Pemberton he seemed to himself like a different man.”¹²⁷

It is important to note that the different man whom Dr. Wilson deemed “rescued” from self-destruction under Winifred’s civilizing influence also struggled mightily within those confines. Alexander’s thoughts reveal that “his existence was

¹²⁴ Cather, 28.

¹²⁵ Cather, 38.

¹²⁶ Cather, 42.

¹²⁷ Cather, 37.

becoming a network of great and little details"¹²⁸ that were the result of his success and concomitant power. That power, however, brought with it a "kind of restraint,"¹²⁹ through the civic obligations and social customs he thought he embraced. Ultimately, like the West, Alexander wanted to be free. He was beginning to feel he was "being buried alive,"¹³⁰ and Hilda served as a re-invigorating, though temporary, alternative. Alexander soon found that the alternative that enlivened him brought little solace. He was aware of the "vibration of unnatural excitement"¹³¹ that pervaded his thinking and it was only Winifred who could calm the "enervating reveries."¹³² Upon reflection, Alexander believes he was happiest within the four walls of his study in Boston, again reiterating the peace and contentment that New England culture purportedly provided through its cultural constructs. Nevertheless, as the story continues, Alexander's revelations become increasingly contradictory. Ordered New England has a calming effect on his sensitivities and yet, he rails at the burden of its inherent constraints. Desirous of personal freedom, Alexander conceptualizes that autonomy as a by-product of unsound thinking. He recalls being drawn to the "loco"¹³³ horses out West and their deceptive cunning - - the one memory he seems to have regained of his childhood. Although it would seem that Alexander had reclaimed a missing piece of his mind through the revived memory, that memory underscored his apparent predisposition to

¹²⁸ Cather, 48.

¹²⁹ Cather, 106.

¹³⁰ Cather, 49. Another possible avenue for considering stifling aspects of New England identity would be through comparing the barn in Brooks' "The Hereditary Barn," with marriage as a tomb in Cather's *Alexander's Bridge*.

¹³¹ Cather, 87.

¹³² Cather, 88.

¹³³ Cather, 129.

mental instability in developing an affiliation between his emerging self and the crazy horses of the western expanse. By extension, the text implicates the relative instability of the West in contrast to the constancy of New England, even as New England's regional identity had become tarnished through declension discourse.

While Alexander's mental torment increases, Cather asserts the natural moral authority of Winifred when Alexander laments that, "Two people, when they love each other, grow alike in their tastes and habits and pride, but their moral natures...are never welded. The base one goes on being base, and the noble one noble, to the end."

¹³⁴Alexander's inability to adhere to social strictures - - to be of a different mindset - - are alleged to be the result of both his intrinsically corrupted nature and his erratic thinking, while Winifred's perfect morality is assumed to be innate. At this point, the text begins to be rather deterministic with respect to the West and while Cather upholds New England exceptionalism, she also casts doubt on whether New England can prevail. To be sure, as Alexander is repeatedly driven to distraction through his alliance with Hilda, he neglects the "great and little details," the discipline developed through his marriage to Winifred and necessary to his enduring success. Not surprisingly, disaster follows.

As *Alexander's Bridge* nears its conclusion, Alexander is called to the site of his newest feat of engineering, a bridge in the wilds of Canada. He has been absent from the site during most of its construction, unlike previous projects, due to his indiscriminate activities. Alerted by his assistant that the bridge in progress was

¹³⁴ Cather, 128.

showing strain, Alexander was forced to admit that he may have been careless as much as he had been ambitious, for his design worked out well enough on paper, but had been based on “nonsense,”¹³⁵ and the unproven theory of other engineers. The load was simply too much for the span of the bridge and Alexander determined it would need to be dismantled. During an inspection of the unfinished bridge, it suddenly gave way, throwing Alexander, nearly a hundred workers, and grinding metal into the rushing waters below. Although Alexander was a strong swimmer, he was overcome by the “French Canadians,”¹³⁶ who grabbed hold of him and pulled him under until he drowned. As he was slipping away from life, Alexander envisioned Winifred beside him, encouraging him to “keep his head,”¹³⁷ asserting that if he would hold out a bit longer, the laboring men would release their grasp and he would survive.

In the end, Alexander’s brilliant rise and his equally sensational demise came to pass precisely as Dr. Wilson had predicted: in a “crash and clouds of dust.” By way of representation, the text is attempting to foretell the future of the West as well as the future role of New England. The manner of Alexander’s death comes in part from his foundation, as implied by his admission that he hadn’t built his bridge - - the span connecting the past over the present and into the future - - on any sound or tested theory. Likewise, the text projects an old New England fear when it relates that Alexander doesn’t perish through lack of his physical capability or experience as a swimmer, but because of the French Canadian workers who do not possess the same

¹³⁵ Cather, 155.

¹³⁶ Cather, 159.

¹³⁷ Cather, 160.

qualities. New England had long concerned itself with being overcome by the various ethnic groups who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century and began to change the cultural landscape. At the turn of the twentieth century, the West was threatened by the same evolution. The narrative posits that it is not through sheer force or flights of fancy that the West will succeed, but by exercising patience, restraint and maintaining control over its cultural faculties. As exemplified by Alexander, however, the text strongly suggests that the West is incapable of such a task: "The mind that society had come to regard as a powerful and reliable machine, dedicated to its service, may for a long time have been sick within itself and bent upon its own destruction."¹³⁸ The reserve so readily associated with the New England identity, and through Winifred and her apparent mental health in this novel, is the critical element to enduring.

Alexander's Bridge emphatically advances the notion that New England restraint is desired and necessary for the success of the United States, especially when faced with the grandeur and potent possibilities of the West - - and America's future. The construction of Winifred's dignified reserve is obvious, but Cather also suggests that this isn't necessarily Winifred's natural state of being. In fact, she offers glimpses into other potentialities within Winifred. Dr. Wilson observed her face to suggest "stormy possibilities,"¹³⁹ and likened her eyes to a "fine windy sky that may bring all sorts of weather."¹⁴⁰ When the text includes Winifred's mastery of Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*, the author is likewise demonstrating her ability to exercise control of herself and the

¹³⁸Cather, 166.

¹³⁹Cather, 9.

¹⁴⁰Cather, 7.

disruptive energies within.¹⁴¹ Winifred's mastery over the technical and emotional elements of *Carnaval* - - a work literally of multiple personalities created by a man known for mental instability - - bolsters the depiction of Winifred as both practiced and capable of controlling the potent, chaotic forces within. Winifred is not portrayed necessarily as the exemplar of mental health as the core state of her being. Rather, the text acknowledges unstable energies, but emphasizes her ability to control them as part of a cultural discipline, a discipline that Alexander does not possess. It is not mental instability per se that is a symbol of weakness or degradation, for Alexander's mind most craves freedom. *Alexander's Bridge* implies, instead, that it is the ability to balance and control the desires of the mind - - something that is culturally learned - - that ensures success. Alexander's untimely death notwithstanding, the text advances the concept that like a marriage, New England and the West must work together and, that to some extent, New England may not be capable of leading alone, as Winifred's noteworthy qualities emerge most prominently when she is with Alexander.

Nevertheless, as representative of New England persistence and fortitude, Winifred advances the notion of the region's appreciable assets and potential contributions to the developing nation.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Schuman attempted suicide in 1854 and subsequently admitted himself to a mental institution where he died two years later. *Carnaval* is a collection of piano solos noted for their technical difficulty and emotional complexity. Additionally, the theme of the piece involves masked revelers and considers the duality of the mind. The solos are constructed around note sequences that produce a cryptic code, which Schuman designed as a challenge for others to decipher.

¹⁴² The Epilogue of *Alexander's Bridge* finds Dr. Wilson and Hilda Burgoyne, now a couple in Europe. Having just returned from a visit with Winifred Alexander, Dr. Wilson suggests that her reserve, which does make her beautiful and elegant, has come at a cost. He felt that her happiness was "not apart from the world, but actually against it." Now her grief is the same. The text may be grappling with a component of insularity or defensiveness sometimes identified with the New England identity; it might be a worthwhile undertaking in another analysis.

Conclusion

Alexander's Bridge utilizes mental disability to consider regional identity and exceptionalism during a time when New England's prospects may have seemed bleak in contrast to the vibrant inspiration of westward expansion. The text, however, strongly advocates for New England's centrality in the national narrative. Likewise, "The Hereditary Barn," probes at the constructed and contested nature of regional identity through the trope of mental disability. Both texts employ features familiar to readers that support aspects of ascendancy, exceptionality, and decline in New England. Mitchell and Snyder contend that narratives of disability are not only built upon cultural conceptions of disability, but also that those narratives, in and of themselves, act as prosthetic devices.¹⁴³ Through their discursive power they attempt to substitute or supplement that which is perceived as defective or absent in the prevailing construction of identity. In "The Hereditary Barn" and *Alexander's Bridge*, the improvisational authority of the literary text strives to compensate for and to reign in the perceived menace in New England's declension narrative through the trope of mental disability.

The essential alterity that is culturally constructed through mental disability within these regional texts opens a venue to question challenge prevailing beliefs or threatening discourse and, ultimately, to issue prescriptive models. Indeed, New England was a region that had built its identity upon discourses of extraordinary social and individual attributes. Merging New England identity with mental disability was an

¹⁴³ Mitchell, David T. and Sharon Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

Chapter 2

Complicating New England Literary Conventions: Penobscot Tales of Mental Disability

In New England, regional literature has been an active participant in the evolving discourse of *disability* through the appropriation of various tropes of disability and impairment as a means to mediate and construct aspects of regional and group identity; the region's literature has had a profound effect on both informal societal responses and formal social policy. For instance, literary representations of disability supported the social practice of shunning persons with impairments, while institutionalization and sterilization became adopted social policy in an effort to preserve hardy New England stock in the era of eugenics. The social response in these instances resulted in the disabling of certain members or social groups through stigmatization, marginalization, containment, and in the extreme, eradication. However, the literary analysis of such associations by regional scholars traditionally employs mainstream, Eurocentric literature as the foundation for these culturally relevant and substantiated claims. In this chapter, an ethnic minority literature of the region exposes an alternative cultural view of *disability* that existed, and continues to evolve, in New England.

Like many indigenous peoples, the Penobscot have a rich oral tradition that illuminates cultural beliefs, practices, and prescriptive mores as a means of understanding their world and their place in it through the diffusion of tribal folklore. Penobscot folktales provide a means for mediating a variety of relationships. These include relationships with elements of the natural world, such as animals and the

landscape, interpersonal relationships among tribal members, and relationships with supernatural beings or unforeseen entities that interact with humankind. As such, folktales provide a textual basis for understanding a Penobscot worldview of physical or mental impairments and disability. Most notably, physical or mental impairments are not necessarily linked with the circumstance of being disabled; the Penobscot -- like many other Native American groups -- have no equivalent native word for disability, although a distinctive cultural ethos involving social responses to impairments is evident. The folktales that survive in written record not only provide a glimpse into a Penobscot outlook regarding impairment from the past, they also support changing viewpoints and social responses as the culture endured the vicissitudes of European contact. Most striking is Molly Spotted Elk's collection of refurbished Penobscot folktales that demonstrate the cross-fertilization of traditional views of impairment with New England's mainstream notions of disability in the early twentieth century. In appropriating prevailing tropes of disability common in the region's literature and mainstream culture, Spotted Elk's *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abnaki Tribe* nonetheless utilizes Penobscot beliefs that contrast with the predominant discourse, thereby linking the Native American with disability in empowering, unconventional representations. It is through the Penobscot traditional view of impairment that Spotted Elk's collection suggests a re-creation of Penobscot identity that wrestles with the intersection of ethnicity, disability, social politics, and identity so central to New England's story of itself.

Anthropologists classify the Penobscot as part of the Abneki group belonging to a larger eastern Algonkian family. While eastern Algonkian tribes occupied lands in both southern and northern New England - - from present-day northeastern New York to southern Quebec and from the Maritimes to the western borders of Vermont and the Connecticut valley - - northern New England was the homeland for Abneki groups like the Norridgewock, Saco, Androscoggin, Pigwacket, and Penobscot. Penobscot territory extended from central coastal Maine between the Kennebec River and Maine's northeastern border with Canada, well into Maine's interior.¹⁴⁴ Unlike southern Algonkian classifications, the division of Abneki tribes is based almost solely on linguistic, rather than political distinctions.¹⁴⁵ Noted 19th century anthropologist and Penobscot scholar, Frank G. Speck, stated that with respect to folklore and religious beliefs, the Abneki differed from their southern Algonkian neighbors by what appears to be a lack in formalized religious ceremonies and political structure.¹⁴⁶ This may be partially explained by rapid population loss throughout the region from the earliest period of European contact (1616-1619) through the mid-17th century due to disease, famine, and war.¹⁴⁷ Current archeological evidence supports the notion of the Penobscot as a "social or dialectic unit rather than a historically homogeneous group."¹⁴⁸ Therefore, as Penobscot folktales and traditions were first formally collected

¹⁴⁴ Colin Calloway. *Dawnland Encounters: Indians and Europeans in Northern New England*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), 2-3.

¹⁴⁵ Calloway, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Frank Speck. "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," *The Journal of American Folk-lore*, 48, no. 187, 1935, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Calloway, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Pauleena MacDougall. *Penobscot Dance of Resistance*, (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004), 57.

and researched in the late 19th century - early 20th century, the surviving population claiming to be Penobscot and residing on or near the Penobscot reservation at Indian Island was, in fact, comprised of a number of other Abneki communities that no longer existed.¹⁴⁹

Notwithstanding the issue of whether the Penobscot folktales surviving through oral tradition into a written record were unadulterated by neighboring Abneki or Algonkian cultures is the consideration of the impact of European influence on Penobscot culture. First, ample evidence of the incorporation of traditional European folktales into Algonkian lore reflects the influence of nearly three centuries of multi-cultural interaction.¹⁵⁰ Second, the biases of non-native collectors and transcribers of folktales, as well as native folklorists, resulted in the frequent superimposition of supposed equivalencies between Christian principles and Algonkian beliefs in an effort to reach some form of cultural understanding.¹⁵¹ Lastly, are the multifaceted difficulties inherent in linguistic interpretation; some Algonkian words, for instance, have no direct conceptual correlation in the English language. This is problematic for both non-native and native speakers alike in their efforts to convey a system of beliefs, customs, or indigenous knowledge with any cultural accuracy. As Speck laments, "There is, however, an undertone of untrue if not inferior reconception, which takes away the

¹⁴⁹ MacDougall, 56-57. At the time that the Penobscot folktales were collected some community members may have been identified as Penobscot, although their family lineage may have been more accurately traced several generations back to another nearby Abneki group. At the same time, individuals of other nearby tribes may have come to reside more recently through intermarriage or for other reasons.

¹⁵⁰ See William Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620-1984*; Speck, Frank G., "Malecite Tales;" Speck, Frank G., "European Folk-tales Among the Penobscot."

¹⁵¹ Simmons, 43-64. See also Joseph Nicolar's *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, which anthropologist Frank G. Speck and Nicolar's Penobscot contemporaries criticize for its Catholic undertones.

smack of originality that every reader feels the true examples of native oral literature should possess."¹⁵² While all of these factors highlight the complexity involved in an interpretive analysis of Penobscot folklore, they also underscore the historically relevant fact that Penobscot culture is not static. In his book, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620-1984*, William S. Simmons addresses this issue and posits that "despite this movement away from their past, ancestral voices continue to speak to the living through oral narratives, and the living in turn attribute new and borrowed customs to ancestral sources."¹⁵³ Keeping this in mind, my focus is to locate impairment and to consider mental disability as understood in Penobscot culture through the identification of symbols and practices detected in folk texts.

A strong association between Native Americans and disability has not been a recurrent theme in New England's regional literature. In fact, early physical descriptions of the Penobscot in the 17th century generally emphasized the strong, lean, and healthy bodies of the men, even as pronouncements about the savage decorum of so much exposed flesh hinted at a European sensibility of the New World's primitive state.¹⁵⁴ Still, accidents, illness, aging, and congenital conditions would have resulted in individual impairments among tribal members that elicited a social response. Terms for physical impairments like *blindness*, *lameness* and *deformed body* exist in the Penobscot language under the linguistic root *ketemaki*, which relates to concepts of 'requiring sympathy' or 'being of poor quality.' This linguistic root also contributes to Penobscot

¹⁵² Frank Speck, "Penobscot Transformer Tales," *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 24 no. 159, 1913, 199.

¹⁵³ Simmons, vii.

¹⁵⁴ Calloway, 33.

words for terms such as *sickly*, *abusive person*, *disrespectful speech*, *unfortunate*, and *pitiful story*.¹⁵⁵ The linguistic construction of these words recommends at least two considerations about impairments of personal function from a Penobscot viewpoint: 1). there is a cultural standard of conventional well-being for both physical and interpersonal attributes and 2). a variation from the cultural standard resulting in such conditions should evoke understanding and compassion.

It is important to note that while linguistically-constructed Penobscot views of impairment acknowledge differentiation from an undefined norm, this does not necessarily suggest the exclusion of members with differences. Under a disabilities theory framework, it also suggests a diverse range of impairments beyond typical medical designations that have the potential to elicit societal responses intended to disable an individual or group. The multitude of culturally acknowledged impairments is consistent with a pervasive Native American belief that conceptualizes what the dominant culture would term a disability as an imbalance with nature or the community; this is as likely to result from damaged interpersonal relationships or character flaws as it is from physical or mental impairments.¹⁵⁶ The interplay between an array of impairments and the act of disabling can be found within traditional Penobscot folktales. An analysis reveals not only the presence of this nexus, but also the instability between impairment and *disability* across the lifespan of an individual, as well as the historic trajectory of the Penobscot.

¹⁵⁵ MacDougall, Pauleena. "Linguistic Roots of *ketemaki*." List provided to author via e-mail, October 17, 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Rowley, Deborah and Ruth Anne Rehfeldt. "Delivering Human Services to Native Americans with Disabilities: Cultural Variables and Service Recommendations," *North American Journal of Psychology*, 2002, 312.

The earliest reference of physical difference in Algonkian folklore can be found in a 1653 description of the deity Hobbamock or Cheepi . His name is related to the words for *death* and the *cold northeast wind*; he is associated with the color black and his likeness is described as "deformed."¹⁵⁷ Though by the 19th century Cheepi would eventually transform into an Algonkian equivalent for the Christian devil, the 17th century account imbues him with both positive and negative qualities. In particular, the appearance of Cheepi as an animal to a dreamer - - especially a snake - - was desired by some and could lead to qualification as a tribal shaman.¹⁵⁸ Cheepi or Hobbamock does not appear in recorded folklore of the Penobscot. However, Speck speculated that an 1829 account of a Penobscot woman who dreamed of a speaking serpent supported a cultural resonance with the concept of Cheepi.¹⁵⁹ As a model for understanding a historic Penobscot view of, and social response to, members with impairments, the physical description of Cheepi is relevant indeed.

According to Speck, the Penobscot implemented a practice of abandoning the "aged and orphans"¹⁶⁰ from time immemorial. Penobscot scholar Pauleena MacDougal clarifies the categories of abandoned members more generally as those with physical or mental impairments, invalids, those who posed some threat to the group and those who could not reasonably care for themselves or be cared for within the group's

¹⁵⁷ Simmons, 39. This description was culled from *Tears of Repentance: Or a Further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New England* by John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew. Eliot and Mayhew were Puritan clergy who developed Indian mission villages, primarily in Massachusetts.

¹⁵⁸ Simmons, 39-41.

¹⁵⁹ Simmons, 45.

¹⁶⁰ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 2.

resources.¹⁶¹ In addition, self-abandonment was practiced if a member felt he or she impacted the group's survival in some way.¹⁶² The elderly and orphans were not necessarily abandoned; it was other compounding conditions frequently associated with their social status - - like impairment or illness - - that might result in abandonment.¹⁶³ Therefore, Cheepi's deformed body, literally marked for the death he represents, evokes the ultimate associations between impairment, abandonment, and death. However, those conditions were not automatic cause for abandonment. As the linguistic roots for potentially disabling conditions imply, care and kindness toward members with impairments was expected. Cheepi's positive attributes, such as wisdom and cosmological power, further support the notion that impairment or deformity did not obviate other capabilities nor diminish the value of the member to the tribe. It was only when the nomadic lifestyle of the Penobscot, a lack of available resources, or a perceived threat to the group emerged, resulting in the inability to sustain a particular individual, that he or she would be abandoned. Disabilities theorists would argue that abandonment was the disabling act that transformed a culturally recognized impairment or threat into a disability. As analysis of Penobscot tales will demonstrate, however, the term disability as accepted in disability studies does not always have a direct correlation with native culture. Penobscot folklore provides for a better understanding of the potentially disabling practice of abandonment, as well as the transitory quality of *disability* among the Penobscot.

¹⁶¹ MacDougall, Pauleena. E-mail to the author. October 17, 2011.

¹⁶² MacDougall, Pauleena. E-mail to the author. October 17, 2011.

¹⁶³ It is equally important to note that many of the characters in Penobscot folklore who are described as orphans do not become orphans (without parents or family members) until they are abandoned. Long Hair, Seventh Son and the maiden in Water Froth (Bitses), for example.

Examining Recorded Penobscot Folktales for Disability and Their Cultural Meaning

The Abandoned Woman is a folktale that adeptly illustrates a number of Penobscot beliefs and practices involving impairment and disability in its observance of abandonment.¹⁶⁴ The tale begins with a hunting party travelling by canoe with an aged and lame woman. "She was so old and covered with vermin that she could not help herself."¹⁶⁵ As the hunting party had no success, they feared that they suffered from "bad luck,"¹⁶⁶ and that the care of the elderly woman unnecessarily delayed their efforts. The hunters abandon the woman on a barren island and although she is provided with a small amount of food, both the hunters and the old woman expect that she will die. In spite of this, the frail woman does not sit back and accept death as her fate; she simply becomes more self-sufficient, though good fortune comes her way as she happens upon a length of rope, which she uses as a snare, and a box of tobacco, which provides her with a leisurely comfort. The old woman feasts upon rabbit, dries surplus meat for future use and makes new clothing for herself from the abundance of rabbit fur. Rather than suffering from her physical impairment and displacement from the group, the old woman uses her skill, wisdom, and good luck to not only survive, but to improve her situation. In fact, as the hunting party makes their return journey, still under the effects of bad luck and near starving, they arrive on the island expecting to bury the bones of the old woman. They are surprised to find the old woman well. She gladly receives

¹⁶⁴ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 88-89.

¹⁶⁵ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 88.

¹⁶⁶ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 88.

them and shares her food. The tale ends: "The old woman who had saved them, they kept with them, and there is the end."¹⁶⁷

Although this might be interpreted strictly as a folktale with moral undertones - - desert frail or aged members and you will endure harsh consequences - - the text is imbued with additional symbolism and cultural meaning for the Penobscot related to impairment and disability. The old woman's degraded condition of being covered in vermin at the outset of the tale is indicative of two potential interpretations with cultural relevancy: 1). The dire circumstances of the hunting party and their inability to care for the old woman properly or 2). The old woman was abandoned by another group when the hunting party encountered her.¹⁶⁸ Regardless of whether the old woman was an original or adopted member of the hunting party's tribal group, the text's suggestion that they were suffering from "bad luck" reflects Penobscot notions of the occasional affliction of tribal members by *wahan-do* (evil forces) or of unique powers attributed to individuals with noted difference. Likened to shamanism,¹⁶⁹ Penobscots recognized unique individual power as a force that could imperil, rescue, or

¹⁶⁷ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 89.

¹⁶⁸ The second interpretation was suggested by Dr. Pauleena MacDougall in an e-mail to the author, October 19, 2011. Other Penobscot folktales shed light on the practice of a tribal band adopting individuals abandoned by other groups. See Joseph Nicolai's folklore about "Frost" in *The Life and Traditions of the Redman*, page 69 and Molly Spotted Elk's "Fishwoman" in *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abnaki Tribe*, page 92. The practice implies that within the larger group, adopting abandoned individuals or orphaned children was expected if resources permitted. Foster parents and foster grandparents, sometimes as supernatural beings, populate native texts in caring for orphaned/abandoned children. Frequently care of the orphaned child resulted in him or her providing a unique benefit to the tribal group. "Frost," however, offers a more cautionary note.

¹⁶⁹ Among the Penobscot certain tribal members were formally recognized as shamans or *pow-wows*. They were perceived to be endowed with unique gifts that allowed them wisdom or magic to cure the sick, ability to divine the hidden or to control events. For more information see Frank G. Speck's "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. Dr. Pauleena MacDougall asserts Penobscot folktales that contain representation of individuals who frighten or threaten the tribe might be considered informal shamans, who derive their power from associations with supernatural forces, but who do not necessarily recognize their power. E-mail to the author, October 17, 2011.

strengthen the tribal group.¹⁷⁰ The intention or associated fate of the individual might be for good or bad; without any certainty, abandonment as prescribed by Penobscot folktales provided a mechanism to alleviate group anxieties regarding perceived risks of association with certain members. In addition to creating an imbalance in the group's resources, the text also suggests the old woman's presence may have brought bad luck upon the hunting party. Either circumstance would have led to culturally permissible abandonment.

As the hunting party leaves the old woman, they provide her with what food they can, underscoring the expected obligation to care for all members with existing resources. Yet, once the party leaves, the elderly woman awaits death...but she is providentially provided with the rope for a snare, a box of tobacco, and an unexpected source of food: rabbits that somehow survive and populate the "barren" island. Although it seems that these life-saving items appear from nowhere, Penobscot members likely inferred that they were brought by the supernatural beings that provide care and support to the abandoned or orphaned in so many other native tales.¹⁷¹

Likewise, as a food source, rabbits hold cultural significance. While all tribal members might eat rabbit, it was the young, elderly, sick or impaired who were expected to hunt small game, while able-bodied members -- primarily men -- travelled

¹⁷⁰ MacDougall, e-mail to the author, October 19, 2011. This concept is related to the recurring motif of the 'orphan,' discussed later in the chapter.

¹⁷¹ Penobscot tales contain supernatural human-like creatures who dwell in the environment of man. One of the most common in Penobscot folktales is Grandmother Woodchuck. Grandmother Woodchuck provides care and life lessons to Gluskabe, the great Penobscot culture hero, as well as other folk heroes (Seventh Son, Long Hair and the maiden in Froth). Like the lesser heroes, Gluskabe appears originally as an orphan whose exploits sometimes involve searching for family or tribal members, implying abandonment.

distances to hunt large game. For practical purposes it made sense for less-mobile individuals to hunt nearby and easy-to-catch game. This "protective practice"¹⁷² underscores a cultural ethos that balanced tribal and natural resources by providing a means for all members to contribute to the survival of the tribe; it suggests that some degree of self-sufficiency regardless of age or impairment be maintained even as it demonstrates a strong communal commitment to the young, the aged, and members with impairments. The cultural association between hunting rabbit and small game as a food source and conditions related to impairment is substantiated in native texts.

Writing in 1893, Penobscot Joseph Nicolar explains:

The spruce partridge and the rabbit were the principal winter food for those less able to go on long journeys for larger game, therefore this kind of game was afterwards reserved for the old and infirm...everybody had been instructed from childhood to help provide for the old and infirm.¹⁷³

Consequently, the act of the old woman hunting the miraculously plentiful rabbits can be placed within the larger context of accepted Penobscot custom. This practice is continually re-inscribed in folktales that include the mention of abandoned individuals hunting for rabbits or partridge once they have been left behind.¹⁷⁴

Native folklore invites another consideration of the importance of rabbit as a food and rabbit used for clothing. *The Great White Hare* is a Penobscot myth about a powerful, evil shaman (the White Hare), whose elusive mountaintop or island realm was fortified from intrusion by almost incomprehensible amounts of snow and ice. His domain was inhabited by the Penobscot dead, who sometimes arrived after having their

¹⁷² Nicolar, *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, (Bangor, ME: C. H. Glass and Company Printers, 1893), 94.

¹⁷³ Nicolar, 94.

¹⁷⁴ Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 22.

brains "combed out"¹⁷⁵ by an evil witch and her consorts. Here the dead roamed, clothed in white rabbit skins. Following an epic journey, the great culture hero Gluskabe located the White Hare's abode and killed the White Hare. Hence the dead were instantly transformed into rabbits. As Gluskabe freed the rabbits he "scattered them all over the world for the Indians to hunt and eat."¹⁷⁶ Penobscot knowledge of the *Myth of the Great White Hare* is relevant to an understanding of the presence of rabbit in *The Abandoned Woman*, as well as considering its relationship to abandonment and impairment.

Had the elderly woman in *The Abandoned Woman* been clothed in white rabbit skin, it is likely that she would have been marked for death (much as Cheepi's deformed body might be viewed as a marker for death) to the Penobscot listener, for being similarly clothed in the manner of the dead described in the *Myth of the White Hare*. White animals were considered to be bad omens among the Penobscot;¹⁷⁷ it is therefore noteworthy that the woman's survival is portended not only by hunting and eating rabbit, but also by the fact that her new rabbit skin garment is not white. The release of the Penobscot dead as a food source for living members in the *Myth of the Great White Hare* appears to be another cultural mechanism - - consistent with a worldview that aims for balance in a variety of relationships - - designed to relieve apprehension about death. When contemplated in the context of abandonment for any

¹⁷⁵ Speck. "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 50-52.

¹⁷⁶ Speck. "Penobscot Folktales and Religious Beliefs," 53.

¹⁷⁷ Speck. "Penobscot Folktales and Religious Beliefs", 26. Speck notes that while equating white animals with grim foreboding is the dominant view, some Penobscot believe the opposite. It is unclear how contact with European culture or the Catholic church may influence the diverging opinion.

number of reasons, understanding that a likely death would result in providing life to other members of the tribe may have made the act more bearable.

Still, it is likely that abandonment was undertaken with great difficulty. Aside from emotional considerations, *The Abandoned Woman* may be plumbed for additional cultural meaning. Since women were largely responsible for clothing and preparing stores of food, the gender of the old woman is important in the tale because it represents the vital role women played in caring for all members of the tribe. Further, the woman's experience and knowledge in exploiting the resources available provide evidence of the Penobscot acknowledgment of the wisdom and skill-base of their elders.¹⁷⁸ To lose elderly or female members threatened the survival of the group as surely as mental or physical impairment might tax resources. Indeed, it is the old woman who saves the hunting party, utilizing her many associated attributes: gender-based skills, wisdom and experience, and good fortune. The condition of being lame is not necessarily cause for the abandonment that might result in a disabling social response and death. In this way, the cultural meaning inherent in *The Abandoned Woman* suggests how mutable *disability* among the Penobscot could be and that a physical impairment was not an essential factor in determining an individual's social worth.

An analysis of *The Abandoned Woman* is useful in mining Penobscot folklore for meanings, practices, and attitudes related to impairment and disabling of an individual through abandonment. Yet it must be acknowledged that of the many native folktales reviewed, very few contain overt instances of physical impairment. This may be

¹⁷⁸ The implications of age and gender in *The Abandoned Woman* was suggested by Dr. Pauleena MacDougall in an e-mail to the author, October 19, 2011.

reflective of an actual lack of persons with physical impairments existing within the tribe due to early deaths or abandonment. It may also suggest that physical impairments were present, but that their impact on the group didn't warrant considerable attention in folktales. Errors in translation from Penobscot to English may obfuscate the location of physical impairment, as well. As disabilities scholar Rosemarie Garland Thompson explains in her research locating physical impairments and disfigurement in American texts: "the margins must constitute the center" and inferences of the seemingly peripheral will allow for what was thought to be hidden, to be revealed in a fresh, new way.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, given the linguistic roots of words associated with impairment and the sickly, presumed connections provide one approach to locating both physical and mental impairments in Penobscot literature. That the root *ketemaki* engenders a cultural response requiring sympathy offers another possible avenue for recognizing culturally perceived impairments. And, consideration of abandonment as a Penobscot social response to disabling an individual with an impairment supplies yet another signifying connection. Building upon these links, it may be possible to locate a cultural understanding of mental impairments as represented in Penobscot folktales.

In his analysis of Penobscot folklore, Speck notes the recurring motif of "the hero as an orphan boy, as the weakest in a family of brothers, or in other humble guises."¹⁸⁰ By and large, the tales that fit this motif, such as *Long Hair* and *Seventh Son*, begin with the boy's abandonment and subsequent care by a supernatural woodland creature,

¹⁷⁹ Rosemarie Garland Thompson. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5-6.

¹⁸⁰ Speck. "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 11.

usually Grandmother Woodchuck. As the boy becomes more self-sufficient, he begins to exhibit extraordinary skills or unique powers. These orphan-heroes frequently conquer some form of evil and eventually rescue the tribal or family group who once abandoned them. The cause for the original abandonment is often murky, but the essential formula is consistent with that of *The Abandoned Woman* and therefore hints at some form of culturally recognized impairment. The *Legend of Froth-of-the-Water* or *Bitses* also fits this motif, but offers a representation of a mental impairment as it might have been understood by the Penobscot.

Although there are several variants of the *Bitses* tale, they all begin with a young maiden's peculiar enchantment with saltwater. She is so drawn to the water that she either can't stop swimming in it or is mesmerized by something unforeseen within its depths. The maiden's apparently unhealthy obsession gestures toward a form of mental impairment. As the tale unfolds, she is impregnated by the foaming sea in some versions and in others, a baby emerges from the water she has collected in a basket and stares at endlessly. The supernatural birth would suggest to the Penobscot listener that the maiden had a unique power, which might harm or benefit her family group.¹⁸¹ In all cases, however, her family abandons her, fearing she has been "bewitched"¹⁸² by an evil spirit and that her misfortune will impact them. The maiden worries that she will die, but Grandmother Woodchuck appears and attends to her needs; the maiden becomes the foster mother of Bitses (Water Froth). In time, Bitses grows to be an extraordinary

¹⁸¹ This interpretation suggested by Dr. Pauleena MacDougall in an e-mail to the author, October 17, 2011.

¹⁸² Molly Spotted Elk, *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abneki*, (Orono, ME: Maine Folklife Center, 2003), 21.

young man and decides to search for his foster grandparents. When he finds them, they have been enslaved and morally degraded by another tribe. Through a series of exploits Bitses wins the freedom of the maiden's parents and other tribal members. Upon return to their homeland the maiden's mother declares that "they had suffered at the hands of the valley people and [that] the great Manitou had punished them for leaving their daughter to die."¹⁸³

If an individual had a mental disability, Penobscots might once have understood the condition as being bewitched, cursed by spirits, or fated by ill-fortune in some way. As such, fearing for the survival of the tribe, abandonment would have been a viable option, as this folktale implies. The folktale also supports the notion that in addition to a threat, an impaired member's mental status might provide a unique advantage to the group, but this might not be obvious to tribal members with any certainty. The belief in supernatural creatures like Grandmother Woodchuck permitting the survival of an individual with mental impairment may have been another cultural mechanism contained within Penobscot folklore designed to lessen anxieties related to abandonment. Whether an individual abandoned survived or perished would appear to be less a decision made by his or her family group than that of the natural world and the beneficent forces that inhabited it. The tension of not knowing what impact an individual with mental impairment might have on the tribe is evident in this tale, most especially through the belief that the abandoning group was severely punished for the act. In many ways, this continues to highlight a Penobscot view that individuals with

¹⁸³ Spotted Elk, 24.

impairments were not essentially *good* or *bad*, nor would their presence have a necessarily deleterious impact on the tribe. In fact, the portrayals in the folktales regularly link the presence of impairment or difference to the survival and health of the community. It was the fluctuating circumstances of the group and related changes in the individual that could call for disabling through abandonment, which appears to be undertaken on a case-by-case basis.

Molly Spotted Elk's *Katahdin*:

Appropriating Declension Discourse in Penobscot Folktales

Although the references of physical or mental impairment in the previous examples are obscure, a review of folktales collected at a slightly later period bolsters both their presence and the social response of the Penobscot. Or rather, with thinking akin to anthropologist William S. Simmons, the whispers of the ancient voices, people, and customs remain a continuous thread through these native folktales, even as they are re-purposed for a new generation. *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abnaki People* contains native tales collected by Molly Spotted Elk between approximately 1924 and 1937.¹⁸⁴ Molly Spotted Elk was a Penobscot performer and native folklorist who was born on Indian Island in 1903 to a Penobscot father and Maliseet mother.¹⁸⁵ Christened Mollie Dellis (Mary Alice) Nelson, her multi-ethnic parentage reflected the various Abnaki people living on the Penobscot reservation in northernmost Maine.

Simultaneously, life on Indian Island during her formative years evidenced significant

¹⁸⁴ Spotted Elk, xv. Speck's collection of Penobscot folklore was undertaken from 1909-1916. They were first published in a scholarly text, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, in 1935.

¹⁸⁵ Bunny McBride. *Women of the Dawn*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 103-104. McBride notes that Spotted Elk's father, Horace Nelson, had some Passamaquoddy ancestry and that her mother, Philomene, also had Penobscot and French ancestry.

cultural changes. Her father was one of the first Penobscots to earn a high school diploma and spent a year studying at Dartmouth before returning to marry and raise his family.¹⁸⁶ Tribal celebrations often contained a mixture of traditional Penobscot and European entertainments.¹⁸⁷ Spotted Elk's first language was English, though she understood the various dialects spoken on the reservation: Penobscot, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy, to name a few.¹⁸⁸ She attended public schools on the mainland regularly through the eighth grade and took ballet lessons, but she also learned the traditions of basket-making, dancing, and her favorite: storytelling.¹⁸⁹ In fact, as a young girl she regularly encountered anthropologist Frank Speck as he was gathering folktales; he acknowledges Spotted Elk in one of his scholarly articles.¹⁹⁰

Before completing high school, Spotted Elk began to tour as Princess Neeburban (Northern Lights)¹⁹¹ on the vaudeville circuit from 1918-1923,¹⁹² performing 'the Indian' in pan-Native American costume for white audiences. This was not an uncommon form of employment for Penobscot members in the early twentieth century.¹⁹³ However, it was Spotted Elk, an inveterate diarist, who documented the struggles of native performers. She was bewildered by audience responses that ranged from enthralled to mocking. That is, by audiences that essentialized the performers and their traditions as

¹⁸⁶ McBride, 104.

¹⁸⁷ McBride, 105-106. At a public celebration on Indian Island to receive officials from Augusta, Penobscot members danced the traditional snake dance and then proceeded to waltz to music supplied by the Penobscot Indian Band, which featured Spotted Elk's father on the French horn.

¹⁸⁸ Spotted Elk, viii-ix.

¹⁸⁹ Spotted Elk, ix.

¹⁹⁰ McBride, 102. Speck, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 2.

¹⁹¹ Spotted Elk, ix.

¹⁹² McBride, 106-107.

¹⁹³ McBride, 107. Among the most notable of Penobscot performers was Frank Loring, also known as Big Thunder; he and his family eventually toured and sold native baskets with P.T. Barnum's circus.

either a noble, but vanishing people, or as crude, backward savages. Neither view appeased Spotted Elk and she felt the sting of racism acutely. In fact, she wrote a short article, 'A Criticism on Racial Feeling,'¹⁹⁴ published in the *Boston Telegram* that confronted the insults she endured from paying crowds.

When an opportunity arose through Speck to study anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1924, Spotted Elk eagerly accepted it.¹⁹⁵ There she learned the basics of research and was able to "deepen her own insights into the meaning behind the dances she performed,"¹⁹⁶ which had begun to lose their cultural meaning as they were re-fitted to meet the expectations of white audiences. Although Spotted Elk only attended the university for one year, before returning to performance-based employment primarily for economic reasons, the skills and experience she gained there would remain influential. While touring in Europe, for instance, she researched the Jesuit Letters at the French Archives, which contained early accounts of interaction between the Abneki peoples and those who first introduced them to the Catholicism now so enmeshed in Penobscot culture on Indian Island.¹⁹⁷ It was during this time that she discarded the Princess Neeburban persona for Molly Spotted Elk and met a French man she would later marry. Spotted Elk witnessed the rise of eugenics and racial politics

¹⁹⁴ McBride, 108.

¹⁹⁵ McBride, 109.

¹⁹⁶ McBride, 109.

¹⁹⁷ Spotted Elk, v-vi. In her brief introduction to *Katahdin*, Spotted Elk's daughter Jean Moore writes proudly of presenting noted Penobscot linguist and historian, Frank Siebert, with these papers and his astonishment. Moore explains, "I got the distinct impression from him that no Indian, and a woman at that, had the mental wherewithal to possibly know more than he did."

in Europe at the onset of World War II - - and while she and her daughter escaped the horrors of war, sadly, her husband perished in a refugee camp in 1941.¹⁹⁸

However, it was in 1939, while still in France with her young family that Spotted Elk's collection of folktales was accepted by Paris-based publisher, Paul Geuthner, primarily known for producing academic texts.¹⁹⁹ *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abnaki Tribe* contains an introduction written by Molly Spotted Elk wherein she recounts her love of the traditional tales she heard "over and over again" as a young child.²⁰⁰ She also reveals that she often did chores for the elders like, "picking berries, braiding sweetgrass, weaving baskets, chopping wood or shoveling snow," in exchange for hearing the stories she would later record.²⁰¹ Her favorite storyteller was Hemlock Joe, who was also acknowledged as one of the informants of Speck's collection.²⁰² As such, it is likely that the tales in *Katahdin*, were derived from the same coterie as Speck's informants. The tales, however, are exceptionally different in their presentation from those recorded by Speck. Unfortunately, just as Spotted Elk was prepared to undertake a promotional tour for *Katahdin* the war began and the book was never published in her lifetime.²⁰³ The distinctive differences between the tales presented by Speck and those presented by Spotted Elk allow for further analysis of impairment and *disability*, as well

¹⁹⁸ Spotted Elk, xvi.

¹⁹⁹ Spotted Elk, xvi.

²⁰⁰ Spotted Elk, xxi.

²⁰¹ Spotted Elk, xxi.

²⁰² Spotted Elk, xxi; Speck, "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," 2.

²⁰³ The Maine Folklife Center (MFC) published *Katahdin: Wigwam's Tales of the Abnaki Tribe* in 2003 based on an earlier manuscript of the proposed book donated to the MFC by Spotted Elk's daughter, Jean Moore. Editor Pauleena MacDougall decided to publish using the name Molly Spotted Elk for the author. The close-up portrait of Spotted Elk in a beaded headband from promotional photographs of her touring days was chosen by Jean Moore. E-mail from Pauleena MacDougall to the author November 26, 2011. These choices were consistent with Spotted Elk's text and intentions as there is an element of performance within.

as the intersection of those concepts with ethnicity and identity in twentieth century Penobscot culture.

The explicit and implicit objectives of *Katahdin* are numerous. Consistent with the academic bent of publisher Paul Guethner, Spotted Elk also constructed the text with a scholarly purpose in mind. For instance, she included three glosses as an appendix to the text.²⁰⁴ Additionally, in the brief foreword Spotted Elk provides a condensed history and cultural background of the Penobscot, which reflects its European and multi-Algonquin make-up; these elements, she asserts, are present in the folktales. At the same time, Spotted Elk personalizes the text through her introduction and inserts herself into the text as a child, playfully collecting tales from tribal members. At the outset, the reader learns that one of her primary informants is Hemlock Joe, "a hopeless invalid...[who] even had a story about the misfortune that confined him to his bed."²⁰⁵ Thus, the text readily locates a noteworthy Penobscot with a physical impairment. She also reveals that not all of the tales contained in *Katahdin* are "old and legendary;"²⁰⁶ some are, Spotted Elk states, the product of the "vivid imaginations"²⁰⁷ of various Penobscot storytellers. All of the stories, Spotted Elk hopes, will be interesting, enjoyable and educational for the "little paleface boys and girls."²⁰⁸ *Katahdin*, just as its

²⁰⁴ These are English-Penobscot, Penobscot-French, and French-Penobscot dictionaries (which include some Maliseet and Passamaquoddy terms), and explanative notes related to some common folktale characters found in Penobscot lore. In the original manuscript, Spotted Elk arranged the glosses by conceptual categories (indicating a particular perspective), while in the 2003 published version, editor MacDougall re-arranged the glosses by alphabetizing them to facilitate use by readers unfamiliar with Penobscot culture.

²⁰⁵ Spotted Elk, xxi.

²⁰⁶ Spotted Elk, xxii.

²⁰⁷ Spotted Elk, xxii.

²⁰⁸ Spotted Elk, xxii.

author did in her lifetime, attempts to convey Penobscot culture as both time-honored and vibrantly dynamic, as compelling knowledge and as entertainment.

This stands contrary to Speck's recorded tales, which were meant almost exclusively for scholarly study and were an attempt to tap into a 'more authentic'²⁰⁹ aspect of Penobscot culture. Speck's collection was recorded primarily in native tongue and then transcribed, almost word-for-word, into English;²¹⁰ most of the folktales are brief, averaging one to two paragraphs in length. As discussed earlier in this paper, native listeners were likely to infer much from the folktales through cultural shorthand, while a non-native might never grasp relevant points. In contrast, the tales in *Katahdin* tend to be several pages in length, providing nuanced descriptions of characters, feelings, and the landscape. Perhaps because English was Spotted Elk's first language, she had the ability to translate the concepts inherent in the tales into a form - - with all of its cultural markers and meaning - - that was more accessible to a non-native reader, by simultaneously using cultural markers and meaning relevant to a white audience. With respect to disability and impairment, *Katahdin* evidences far more Penobscot characters with readily recognized impairments than those found in other collections.²¹¹ At the same time, Spotted Elk utilizes both Penobscot responses to impairment, as well

²⁰⁹ The term authentic is used loosely here. Surely, folktale telling among the Penobscot was also about entertainment, even as it conveyed important cultural practices and beliefs.

²¹⁰ For examples of this, see Speck, Frank G., "Penobscot Transformer Tales," *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 1 no. 3, 1918.

²¹¹ Spotted Elk's facility with English may have permitted her to more directly name some impairments as such within the folktales. In addition, informants such as Hemlock Joe and Blind Liz (noted in a diary excerpt included in Mc Bride's *Women of the Dawn*) may have superimposed their own impairments onto characters in tales. The increase in explicitly noted characters with impairments in *Katahdin* may also be reflective of new demographics within the Penobscot; that is, now confined to the reservation, abandonment was no longer regularly used and there was an increase in aged, infirmed, or impaired members.

as tropes of disability found in mainstream regional literature in a manner that champions new interpretive meaning.

To begin, a number of folktales in Katahdin contain characters with unambiguous impairments. In *The Grasshopper Maiden*, for instance, the text states, "Among her people were two who were handicapped and one who had a hunchback, Chebootas."²¹² The open reference to Chebootas' physical disfigurement and impairment suggest that the "two who were handicapped" may have had cognitive impairments.²¹³ Broken One, a character in *Plump Plump*, is described as "lame, with a deformed back, neck and shoulder, and his face was covered with long smooth flesh scars."²¹⁴ Several other tales suggest mental health impairments, such as *Bitses* and *Fishwoman*. In *Fishwoman*, a woman once deformed and orphaned is made beautiful. Yet she never believes in her inner or outer beauty, despite frequent praise by her husband. Over time, she continues to distance herself emotionally and physically from her young son and husband, until in her utter despondency, she changes her physical form into a fish and cannot return to them.²¹⁵ All of these serve to plainly locate individuals with impairments in Penobscot culture for non-native audiences. Having included impairment within the folktales makes it possible to glean additional cultural messages regarding impairment and mental disability.

²¹² Spotted Elk, 57.

²¹³ Using Garland Thomson's position that physical disfigurement was frequently associated with cognitive impairment in American literature of the late 19th and 20th centuries, as well as her assertion that some impairments must be inferred from other clues in the text.

²¹⁴ Spotted Elk, 125.

²¹⁵ Spotted Elk, 92.

For example, in *The Grasshopper Maiden*, Cheebotas the hunchback associates primarily with other community members with impairments including the Grasshopper Maiden (Chuwls), who was an orphan and stigmatized because she was deformed and ugly. She was so homely and ridiculed that she went out only when it was dark enough to hide her unsightly visage. Her friend Cheebotas, was considered a "clown," and though "the people thought of him as a stupid person, in reality he was the wisest man in the tribe;" he also lived alone because no woman would have him for a husband due to his deformity.²¹⁶ The folktales contained in Speck's, and to a lesser extent Joseph Nicolar's, collections do not hint at members with impairments being ostracized within their communities or given lower social status, with the exception of abandonment based on sustaining communal resources. Therefore, the associations with physical deformity, cognitive impairment, and ugliness may be more reflective of mainstream culture and the typical linkages of these conditions with disability in regional texts, rather than traditional Penobscot practice. The prevalence of characters described as ugly in the various tales of *Katahdin* may, in fact, be referencing 'Ugly Laws,' which were in effect from the late 19th thru the mid-20th centuries. For economic and social reasons, New England municipalities - - like many other American cities - - passed laws prohibiting those with visible impairments from appearing in public or marrying.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Spotted Elk, 57.

²¹⁷ For more information on the rise of Ugly Laws see David A. Gerber's "Ugly Laws: Disability in Public," *Journal of Social History*, Fall 2010. See also Paul K. Longmore's *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), particularly the chapter on Randolph Bourne. In "Delivering Human Services to Native Americans with Disabilities: Cultural Variables and Service Recommendations," *North American Journal of Psychology*, 2002, Rowley and Rehfeldt state that it is common among Native American populations that those with physical impairments or who are unattractive are not viewed as good marriage partners. It is difficult to surmise whether that is the case in

Whether such mainstream attitudes were in effect in 20th century Penobscot culture on Indian Island or whether the text is employing common associations between impairment and disability familiar to white readers is difficult to discern, though the textual evidence suggests that Spotted Elk utilizes this most effectively as a cultural bridge building on regional tropes of disability.

In contrast, *The Story of the Big Dipper* seems to be more aligned with Penobscot attitudes toward impairment as indicated in Speck's tales. In this tale, a poor, orphaned family of seven brothers and two sisters live on the edge of a village. Six of the brothers were hardworking and renowned for their strength, but the youngest brother and the youngest sister were "frail and small."²¹⁸ Known as P'sesemuk and Alakus, the siblings with impairments "helped in their own way by sewing and decorating the skin garments with porcupine quills."²¹⁹ Spotted Elk utilizes mainstream constructions of impairment and disability by linking the family with impaired members to poverty and geographical marginalization. At the same time, the text demonstrates Penobscot notions of communal contribution, showing P'sesemuk and Alakus as performing a specific, practical labor in making quill-adorned garments²²⁰ and therefore, calling attention to their capabilities. P'sesemuk and Alakus were beloved by their six older brothers, who concerned themselves with their care and well-being. The older, able-bodied sister,

traditional Penobscot culture; folktales other than those contained in *Katahdin* do not provide evidence of prohibiting members with impairments from marrying.

²¹⁸ Spotted Elk, 83.

²¹⁹ Spotted Elk, 83.

²²⁰ The Penobscot are admired for the intricate designs created on various garments using natural and dyed porcupine quills. This is a traditional indigenous craft.

Mooiin, however, was “strange.”²²¹ When P’sesmuk and Alakus are left in Mooiin’s care after the older brothers depart for war, they soon become “frailer and frailer.”²²² Mooiin mistreats P’sesmuk and Alakus, eating the best food and reserving only the scraps for them. Eventually she threatens their very lives and the health of the tribal members who remain in the encampment. Transforming into a bear (indicative of her status as a shaman), Mooiin “destroyed all of her people and the entire village. But she saved her youngest brother and sister because she still loved them in her own way.”²²³ Still Mooiin plots to kill her entire family once the six brothers return. In the end, it is P’sesmuk who saves his virile able-bodied brothers - - and Alakus, too - - from Mooiin’s destructive nature by employing magic and lifting them from the earth into the “clear, silvery sky,”²²⁴ where they become the stars that form the Big Dipper.

While *The Story of the Big Dipper* contains elements that assist non-native readers in making associations between impairment and disability, it also demonstrates an alternative cultural response to impairment that is consistent with Penobscot practices. That is, although they have disabilities, but both P’sesmuk and Alakus are expected to contribute to the family and in turn, to be well cared for. Mooiin’s inability to balance her actions with tribal needs and moral imperatives threatens the survival of the tribe. Indeed, Mooiin’s selfish, abusive nature - - what might have been considered an impairment within a Penobscot worldview - - wipes out an entire community. Despite her potent supernatural talents, Mooiin’s malicious intent is exposed as

²²¹ Spotted Elk, 83.

²²² Spotted Elk, 84.

²²³ Spotted Elk, 84.

²²⁴ Spotted Elk, 87.

unflattering and detrimental. At the same time, Spotted Elk employs the traditional weakest orphan motif with particular attention to P'sesemuk who, despite his frailties, uses his wits and latent magical abilities to outwit Mooin and save his family, who literally become immortalized in the heavens. In this way, Spotted Elk's rendering of impairment builds upon traditional Penobscot views and permits the text to suggest a new way of considering such concepts as *strong*, *weak*, *impairment*, *morality*, *community* and *acts of disabling*. Many of the folktales in *Katahdin* that contain characters with impairments operate in a similar fashion: construction of the character using mainstream New England tropes of disability, but creating circumstances that illuminate that difference and empower the character with an impairment.

Concomitantly using implicit textual means to expose the ill-effects in imbalances of social power, there appears to be a subtext at work through which Spotted Elk is communicating yet another cultural message to her readership - - one that utilizes tropes of disability to advocate for a new consideration of the Native American.

It is interesting to note that the marginalization of individuals or populations with impairments, poverty and degeneracy popularized in New England regional texts like Edith Wharton's *Summer*, is evident in several tales in *Katahdin*. In addition to locating the orphan family in *The Story of the Big Dipper* as living on the periphery of the village or several Penobscot maidens with deformities who only venture out at night, the tale of *Plump Plump* leads to an encounter with Broken One, a maimed humanistic-animal character who saves the protagonist, but who lives alone in the New England forests, frequently observing activity in nearby encampments. Broken One's injury and

social exclusion result from the hidden trap set by white "two-legged hunters"²²⁵.

Spotted Elk goes beyond these literary creations, however, when she locates her beloved and impaired Hemlock Joe in a "little one-room shack on the banks of the Penobscot."²²⁶ Extrapolating the trope of disability and its relationship to concepts of impoverished geographic marginalization - - in the one-room shack, as well as on isolated Indian Island - - and further overlaying impairment directly onto the Penobscot identity, permits Spotted Elk to subtly argue for a new conceptualization of the Native American identity aligned with disability.

In the early 1920's through the 1930's - - just as Spotted Elk was preparing *Katahdin* for publication - - new sentiments with respect to U.S. governmental relationships with Native American tribes were emerging. In particular, Bureau of Indian Affairs chief John Collier and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ikes investigated the dire situation of U.S. programs that promoted "dependency" ²²⁷ of those living on reservations, often resulting in poor conditions like inadequate housing, poverty, compromised health, and illiteracy. They began to advocate for changes on reservations that promoted use of the distinct cultural view of Native Americans and a new sense of empowerment followed for a brief period.²²⁸ Inserted into this national discussion, Spotted Elk's already astute views of racism and social politics appear to make use of disability tropes to subliminally participate in the conversation through the tales in *Katahdin*. Of course, Spotted Elk wasn't the first Penobscot to link the plight of Native

²²⁵ Spotted Elk, 125.

²²⁶ Spotted Elk, xxi.

²²⁷ Nabokov, Peter. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-2000*. Revised Edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 309.

²²⁸ Nabokov, 308-312.

Americans with disability. Writing almost 40 years earlier, Penobscot Joseph Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* also combines traditional views of imbalance, impairment, and disabling as the result of European arrival and encroachment. Nicolar's versions suggest that the appearance of impairment in Penobscot culture came with the arrival of the "white brother."²²⁹ According to Nicolar, Klose-kur-beh²³⁰ warns the Penobscot through folk teachings that when the white man arrives he will disrupt Penobscot traditions, but if the Penobscot keep "within the bounds of my [the Great Spirit's] teaching,"²³¹ "There will not be a child born deformed."²³² In reality, conditions of impairment always existed to some extent in Penobscot culture, but Nicolar's text indicates that impairment and resultant disabling of the Penobscot are inextricably entwined with the arrival of Europeans and their eventual cultural dominance. Indeed, Nicolar laments that the practice of reserving small game for aged, ill, or impaired members ceased as Europeans over-hunted large game and pushed the Penobscot onto small reservations.²³³ Regardless of able-bodiedness, the text asserts, all Penobscot now must subsist on small game. Although this may not have been the case in actuality, the text implies the connection between impairment, imbalance, the Penobscot, and the condition of being disabled. For Nicolar, it is the loss of the social contract established

²²⁹ Nicolar, 30.

²³⁰ Klose-ker-beh is, according to Speck, "the most important personage in Penobscot religious lore...purely aboriginal in character," in "Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs," *The Journal of American Folk-Lore* 48, no. 187, 1935, 6. Nicolar describes Klose-ker-beh as "the first person who came upon the earth, and he was their teacher," 17. Klose-ker-beh is a Penobscot folk hero, whose primary role is to transmit how the Penobscot should live in accordance with the wishes of a greater spirit. Other spellings of the name include Gluskabe and Gluskap(e).

²³¹ Nicolar, 31.

²³² Nicolar, 30

²³³ Nicolar, 94.

to maintain the survival of all members that has resulted in disabling the entire tribe by the dominant white culture. It is Spotted Elk, however, who more skillfully unites Penobscot views of impairment and *disability* with regional literary conventions of disability to successfully propose a recognition of difference, ability, and impairment as worthy and valuable to the community, while also challenging dominant assumptions of those who necessarily should be subjected to being disabled.

Conclusion

As a metaphoric stand-in for the Penobscot, disfigured and lame Broken One in the tale *Plump Plump* seems to address this directly when he says: "It is in all people to do and to give to others for a peaceful well-being, as it is in everyone, too, to do and give misery to another and others. I seek to help you for the well-being of another and others. And by it, well being is mine."²³⁴ At the end of the story, Plump Plump and Broken One dance together. Broken One dances to express the happiness and well-being that are his, in spite of his impairment. And the well-being of all follows, the text implies, upon the inclusion of Broken One in the community and the ritual of traditional dance. The association of wisdom, skill, experience, and life outlook with Broken One's impairment supports the text in constructing him as an integral member of the community with many positive attributes. The text dismisses marginalization and champions impairment and therefore, the Penobscot, to be considered as equal members of society. It is through a long oral tradition and cultural outlook that Spotted Elk is able transform mainstream regional cultural tropes of disability into something

²³⁴ Spotted Elk, 126.

that is empowering for individuals with impairments, as well as the Penobscot. As playwright Victoria Mares-Hershey once wrote of the Penobscot, "What better than for the people who expected to see you disappear, see you not only survive, but dance?"²³⁵ As populations, frequently made invisible and voiceless, *Katahdin* re-appropriates common tropes that challenge assumptions about impairment and *disability* so common in regional texts of its day.

Examined as a text concerning itself with impairment and disability, *Katahdin* is not only exceptional in its attempt to perform matchless cultural work at the time of its originally intended publication, it also holds potent possibilities in the identity construction for today's Penobscot individuals and Native Americans living with impairments. Cognitive impairments among Native Americans are nearly four times that of the general population, for instance,²³⁶ and Penobscot tribal historian James Francis acknowledges that both physical and cognitive impairments are common on Indian Island in the 21st century.²³⁷ While impairment and *disability* are frequently compared to ethnic minorities in the context of marginalization and oppression by disability studies theorists, Marten Soder cautions that it is the intersection of ethnicity and impairment - - the place where the mind or the body interacts with specific cultural attitudes and practices - - that warrants deep excavation to unpack the relevant meaning associated with bodily or cognitive difference.²³⁸ Building blocks for

²³⁵ Donna Loring. *In the Shadow of the Eagle: A Tribal Representative in Maine*, (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 2008), iii.

²³⁶ Rowley and Rehfeldt, 312.

²³⁷ Francis, James e-mail to author, June 4, 2010.

²³⁸ Marten Soder. "Tensions, Perspectives and Themes in Disability Studies," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 2008, 75.

constructing a multivalent identity that is both Penobscot and impaired can be found within native folklore. This analysis suggests that ethnicity and mental disability can work reciprocally to promote new perspectives that disturb dominant conventions and advocate for inclusive, if unorthodox, consideration in the construction of regional identity.

Chapter 3

Northern New England Neo-Regionalist Texts and the Narrative of Declension: Potential Limits on the Literary Representation of Intellectual Disability and New England Identity

Mental disability as a trope in northern New England texts was not uncommon and can be, as I have shown in my analyses of *The Hereditary Barn*, *Alexander's Bridge* and Penobscot folktales in previous chapters, employed to link cultural considerations of disability to regional identity throughout various historical eras. The previous analyses suggest that while mental disability was used in some texts as either a norming referent or to connote degradation, such representations might simultaneously be used to probe and contest presumptions about New England's regional identity. The use of mental disability within these texts suggests how prevalent the narrative linking regional identity to decline and degeneracy had become, especially as eugenics theory gained traction in public discourse. Yet, textual construction sometimes frustrated the singular conclusions drawn from cultural responses to mental disability, as well as popularized understandings of eugenics theory in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

As the twentieth century progressed, however, discourse relating immorality, mental disability, eugenics and regional degeneracy became a firm and relatively uncontested staple in regional texts. This chapter compares one of the first novels incorporating intellectual disability with a prevailing eugenics narrative that supported and initiated a number of political and social responses to individuals with intellectual disability, their families, and sometimes their communities. Holman Day's *King Spruce* and Henry Herbert Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of*

Feeble-mindedness, were published within a few years of each other. Both texts contain a similar narrative linking immoral sexual behavior, poverty, criminality, and heredity to intellectual disability. While the text in *King Spruce* leans toward tolerating and accommodating intellectual disability, *The Kallikak Family*, on the other hand, advocates for containment and elimination of intellectual disability. The power of the narrative linking intellectual disability and its threat to regional identity was effectively employed in the pseudoscience of *The Kallikak Family* in order to produce a different response to mental disability within New England, which is then reflected in some of the region's later texts.

After decades of eugenics-driven social policy, the neo-regionalists of the late-1970s and 1980s continued to build upon the declension narrative.²³⁹ Their incorporation of marginalized families and individuals with intellectual disabilities is steeped in familiar tropes, but provides a more intimate view of the relationship between individuals with disabilities and their families. Ernest Hebert's *A Little More Than Kin* (1982) and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985 and 1995) are neo-regionalist texts that arrived at a remarkable time in New England's history—decades that witnessed the intersection of a revivification of a geographic (and at times imaginatively constructed) New England, and growing momentum for the civil rights of

²³⁹ In American literary criticism, "regionalism," sometimes referred to as "local-color," is understood to be a genre of literature that captures the dialects, customs, topography, and characters associated with a specific region during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Regionalist texts are characterized by their sentimentality, realism, a tendency to use character-types, and remote settings. The emphasis of the texts is on the vernacular culture of the region and frequently lauds distinct aspects of the region or mourns the loss of old customs. Neo-regionalism is a second wave of the genre that re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in response to perceived cultural changes that arose due to an influx of new residents hailing from outside the region.

people with disabilities. In contrasting a rural underclass and declension with those who are attempting to re-form New England, *The Kinship* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* manage to probe cultural attitudes toward people with disabilities, suggesting perceived threats that engender cultural responses. Ultimately, and in a bewildering narrative twist, these neo-regionalist texts suggest that intellectual disability no longer has the capacity to represent New England's regional exceptionality. In order to more fully understand a perceptual change in the capacity of the literary figure of mental disability to effectively communicate regional identity, it is helpful to trace the literary and historic arc of New England's narrative of degeneracy and the construct of intellectual disability in regional texts in the twentieth century.

King Spruce and The Kallikak Family:

The Narrative of New England Declension Masquerades as Science

Among the first popular novels to emerge bearing the particular construction of a marginalized community that sat, "like running sores on the body of northern New England,"²⁴⁰ was Day's *King Spruce*, first published in 1908. The story primarily takes place in the remote woods of northern Maine, near a logging camp. While the logging camp and its accompanying lifestyle may be outside the boundaries of typical civilized society, the text suggests that even within otherwise marginalized spaces, there are still moral codes and social rules to abide by. In contrast with the rough-around-the-edges loggers, Day introduces a ragged, socially isolated community of people known as the

²⁴⁰ Grace Metalious. *Peyton Place*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1956), 29.

"Misery Gore squatters."²⁴¹ The Misery Gore folk are characterized by crime, debauchery, illness, and poverty; they have been repeatedly chased off from encampments made closer to neighboring towns due to their perceived moral degeneracy and the potential threat they pose to civilized order. These folk are also marked by poor genetic stock through intermarriage and intellectual inferiority, as Day explains: "All Skeets and Bushees, and married back and forth and crossways and upside down till ev'ry man is his own grandmother, if only he knew enough to figger relationship. All State paupers, and no more sprawl to 'em than there is to a fresh-water clam."²⁴² Among the Misery Gore squatters is a man with apparent intellectual disabilities named Abe. The author's initial description of Abe imbues him with subhuman qualities that seem to make him of lesser stature than the average squatter: "...this huge, hairy, shaggy, almost naked giant, cowering against the side of a shack with all the timidity of a child, marked a climax even to such degeneracy as he had quailed before."²⁴³ Abe is considered to have the intellectual capacity of a five-year old child and, despite his towering muscular physique, is afraid of women and shadows.²⁴⁴ Mute, descriptions of Abe throughout the novel capitalize on his sub-human qualities, often equating him to a dog. While the text emphasizes Abe's perceived animal nature, it also reveals an intelligence, for Abe whittles small creatures out of scraps of wood. Like the Skeets and the Bushees, Abe's presence in the text is predicated on commonly understood notions of marginalized communities and mental disability in northern New

²⁴¹ Holman Day, *King Spruce* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1908), 82.

²⁴² Day, *King Spruce*, 82.

²⁴³ Day, *King Spruce*, 89.

²⁴⁴ Day, *King Spruce*, 89.

England. Similar to the representations of individuals with mental disability considered in the previous chapters, Abe's intellectual disability is not solely a signifier of moral or regional decline. Rather, the character of Abe also displays utility, perseverance, and loyalty through his actions in the text, which are ostensibly preferred qualities. The construction of Abe as a man with intellectual disabilities and multivalent attributes subtly argues for approbation, inclusivity and regional viability.

To be sure, rural folk like the Misery Gore squatters did not arise solely from Day's imagination. A part-time resident of coastal Maine, Day occasionally wrote articles for *The Harper's Monthly*. In the 1909 article, "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," Day recounts his interactions with the "queer squatter people who have been dispossessed [and] find little relish in being stared at as human curiosities."²⁴⁵ From among several isolated island communities, Day illustrates their poverty, marginalization, and eccentricities. Although some of the residents appear as caricatures, many of Day's descriptions allow the quaint folk to retain dignity and social worth. The article describes them as a "content"²⁴⁶ lot and suggests that, "the proud folk in the cottages down the bay needed pity more than [they]."²⁴⁷ While the article highlights their uncertain status, it also relates the self-sufficiency and economic mechanisms that supported their subsistence without the aid of outside communities. In addition, "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," describes an unusual mixed-race community on Malaga Island. Like the other small groups Day depicts, consanguinity

²⁴⁵ Holman Day. "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," *The Harper's Monthly*, 23, Sept. 1909, 529.

²⁴⁶ Day, "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," 522.

²⁴⁷ Day, "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," 523.

marks the Malaga Islanders, as does intellectual disability, for they are as “inattentive as little children would be.”²⁴⁸ Their “rude hospitality,”²⁴⁹ however, is extended with “touching warmth and sincerity.”²⁵⁰ Day’s familiarity with the isolated and marginalized coastal communities, as well as his understanding of how they were perceived within their local culture, likely influenced his construction of the Misery Gore squatters and Abe. Day utilized the real multivalence ascribed to such groups and individuals during turn of the century New England to convey cultural meaning throughout his novel, *King Spruce*.

The central plot of *King Spruce* revolves around John Davis Barrett, a logging magnate, and his two daughters, Elva and Kate. Barrett has become a powerful and highly regarded citizen throughout Maine due to his wealth earned from the timber trade. Despite the profit gained by the harvesting of lumber, Barrett has not visited his logging camps in over two decades. After the untimely death of his wife, Barrett provided an advantageous upbringing and cultured education for his daughter Elva. Kate, the author later reveals, is Barrett’s illegitimate daughter. As a young man working in the logging camps Barrett seduced the wife of another man, who he abandoned when he learned of her pregnancy. When Kate’s mother died in her infancy, she was raised among the Skeets, Bushees and the rest of the Misery Gore squatters. Thus, the circumstances of the births of Elva and Kate are quite different. Kate is the product of a proscribed union, outside the bounds of matrimony. Her mother perishes

²⁴⁸ Day, “The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast,” 529.

²⁴⁹ Day, “The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast,” 530.

²⁵⁰ Day, “The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast,” 530.

shortly after her birth; the ultimate consequence of her adultery is her textual death. Kate, however, fares much better with respect to the text's pronouncements on her character's place in society. Although she is illegitimate and raised among the Misery Gore squatters, she is nonetheless portrayed to a large extent as a less socialized, unsophisticated, slightly more headstrong version of Barrett's legitimate daughter, Elva. Barrett, in fact, recognizes his part in the disadvantages Kate has faced, offering her financial support and a place in his social circle, which Kate declines. While Elva marries a lumber businessman and retains her elevated social standing, Kate marries a logging foreman. On the one hand, this suggests that Kate's parentage does indeed influence her social standing placing her in a lower status than Elva, but on the other, that she has a respectable and socially accepted place in New England culture. Like the narrative's treatment of the Bushees, Skeets, and Abe, the text suggests that New England culture encompasses a wide range of groups that may abide in the regional narrative, so long as the geographic and social places or imaginatively constructed spaces in regional identity are maintained.²⁵¹ Similarly, the descriptions of Abe in the text diminish the literary figure's potential threat when his unfailing loyalty is demonstrated by his willingness to defend those with whom he has a tender affiliation.

Abe and Kate have forged a special relationship since childhood and although the text characterizes the relationship as one of a kind mistress and her faithful dog, thus underscoring Abe's intellectual capabilities, Day also creates a vehicle for the

²⁵¹ See Holman Day's "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," in *The Harper's Monthly*, 23, Sept. 1909, 521-530. In this article Day describes several small, isolated communities in Maine's Casco Bay, which are populated by eccentric and poor folk.

reader's positive consideration of Abe's moral capacity. When circumstances bring Barrett's two daughters together in the wilderness and their lives are in peril, it is Abe who can be entrusted with their safety. For example, when Elva masquerades as Kate, her love interest, Dwight Wade, commands Abe to locate her in the wilderness and to return her to the safety of his camp. Elva remonstrates Wade for placing her in the care of the "unspeakable creature,"²⁵² but Abe, sensing *he* is the cause of her distress defends his obedience to Wade and his safeguarding of Elva, exclaims, "Me do it – me do it as you told!"²⁵³ Indeed, while other men attempt to physically harm or make illicit advances toward Kate and Elva, Abe remains ever their protector.

Day's construction of the character of Abe comes at a critical turning point in northern New England literature. Similar to previously considered literary representations of characters with mental disability, Abe is constructed with both positive and negative qualities. In spite of being created with animal-like features and habits to suggest his intellectual inferiority, Abe is also characterized by physical strength and endurance. In addition to travelling throughout the mountainous wilderness, sometimes carrying Kate or Elva, the text refers to his "giant strength,"²⁵⁴ and highlights a particularly arduous journey where Abe maintains pace with the other men, his barefeet "ploughing the snow."²⁵⁵

²⁵² Day, *King Spruce*, 285.

²⁵³ Day, *King Spruce*, 285. In another analysis, further consideration might be given to Abe's construction as a man with intellectual disabilities who speaks and for whom the text occasionally provides omniscient insight into what he is thinking. Whereas the regional texts containing some characters with mental disabilities neither provides insight into what they think, nor gives them a voice, Abe's textual construction aligns him more closely with the norm than distances him as an individual who is remote from the reader's way of knowing or understanding him.

²⁵⁴ Day, *King Spruce*, 124.

Abe's physical vitality is in direct contrast to the sickly nature of many of the Misery Gore folk, including their leader, Old Jed, who is described as "shuffling down the path...with the leanness of want."²⁵⁵ In addition, Abe demonstrates his 'able-ness' through his loyalty to and defense of his mistress - - and to a lesser extent, her half-sister. The characterization of the Skeets and the Bushees support the narratives of New England's decline through genetic stagnancy and the resultant threats to the region, such as poverty, illness, immorality, and criminality. In addition, the text affirms cultural notions regarding the potential of such marginalized communities to drain economic resources without providing any beneficial contributions. Despite these concerns, the simultaneous position of Abe as a member of the Misery Gore Squatters, as well as a strong protector, complicates the narrative and frustrates contemporaneous assumptions about individuals with mental disability. Day's construction of Abe hints at his innate physical and moral exceptionalities despite his culturally understood intellectual limitations. Abe contributes in meaningful ways to the survival of the contingent groups he interacts with and demonstrates his abilities through his strength and steadfastness. As a literary representation of intellectual disability, Abe may support the declension narrative through one perspective since he is marked with a mental disability and the assumed signification of regional degradation to that category. An alternate perspective, however, recognizes Abe's worth, strength, and endurance as a means to refute what seems his obvious detraction, his mental disability, and advances an affirmative appreciation for regional distinctiveness.

²⁵⁵ Day, *King Spruce*, 287.

²⁵⁶ Day, *King Spruce*, 82.

While *King Spruce* introduced a reading public to the Skeets, Bushees, and Abe, it did not readily resolve their place in the narrative of New England declension. As literary representations, these characters appear to support many of the claims made by eugenics theorists, in addition to supporting commonly held beliefs about such families or communities in New England. At the end of *King Spruce*, however, the fictional community of Misery Gore Squatters are not converted, driven elsewhere or eradicated, unlike Maine's actual elimination of the mixed-race Malaga Island community in 1912. Literary critic and theorist Stephen Greenblatt posits that texts operate as a "pervasive technology of control" in that they communicate the limits or models of accepted social behavior.²⁵⁷ In *King Spruce*, the Misery Gore squatters and Abe are constructed as a contemptible class, but they are nonetheless permitted to remain on the landscape of New England.²⁵⁸ Therefore, as a cultural means to mediate and control social responses, *King Spruce* argues for the inclusion of individuals with mental disability. Near the end of the twentieth century, regional texts begin to suggest otherwise as the literary figures marked with mental disability are removed from their homes and contained in institutions or perish. In part, this may be due to a popularized eugenics narrative published a few years after *King Spruce* that heavily influenced both regional and national discourse about individuals with intellectual disabilities and their influence on the social and cultural landscape.

²⁵⁷ Stephen Greenblatt "Culture" in Lentricchia and McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Literary Terms for Study*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225.

²⁵⁸ *King Spruce* repeatedly describes the Misery Gore squatters as a "tribe," suggesting alternative readings. One potential alternative would be that the squatters lived a nomadic life unlike the predominant culture of New England. Another might be that the text is denoting Native Americans as a contemptible class, predicating socio-political responses like the Vermont Eugenics Survey that targeted Abneki populations for sterilization. See Gallagher's *Breeding Better Vermonters* for more information.

New Englander and prominent eugenics theorist Henry Herbert Goddard²⁵⁹ published *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness* in 1914. The book was the result of a sweeping project Goddard oversaw to study intellectual disability and firmly establish a link between mental disability, social deviance, and heredity. Tracing the ancestral lineage of his student at the Vineland School for Backward and Feeble-Minded Children in Vineland, New Jersey, Deborah Kallikak, Goddard asserted that he was able to scientifically validate Deborah's mental disability as the result of her heritage by using Mendelian genetics.²⁶⁰ Although Goddard's narrative assumes the quality of a scientific study through his use of field agents gathering oral histories and genealogies beginning in 1906, the basis for his construction bears a striking similarity to Day's fictional *King Spruce*. While both texts are the products of long-held cultural beliefs in New England, they result in different conclusions that propose conflicting cultural responses. In *King Spruce*, although Kate is born of an illicit union, she does not become a threat to the community through socially deviant activity. The text, in fact, creates a legitimate and creditable role for Kate. Likewise, the text accommodates Abe and the Misery Gore squatters within the regional narrative. In contrast, Goddard's study of the Kallikaks co-opts the narrative of illegitimate and legitimate progeny employed by Day, using it to suggest a new way of understanding and responding to different social classes by relating a number of perceived social ills to intellectual disability.

²⁵⁹ Goddard was born and raised in East Vassalboro, Maine.

²⁶⁰ Henry Herbert Goddard. *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914). Deborah Kallikak and other Kallikak relations are pseudonyms in Goddard's text.

Goddard's case study begins with Deborah, a young woman with an intellectual disability who, after 13 years at the Vineland Institute in New Jersey, was deemed to have the "mentality of a nine-year-old child."²⁶¹ Furthermore, Goddard asserted, Deborah was a "typical illustration of the mentality of a high-grade feeble-minded person...the kind of girl that fills our reformatories...They are wayward, they get into all sorts of trouble and difficulties...sexually and otherwise."²⁶² According to clinical observations included in the text, Deborah had made gains at the Vineland Institute. At the time of Goddard's publication, she could add and subtract basic sums, spell simple words, and attend to household tasks with supervision. Goddard cautioned that Deborah was "most carefully guarded" and "persistently trained since she was eight years old,"²⁶³ but that "nothing"²⁶⁴ was accomplished in improving her intelligence or self-sufficiency. Deborah, in his opinion, would need to be institutionalized for her safety for the remainder of her life, lest she fall prey to nefarious individuals or act on her instincts, all of which were "in the direction that would lead to vice."²⁶⁵

Whereas Abe's natural instincts in *King Spruce* led him to be protective and loyal, Goddard foresaw no possibility of Deborah independently demonstrating positive characteristics or abilities. Deborah's training and care, lamented Goddard, like that of other individuals with intellectual disabilities, would become the burden of the taxpayer, usurping public resources. It was not simply the cost of Deborah's care that concerned Goddard, however, it was that she was representative of a large number of

²⁶¹ Goddard, 10.

²⁶² Goddard, 11.

²⁶³ Goddard, 12.

²⁶⁴ Goddard, 12.

²⁶⁵ Goddard, 12.

other individuals with intellectual disability who were not contained in institutions and constantly remediated against their 'instincts.' In order to better illustrate the enormity of the perceived problem of intellectual disability, Goddard sought to enlighten the public through Deborah's family story.

In his narrative, Goddard claimed that through an illicit sexual union, Deborah's great, great, great grandfather, colonialist Martin Kallikak, fathered a son with intellectual disabilities with a "nameless feeble-minded girl."²⁶⁶ The Kallikak line from the "nameless feeble-minded girl," was labeled by Goddard as the "bad side,"²⁶⁷ and was comprised of "paupers, criminals, prostitutes, drunkards, and examples of all forms of social pest with which modern society is burdened."²⁶⁸ Goddard mused that Martin Kallikak may have regretted his immoral liaison with the feeble-minded girl, but that it was likely he did not "realize the evil that had been done"²⁶⁹ in siring an abject line of descendants. In contrast, and in further support of Goddard's claims, after completing service in the Revolutionary War, Martin Kallikak married another woman, supposedly of average intelligence - - although the case-study does not affirm this outright - - with whom he propagated the descendants of the "good side of the family, prominent people of all walks of life and nearly all of the 496 descendants owners of land or proprietors."²⁷⁰ On the 'good side,' there are no members with intellectual disability, "no illegitimate children; no immoral women; only one man who was sexually loose."²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ Goddard, 37.

²⁶⁷ Goddard, 116.

²⁶⁸ Goddard, 116.

²⁶⁹ Goddard, 102.

²⁷⁰ Goddard, 116.

²⁷¹ Goddard, 30.

The 'bad side' contained 262 members whom Goddard and his colleagues deemed feeble-minded based on oral histories and interviews, and 197 who were "normal."²⁷² Goddard conceded that there were yet 581 members of the reputedly inferior lineage who were labeled "undetermined."²⁷³ 'Undetermined,' as Goddard explained, did not mean that no information was gathered about those individuals, but that a determination regarding their intellectual, criminal, moral, or health status could not be made. Still, Goddard asserted, "They are people we can scarcely recognize as normal; frequently they are not what we could call good members of society."²⁷⁴ The oral histories gathered by Goddard's fieldworkers are presented in narrative format in a chapter titled, "The Data," and a subsequent chapter that translates the data into genetic pedigree charts is titled, "The Charts." This format gives the text the appearance of being an objective scientific study, even as Goddard's dramatic descriptions of 'the bad side,' such as "Old Horror" Martin Kallikak, Jr.,²⁷⁵ coupled with his fervent conclusions, indicate that *The Kallikak Family* is predicated on the long-familiar and understood declension narrative, rather than uncontested facts.²⁷⁶ Unlike

²⁷² Goddard, 19.

²⁷³ Goddard, 19. If Goddard's numbers of descendants is near accurate, 496 progeny from the 'good side,' were compared against 1,040 progeny from the 'bad side.' Given the reported economic disparities between the two groups, when one considers the birthrate and survival of the 'bad side' as twice that of the 'good side,' questions of overall health might be raised and considered as an indicator of genetic quality.

²⁷⁴ Goddard, 19.

²⁷⁵ Goddard, 19.

²⁷⁶ In considering Goddard's study, which is a product of its time and place, one must consider the oral histories of the families involved. 'The Good Side,' may have hidden tales of less desirable family members' traits, for instance. In addition, their health may have been better due to material resources and advantages that provided them with better food, shelter, and access to medical care. Goddard himself easily explains away potential aberrancies in the "good side" of the family's genetic stock. For instance, one member who may have been considered insane was merely a case of "religious mania" (30)

King Spruce, where such classes - - especially those with intellectual disability - - were permitted to remain, *The Kallikak Family* targets intellectual disability as a condition that is a serious threat to society and must be eliminated through containment: institutionalization and sterilization.

The narratives of the correlation between genetics and mental disability in New England that existed prior to Goddard's study provided a familiar discourse that, when enhanced with the appearance of science and Goddard's alarming predictions, struck a throbbing nerve in the New England mindset. While previous narratives may have offered some succor for an imperiled regional identity, the dire pronouncements made in the narrative of *The Kallikak Family* resonated strongly. Goddard's theory regarding the hereditary nature of intellectual disability and the concomitant threat such disabilities posed took hold throughout New England. In Maine, for instance, the residents of Malaga Island were forcibly removed and incarcerated at Pineland Hospital and Training Center in 1912, not only because of their mixed-race heritage, but also because they were considered "as near to being children of nature as it is possible for people to be who are only a stone's throw from the mainland and civilization."²⁷⁷ Fears of compromised genetics as the result of out-migrations of New Englanders to the west

and the cases of habitual drunkenness noted were "cultivated at a time when such practices were common everywhere" (30).

²⁷⁷ Holman Day, "The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast," 529. Merely evicting Malaga Island residents was not sufficient, for even the trace of that community needed to be expunged from Maine's history. In 1912, the remains of the ancestors of the residents were dug up and relocated to a mass grave on the grounds of Pineland Hospital and Training Center. Lottie Marks, a Malaga Islander who was removed to Pineland, repeatedly petitioned to be released. Despite her expressed desire to earn her own way, she was kept at Pineland because of her perceived threat to the general community: "She is a colored girl, now twenty-five yrs. of the moron type, or the type which is generally conceded to be the most dangerous to be at large, because of the marked tendency to become a source of social menace." For more information see Allen Breed's "No Longer a Reproach: The Story of Malaga Island," in *Maine's Visible Black History*, H. H. Price and Gerald Talbot eds., (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 2006).

in the mid-nineteenth century were compounded with the outbreak of World War I.

Again, a recognizable narrative re-emerged, this time lamenting the loss of New England men to the war and its effect on the region's "breeding-stock."²⁷⁸ In 1918, a Portland, Maine, newspaper warned readers:

Already there are not enough able-bodied and able-minded to do the communities' [sic] work as it was done formerly, and the dependents are not taking their places so well in our modern, rapid paced, high priced mode of living, as they could have done in the sixties...it behooves us of this generation to take thought for the future of our race and devise the wisest measures to prevent the increase of feeble-mindedness, the increase of which may be almost wholly stopped and that within a generation and without injury to any...Parenthood should be denied to those of such depleted or tainted stock that the descendants are sure to be dependents.²⁷⁹

New England, it seemed, could not endure the menace of poor genetic stock, which was now solidly, under the guise of "science," linked to mental disability. As such, New England embarked upon a singular direction towards containment and elimination, where it had once been undecided in its response to intellectual disability.

By the early 1920s sterilization laws for those with mental disabilities, as well as those with other perceived threats to society, were enacted. In order to identify those who should be subject to institutionalization, sterilization or both, various states created agencies to investigate and contain the supposed menace. In her study *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*, Nancy L. Gallagher examines the establishment and work of Vermont's Eugenics Survey and Commission on

²⁷⁸ Portland Evening Express, "The War and Our Dependents," February 2, 1918.

²⁷⁹ Portland Evening Express, "The War and Our Dependents."

Country Life, which were “devoted to Vermont’s Yankee Protestant heritage.”²⁸⁰ As early as 1925, the Vermont Eugenics Survey proposed to document and register ‘defectives,’ by identifying geographic “pockets of degeneracy” or “notorious families.”²⁸¹ Maine embarked upon a similar enterprise of identifying “retrograde” families and geographic sites of alleged degenerate communities.²⁸²

Eugenic or involuntary sterilization for individuals with intellectual disabilities was implemented by law in 1925 in Maine and 1931 in Vermont. Reports from Pineland Hospital and Training Center, Maine’s state-run institution for people who were considered poor, intellectually disabled, or socially-deviant, reflect the emphasis on sterilization as a necessary treatment for successful re-integration into the community.²⁸³ In particular, the report states that the “first and second most significant [indicators] were eugenic sterilization” for women, while for men, whether one’s father was “ethnically a Yankee of town background,” exceeded eugenic sterilization for effective re-integration and inclusion into the larger community.²⁸⁴ The reports contained significant detail regarding the individual’s extended family and their behavior in the community, which came from local officials and were used to admit individuals to

²⁸⁰ Gallagher, Nancy L. *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England), 1999, 7

Gallagher’s study includes Vermont’s effort to eradicate ethnic classes, as well as individuals with mental disability. For instance, a significant number of Abenaki (Native Americans) were sterilized. Franco-American communities were likewise targeted for surveillance.

²⁸¹ Gallagher, 73.

²⁸² William David Barry, “Retardation: An Assessment After One Year at Pineland Hospital and Training Center.” (Unpublished paper for the University of Vermont, on file at Maine Historical Society, 1972), 2.

²⁸³ Social and Rehabilitation Service: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Report on Project RD-1606P: Pineland Hospital and Training Center, Pownal, Maine – Biographical Supplement to An Investigation of Factors Contributing to the Successful and Non-Successful Adjustment of Discharged Retardates*, Washington, D. C., 1969.

²⁸⁴ Social and Rehabilitation Service, 33.

Pineland Hospital and Training Center. Eugenic sterilization was justified due to concerns that the “morally relaxed”²⁸⁵ home environments to which these individuals would return caused a breakdown in the community’s welfare and that such families would continue to drain public resources.²⁸⁶ Like Goddard’s study on the Kallikak family, New England states continued to apply a narrative of perceived hereditary deficiency and mental disability to long-standing concerns about regional sustainability in the guise of scientific reporting. Containment in institutions was one means to reduce risks to society, but sterilization was quickly adopted as a means to eliminate classes of people who were deemed marginal and therefore, a financial burden on society.

Writing in 1969, Dr. John Hoffman of the Pineland Hospital and Training Center stated that many of the individuals identified as “mentally retarded” were often associated with a lower socio-economic class.²⁸⁷ Hoffman asserted, however, that many working and professional class parents of children with disabilities had begun a movement toward identifying factors beyond heritability and class as possible causes of mental retardation. Nevertheless, he remarked that such efforts seldom met with much enthusiasm from the broader community. Parents who were understandably eager to diminish the social stigma now associated with intellectual disability were pushing against cultural beliefs that seemed to be supported by science – cultural beliefs that had evolved since the early twentieth-century and that now severely restricted or, in the worst cases, eradicated those who did not fit the New England ideal. In fact, to

²⁸⁵ Social and Rehabilitation Service, 51.

²⁸⁶ Social and Rehabilitation Service, 51.

²⁸⁷ Social and Rehabilitation Service, 51.

underscore this point, in 1971, Representative John Cottrell of Portland led efforts to expand the provisions that applied to sterilization of individuals with intellectual disabilities to cover all “low income persons.”²⁸⁸ Although Cottrell’s measure was defeated, it was not until 1982 that it became illegal to perform eugenic sterilization in Maine.²⁸⁹ As evidenced by literature and non-fiction, the discourse about genetics, mental disability, and class were firmly entrenched in the New England psyche for a significant span of time. Thus, as the mid-twentieth century was coming to a close, the declension narrative was not only an indicator of cultural meaning related to mental disability, it also was a catalyst for real social responses and restrictive policies in New England. As an ingrained trope for expressing regional identity, the literary figure with an intellectual disability could not avoid contending with the shift in New England’s response.

Late Twentieth Century Neo-Regionalist Texts:

Delimiting the Trope of Intellectual Disability in New England Identity

The texts of New England’s neo-regionalist authors followed in the wake of this long history of medical, scientific, legal and cultural posturing toward individuals with intellectual disability. Much like the local color texts of the late nineteenth century that emphasized the people, places, and customs of New England that were eccentric, quaint and dear, the neo-regionalists brought to the fore hard-scrabble New Englanders who represented realistic portrayals of New England’s underclasses in sometimes jarring responses to popularized and nostalgic representations of New England, such as those

²⁸⁸ *Portland Press Herald*, “Editorial: Another Controversy” March 2, 1971.

²⁸⁹ Maine State Law, Chapter 193, Sections 7008-7017.

found in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* or on the pages of *Yankee* magazine. Intellectual disability features prominently neo-regionalist texts as a means to culturally mediate concerns about individuals with mental disability and additionally as a means to reconsider regional identity and the ways it had evolved by the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Ernest Hebert's *A Little More Than Kin* and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, were published in 1982 and 1985, respectively.²⁹⁰ Situated in fictional small towns in New Hampshire and Maine, both novels utilize the narrative of families that appear to be antithetical to a literate, moral, competent, and self-sufficient New England. Just as the surname Skeet or Bushee came to be synonymous with being a member of the Misery Gore squatters in *King Spruce*, the fictional families of *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* were readily identified as a lower socio-economic class by a surname that doubled as a local epithet. Hebert constructed the Jordan family of *A Little More Than Kin* to meet the regional requisites of the declension narrative through its depiction of an underclass marked by hereditary anomalies and perceived aberrant social behavior: "'The Jordans are no kin of mine, no kin of yours, no kin of God almighty himself,' he said, 'They ain't even a family exactly, not like you and I think of as family, anyway. Just a collection of like-minded individuals...Course the blood bond is there, right from the line of Cain...'"²⁹¹ In doing so, the author not only marks the family as consanguineous and deviant, but also attempts to link their

²⁹⁰ Hebert's *The Dogs of March*, published in 1979 first introduces readers to the Jordan clan.

²⁹¹ Ernest Hebert, *The Kinship*, (Hanover, NH: University Press New England, 1993), 1. *The Kinship* contains the books *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Passion of Estelle Jordan*, which were previously published separately. They, along with *The Dogs of March*, are known as "The Darby Chronicles," in reference to the fictional town of Darby, New Hampshire, the setting of these stories.

supposed defective nature to the biblical fratricide of Abel at the hands of his brother, Cain. Their evil and sin, the text suggests, is intrinsic and displayed in the way they continue to live in opposition to commonly accepted social standards.

Carolyn Chute, in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, also constructs the Bean family at the center of the novel with a heavy reliance on the established discourses of a clan of poor, uneducated folk who tend toward violence, promiscuity and other breaches to civil order. The text continually re-inscribes associations between Bean family members and characterizations of the brute. Scarcely human, they are described as jumbles of body parts, burrowing creatures of the wild, and marked by their animalistic, cunning “fox-colored eyes.”²⁹² “To a callous eye,” noted one reviewer, “Chute’s characters appear as prime candidates for compulsory sterilization.”²⁹³ Lauded by many literary critics for its stark, unflinching portrayal of New England’s poor, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, nonetheless riled the public, particularly readers from Maine. Apparently, narratives of declension were so imposing, that actual Mainers with the surname of Bean quickly moved to dissolve any connection that might be made between them and their imaginary kinfolk. Drawing upon the Kallikak discourse of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ branches of a family, one Maine newspaper proclaimed that Chute’s Beans “were not L. L.”²⁹⁴ Referencing the founder of L. L. Bean, purveyor of high-quality, rugged outdoor apparel and goods, the headline locates the fictional Beans as the antithesis of Leon

²⁹² Carolyn Chute. *The Beans of Egypt, Maine. The Finished Version*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 30.

²⁹³ Prescott, Peter. “A Gathering of Social Misfits.” *Newsweek*, February 25, 1985.

²⁹⁴ Kries, Donald N. “These ‘Beans’ not L. L.,” *Portland, Maine Evening Express*, January 24, 1985.

Leonwood Bean's tale of a self-made man whose company would become known for its characteristic excellence.

Mainers like Chester Bean also defended their family lineage in the aftermath of attention given to *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. The 86 year-old, who still lived on the Bean family farmstead, located on Bean Road in Vienna, explained that his family was comparatively poor, but pious, "I had plenty of patches on my pants. Still all six of us graduated from Kents Hill. We were a respectful family. We always went to church on Sunday. Chester Bean went on to name various extended family members in reputable occupations: a lawyer, a doctor, a postmaster, a county commissioner and a United States astronaut."²⁹⁵ In 1985, eugenics discourse still held such power and sway that New Englanders felt the need - - and already had a prepared family dossier - - to preserve a family's good name and prevent any association with the "pockets of ignorance and stupidity and depravity"²⁹⁶ portrayed in fictional *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. Since eugenics discourse and the regional narrative of declension were so strongly associated with mental disability, it is no surprise that the families at the center of regional concerns in *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* have a family member with an intellectual disability. Using familiar discourse related to regional degradation, literary representations of intellectual disability through the characters of Willow Jordan and Merry Merry Bean provide a means to consider the textual use of mental disability in reconsidering New England identity, once again.

²⁹⁵ Kathleen Wagner, "Beans Aren't Flattered," *Portland Press Herald*, February 4, 1985.

²⁹⁶ Wagner, "Beans Aren't Flattered"

The character Willow Jordan in *A Little More Than Kin* is the son of an incestuous liaison between Ollie Jordan and his mother, Estelle.²⁹⁷ A young man who is mute and described as an “idiot,” Willow is cared for by his father. Similarly, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* introduces readers to Merry Merry, a middle-aged woman whose communication is frustrated by unintelligible utterances and is kept under the watchful eyes of Auntie K. and Auntie Hoover. Merry Merry’s parentage is unknown, but she has borne a son, Beal, who comes to represent the threat of his ilk in a changing New England.²⁹⁸ Willow and Merry Merry are constructed similarly in that they come from marginalized families who are not only poor in terms of education and material circumstances, but also noted for a dearth of kindness or positive affection toward each other. Willow and Merry Merry, however, are treated relatively better than other family members and with distinct fondness. For instance, in *A Little More Than Kin*, Ollie Jordan outfits Willow in a suit for no special occasion and admiringly exclaims, “Who says Willow Jordan ain’t sharp?”²⁹⁹ The sense of marginalization experienced by the Jordan clan, does not extend in any form of empathy for Willow and his needs. Although he receives no support from his family, Ollie advocates for Willow and his inclusion, stating, “He’s in the kinship same

²⁹⁷ Estelle Jordan was the local prostitute. Her story is covered in a subsequent book, *The Passion of Estelle Jordan*, which is part of Hebert’s trilogy, known as the “Darby Chronicles”. Readers are first introduced to Ollie Jordan and his two sons with intellectual disabilities, Willow and Turtle, in the first book of the *Darby Chronicles*, *The Dogs of March*. Interestingly, Turtle is neither present nor referenced in the other books.

²⁹⁸ Several reviews and critiques of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* allude to a potential improper relationship between the character of Earlene Pomerlau and her father, as well as the incestuous relationship between Beal and his Aunt Roberta. See: Lillian P. Davis, “Slumming in Maine,” *New York Times Book Review*, March 17, 1985, 32 and Bertha Harris’ “Holy Beauty or Degradation,” *New York Times Book Review*, January 13, 1985, 7. See also: Carolyn Chute’s “Postscript to the Finished Version,” in the 1995 publication of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine: The Finished Version*. Although Merry Merry bore a son, likely from a non-consensual relationship with Granville Pollard, there is no mention of public outcry regarding her apparent victimization.

²⁹⁹ Hebert, 49.

as him,” gesturing toward the young son of a relative. Similarly, while many of the Bean children are noted by their unkempt appearance and ragged clothes, the Bean aunties braid Merry Merry’s hair with colored elastics and “always take the time to fix her up with pretty ‘jewels.’”³⁰⁰ In addition, when one of the children calls Merry Merry “stupid,” Auntie K. admonishes, “No more calling her stupid. No *more*.”³⁰¹ Thus, the authors subtly advocate for social generosity toward individuals with intellectual disabilities while, at the same time, humanizing certain Jordan and Bean family members who convey concern for and tenderness toward Willow and Merry Merry.³⁰² Even so, the texts are challenged to overcome the powerful influence of New England’s declension narrative. As representational figures, Willow and Merry Merry also allow the texts to jostle with changes in regional identity and social transformations toward individuals with intellectual disabilities in the late-twentieth century in intriguing ways. In *A Little More Than Kin*, Hebert utilizes Willow to grapple with such concepts as ability, inclusion, and Yankee self-determination, while, in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, Chute employs Merry Merry to consider sexuality, biological function, and ultimately, eugenics.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Chute, 47.

³⁰¹ Chute, 38.

³⁰² The act of conscientiously dressing Willow and Merry Merry nicely might also be considered as a means to highlight the performative aspect of the literary figure of mental disability in these texts.

³⁰³ It is important to note here that there are two versions of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. The first one was published in 1985 and the second, known as *The Final Version*, was published in 1995. There are subtle, though critically important, changes to *The Final Version* that directly relate to Merry Merry. Interested readers should see the “Postscript to the Final Version” for Chute’s rationale for publishing a revised version of her novel. Although Chute explains why she felt compelled to write *The Final Version*, she does not address why she made the changes that relate to Merry Merry; she makes no mention of Merry Merry in the postscript.

The Beans of Egypt, Maine is divided into five sections. The first chapter in the section on the Beans is titled, "Merry Merry," indicating the centrality of the character of Merry Merry to the existence and relevance of the Bean family. Despite the central role that Merry Merry occupies in the cultural work of the text, her presence is noted in only thirty-five pages of the nearly 300-page novel. These glimpses of Merry Merry are nonetheless provocative as they consider the sexuality and biological capacity of individuals with intellectual disability, as well as their effect upon regional identity.

When the reader first encounters Merry Merry, she has been incarcerated in a tree house by her much younger relatives, and is pounding frantically against the wooden bars they are hastily constructing across all possible avenues for escape. "She's prizna! She broke the law!" exclaim the children.³⁰⁴ Merry Merry's crime is that she has soiled herself. "Anybody who pees theirself right in the road goes ta *jail*," explains one of the children, to which another replies, "And anyone who is the stupidest one around...big and stupid...goes here in this fancy jail!"³⁰⁵ Although Merry Merry lives among her family members, the "fancy jail" and its use seem to stand-in for institutionalization, which had been a culturally-sanctioned place for individuals with disability, particularly those with reproductive capacity. Indeed, as Merry Merry roams the Bean property, she is repeatedly contained whenever her ability to control her biological functions is compromised.

The most concerning biological function related to Merry Merry is her not her incontinence, but her acknowledged reproductive capacity. In order to stress the still-

³⁰⁴ Chute, 31.

³⁰⁵ Chute, 32.

extant cultural anxiety around intellectual disability and reproduction, Merry Merry has a pet rabbit, Whitey, which symbolically references her potential fertility. When Granville Pollard, who likely impregnated Merry Merry, returns after a long absence, it is Merry Merry who the aunties endeavor to control, not Pollard. After all, Chute explains, Merry Merry “doesn’t always have a good hold on this rabbit.”³⁰⁶ At the same time, the author nudges the reader toward an exploration of sexuality and individuals with intellectual disability.

As the aunties are occupied by their soap opera, Merry Merry wanders from the house to the barn and releases Whitey from his cage. She then meanders to Pollard’s pallet of blankets, for even in a cold Maine winter, he has been banished to the barn. Rocking her body back and forth, Merry Merry plays gleefully with Whitey until Pollard returns. In one of the novel’s few scenes of tenderness, Pollard kneels in front of Merry Merry and gently rolls one of her long braids in his hands. “Gettin’ gray,” he remarks, eliciting a smile from Merry Merry. Pollard continues, “Me, too...goddamn it. Ain’t it a pissah!”³⁰⁷ Merry Merry’s presence on Pollard’s bed could be construed as an invitation for sexual activity. In addition, unlike the other characters in the novel, Pollard does not treat Merry Merry like a child; in the same scene he acknowledges they are both growing older. He speaks to her like an equal, even if coarseness dots the conversation. Still, there is the intervening white rabbit between them, serving as a reminder of the potential consequence of sexual intimacy. Exasperated, Pollard drops Merry Merry’s

³⁰⁶ Chute, 47.

³⁰⁷ Chute, 48.

braid and proclaims, "I don't even *like* you no more."³⁰⁸ The statement implies that Pollard may have once had some genuine feeling toward Merry Merry. The competing imagery frustrates attempts to clearly interpret this scene with a definitive position on the sexuality of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Although there is an intimate quality to the exchange between Pollard and Merry Merry, it takes place in the barn, calling upon old associations of individuals with mental disability, deviancy, and animals.³⁰⁹ It also raises the question of whether Merry Merry has the cognitive capacity to consent to a sexual relationship.³¹⁰ Certainly, Chute is wrestling with changing societal attitudes in the 1980s toward individuals with intellectual disabilities and their right to sexual expression, marriage, and parenthood.³¹¹ Nevertheless, the text continues to underscore cultural anxieties about the reproductive capacities of those with intellectual disabilities and perceived threats to regional identity. Thus, the continued proliferation of the literary figure of mental disability as an effective means to express regional identity is called into question.

³⁰⁸ Chute, 48.

³⁰⁹ In *A Little More Than Kin*, the text attempts to elevate the status of the barn to a home while simultaneously questioning other social institutions: "Barns were pretty places, full of old wood beams intimate with one another, like so many fellows drinking together. Barns were comfortable places. You could put your feet up, scratch your ass, spit, holler, and nobody would think of complaining. Not like a hospital. No sir. In the hospital, they made you wait and behave like children in school, which to Ollie was another horrible place," 168.

³¹⁰ The barn scene between Merry Merry and Pollard mirrors the first sexual encounter between Earlene Pomerlau and Beal Bean, which many critics of the book decry as a scene of rape. In "Chute Dialogics: A Sidelong Glance from Egypt, Maine," *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, (2005), pp. 1-22, Katherine Adams cautions that Earlene neither consents nor resists Beal, suggesting a lack of agency. Similarly, Merry Merry appears to neither consent nor resist Pollard; she smiles, she laughs. As an individual with intellectual disabilities, she, like Earlene, also lacks agency. Merry Merry's unintelligible utterances bolster the text's inability to clearly articulate Merry Merry's viewpoint and therefore, spirals into indeterminacy.

³¹¹ Susan Hocter. "The Mentally Retarded Person's Right to Sexual Expression, Marriage, and Parenthood." Independent Writing Project, University of Maine School of Law, 1980.

Although Chute seems to champion New England's rural underclass, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* can also be read as a text that continues to advance eugenics theory. This alternative reading is particularly interesting considering that the novel was published during a time when eugenics, as a science, had fallen out of favor, and when individuals with disabilities were beginning to advocate for social inclusivity and their civil rights. Throughout the text, Merry Merry follows the familiar historic trajectory of the mentally othered. Early in the novel, the reader surveys the Bean clan in the midst of their Thanksgiving Day observance. Chute's choice in depicting this holiday takes on special meaning due to its rootedness in New England culture. The Bean family Thanksgiving, however, subverts the carefully crafted images of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Norman Rockwell. The traditional trappings of a New England Thanksgiving are present: turkey, stuffing and squash -- but there is no homey scene of a family bowed in prayer over the domestic bounty. There are not enough chairs for all of the Beans and some eat propped against a wall, while others plop on the floor. Their table manners are questionable, with the patriarch Pip, pawing at his food and turning the conversation toward sex. Amidst all of this is Merry Merry, who is, during this family gathering, treated with a deference not extended to other family members. Not only does she have a chair, but it also has "both arms and a cushion."³¹² When an argument during the Thanksgiving meal turns violent, Merry Merry remains nonplussed, flicking her hands about the turkey carcass. Everyone watches her hands in dumbfounded

³¹² Chute, 38.

silence, marveling at the “reflex none of them can make heads nor tales of.”³¹³ This scene recalls Michel Foucault’s assertion that the mentally othered were once treated with special affection when they were part of their communities, much as they were considered to be during colonial through early nineteenth century eras in New England. Indeed, Merry Merry’s curious hand gesture that mesmerizes the belligerent Beans also supports Foucault’s position that the ‘unreason’ of the mentally othered was not the absence of reason, but “reason dazzled,” and therefore possessed an ability to convey some mysterious truth.³¹⁴ As eugenics theory took hold, however, individuals with mental difference were removed from their once supportive, tolerant communities, and contained and marginalized in almshouses, hospitals and institutions.

Throughout Chute’s novel, Merry Merry is confined in various ways due to her reproductive capacity and her inability to control her biological functions. Additionally, the text advances eugenics arguments when Chute describes Merry Merry’s son, Beal, as “slow” in his adolescence.³¹⁵ The label comes from within his family and indicates that marginalized communities also bought into the connection between heredity and intellectual disability as much as the general population. Merry Merry disappears from much of the text after her encounter with Pollard, and Beal begins to figure more prominently in the narrative. Beal does not appear to have an intellectual disability, but he has little use or regard for public education. An alcoholic who fathers children out of wedlock, he struggles with maintaining employment, and is prone to violence. Beal’s

³¹³ Chute, 43.

³¹⁴ Tremaine, Shelley. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 2005, 135-137.

³¹⁵ Chute, 51.

children appear to be following in his footsteps. *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* underscores the traditional New England narrative of declension in its construction of Merry Merry and her descendants, through familiar eugenics discourse.

Due to her intellectual disability, Merry Merry has had little agency in the events that have unfolded. Still, the author holds her accountable as the vehicle for perpetuating the declension narrative. After disappearing from the text for nearly 200 pages, a brief and unexpected mention is made about her welfare. Abruptly, the aunties place her in the state institution because she has been found wandering again. Although this complies with the traditional narrative of New England declension and the need for containment of undesirable individuals or populations and their perceived threat, it comes at an odd time in New England given the contemporary political movement to integrate people with intellectual disabilities or mental illness back into the community.³¹⁶ Even as the historical reality in New England for individuals with intellectual disabilities was shifting toward inclusion and respect for their humanity, the narrative of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* demonstrates how deeply rooted fears of declension were and appears to advocate for containment and elimination of those who might perpetuate the narrative. Therefore, Merry Merry is committed to institutional care at the same time the system was being publicly condemned for abuses and

³¹⁶ For an example of this, see Blatt & Kaplan, *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay in Mental Retardation* (Syracuse, NY: Human Policy Press, 1974). This photographic essay documented the deplorable conditions of institutions for people with mental disabilities at The Seaside in Connecticut. It was first disseminated in 1966 to parents, community leaders, legislators and policy makers. The book became a catalyst for de-institutionalization. See also Richard Kimball's *Pineland's Past: The First One Hundred Years* (Peter E. Randall, Publisher, 2001). Poor conditions and allegations of abuse led to Pineland Hospital and Training Center in Maine to be taken under federal receivership in 1976, prompting Maine's transition of individuals with disabilities to more inclusive community living situations.

deplorable conditions. Following this line of analysis, Merry Merry's potentially dangerous son, Beal, also cannot be permitted to survive. He is summarily killed in a violent shoot out with law enforcement as he rails against the encroachment of the new middle class and wealthy landowners upon land previously occupied by the Bean clan. Whereas earlier texts such as *King Spruce* accommodated individuals with intellectual disabilities by allowing them to remain on the landscape or within the narrative of New England, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* does not. Inferring the possible aim of the cultural work that *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* may be attempting to undertake through the treatment of Merry Merry as a literary figure is complicated and perhaps better considered alongside the literary figure of Willow Jordan in *A Little More Than Kin*.

Appearing in 1982, *A Little More Than Kin* is historically contemporary to *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*; the movement toward increasing the social worth of individuals with disabilities and including them within their communities, rather than housing people with mental disabilities in institutions had begun. Still, in Hebert's novel, Ollie's estranged wife implores him to "shuck off the burden of his son."³¹⁷ Similarly Estelle, mother to both Ollie and Willow, advises Ollie to "give him [Willow] to the state."³¹⁸ Ollie Jordan realized, however, that the love he had for Willow was "an instinctive, brainless duty, the human equivalent of a salmon swimming upriver to fertilize some eggs and die."³¹⁹ The text describes Ollie as a man disdainful of nine-to-five jobs, regular meals, and people who tried to order their lives in space and time. Nonetheless, he

³¹⁷ Hebert, 13.

³¹⁸ Hebert, 29.

³¹⁹ Hebert, 13.

unquestioningly accepts responsibility for Willow, which he believes is his alone. In fact, after a brief encounter with a woman from the Welfare Department, Ollie travels with Willow to the remote wilderness outside of Darby known as Niagara Falls Park to prevent Willow from falling under the jurisdiction of social services. There, Ollie builds an encampment, which he dubs, "St. Pete's," and constantly frets that he and Willow will be discovered by the Welfare Department.

Willow appears to adapt well in the wilderness. Without any direction, he creates a bed of boughs and forages for his own food. While these depictions suggest an intrinsic animal-like nature to Willow, they also highlight his abilities. Ollie, who has always been suspicious of "the culture,"³²⁰ comes to believe that he has done right by his son, who was not appreciated among the Jordan kin, let alone common society. As Willow becomes more self-sufficient in the woods, Ollie became "more convinced than ever that his role in life was to keep Willow out of the hands of the Welfare Department,"³²¹ and the control of social institutions. In Ollie's estimation, Willow was pure in spirit, which was reflected in his bodily cleanliness. Although Willow was often disheveled from cavorting in the woods, he nonetheless was clean – so clean that Ollie "could swear he smelled Ivory soap on the boy, but of course, that was impossible."³²²

The text reveals, however, that Willow's clean scent was not the product of Ollie's imagination or wishful thinking. Willow had taken to visiting the Widow Clapp's farm where, in exchange for performing chores, she provides Willow with produce from

³²⁰ Hebert, 30.

³²¹ Hebert, 74.

³²² Hebert, 118.

the garden, eggs, baked goods, an alternate place to sleep and regular baths. Willow brings the vegetables and eggs to share with Ollie at St. Pete's. The goods are always of the highest quality and Ollie believes that again, natural instincts are responsible for Willow's ability to provide for both of them, even if, as Ollie surmises, the provisions are pilfered from nearby farms. Willow may have an intellectual disability, but the author continues to demonstrate and highlight his ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to develop self-sufficiency. In working for the Widow Clapp, the notions that Ollie has of Willow being a primitive form of humankind are likewise challenged. In the ways he helps the Widow Clapp to maintain her home, Willow demonstrates a certain malleability to the domestic sphere and underscores his ability to be integrated as a contributing member of society. Hebert utilizes the figure of Willow to consider the duality of his perceived untamed and domesticated potential and thence to merge them into a coherent whole. In this way, the text more fully humanizes individuals with intellectual disabilities.

A Little More Than Kin appears to be offering a prescriptive to the harsh effects of the eugenics argument and positioning itself to advocate for people with mental disabilities to be considered as individuals with talents and flaws, much like people without identified disabilities as understood by New England culture. Still, perhaps harkening to earlier conceptions of mental disability as a marker of a wholesome, uncorrupted nature, *A Little More Than Kin* tends to imbue Willow with an appreciable aura. The Widow Clapp reveals that in her old age she was "delivered a boy like a

woman dreams of.”³²³ In addition to working on the farm, Willow carved Widow Clapp small items or shared with her “gifts” from the forest. Indeed, it was Willow’s simple gestures and peculiar presence that made Ollie recognize his own smallness and in doing so, he understood that wherever Willow went, others would “want to kill him out of jealousy for the purity of his expression and out of fear for the power of his strangeness.”³²⁴ Therefore, the text asserts that Willow might occupy a preferred, perhaps even revered, place within the regional narrative. Like the text’s consideration of Merry Merry, Willow’s activities and ways of interacting with the world are so incomprehensibly unusual that they are cherished. Rather than directly correlating mental disability with a lack of logic, *A Little More Than Kin* suggests that the inner-workings of Willow’s mind may be unfathomable, but that his expression of being is certainly indicative of a way of thinking or knowing that is beyond qualification and represents reason dazzled.

Near the end of the book, Widow Clapp explains how Willow repeatedly tried to warn her of some impending danger through hand signs and a strange wooden object; she could not decipher his communications. Indeed, this portended the dire outcome for, in spite of the rather positive construction of Willow throughout the text, both he and Ollie unexpectedly succumb to a brutal New England winter outdoors. Frozen together like a statue commemorating those who cling together in fierce devotion, Ollie and Willow are unceremoniously buried in a nearby landfill. Their demise appears to be suggestive of the text’s attempts to quell regional questions about individuals with

³²³ Hebert, 205.

³²⁴ Hebert, 26.

disabilities and the long eugenics argument through their representational elimination and transformation into literal human garbage.³²⁵ As literary figures, the text seems to assert that Ollie and Willow are nothing more than the worthless refuse left behind by others. By extension, Willow and the trope of intellectual disability as an expression of New England identity appears to be irredeemable.

Conclusion

The textual eradication of individuals with intellectual disability, as represented by the characters of Merry Merry and Willow, appeared during a historical period in New England when people with a mental disability were being reintegrated into their communities. An overt interpretation of these two texts might suggest that New England culture was wrestling with this evolution and posturing toward opposition to the actual inclusion of individuals with intellectual disability within the community. At the same time, an alternate reading considering the long-standing connection between mental disability and New England's regional identity might also lend support to the assertion that mental disability had become an ineffective trope in the new era. Disabilities theorists, for instance, frequently question the interpretational validity of literary figures as some analyses may not fully account for the real, lived experiences of people with disabilities.³²⁶ The literary figure with disabilities *may* be read within the

³²⁵ It is also worth considering that the fluctuations in Ollie Jordan's mental state throughout the novel may be representational of mental illness, suggesting that Ollie is twice 'othered,' through his choice to live outside social norms and his potential mental disability.

³²⁶ See David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000) and Heidi Krumland, "'A Big Deaf-Mute Moron': Eugenic Traces in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*," *Journal of Literary Disability* 2, no. 1 (2008): 32-43.

political and social dimensions of its culture, but its symbolic potency may also extend beyond what is readily discerned. Therefore, interpreting the textual termination of Willow and Merry Merry as a cultural objective or recommendation for real people with disabilities, while suggestive of contemporaneous cultural apprehensions, appears to be fallible given the texts' historical milieu. Rather, given the long association between mental disability and regional identity, the fatalistic treatment of Willow and Merry Merry may be read more suitably as a mortal pronouncement on the trope of literary figures with intellectual disabilities within the declension narrative of northern New England texts.

Although these neo-regionalist texts employ the well-known declension narrative, constructing both the Beans and the Jordans as in-bred, marginalized miscreants who produced members with intellectual disabilities, they also place the Beans and the Jordans at the center of their texts, rather than at the margins. In doing so, the reader recognizes the undesirable attributes and behaviors typically associated with such populations unquestioningly. At the same time, the reader develops an intimacy with the family members and new knowledge about the socio-economic conditions that hinder the poor in New England, especially as this class rails against the onslaught of new mechanisms of control that are altering regional culture. In a *Little More Than Kin*, for instance, the constant threat of the Welfare Department keeps Ollie in a state of alertness that borders on paranoia: "These government people knew everything and they knew nothing. They were more dangerous than Christian

ministers.”³²⁷ Ollie’s remove to Niagara Falls Park is his noble attempt to avoid Willow succumbing to the control of social services and, by extension, any form of governmental authority. Similarly, the Bean family contends with the gentrification of their locality, represented as the intrusion of money and refinement of former city dwellers buying up cheap land and re-fashioning the community. Beal Bean, Merry Merry’s son, is antagonized by his new neighbors who erect a large, beautiful home with “big windows,” and “hardwood floors,”³²⁸ in addition to the “biggest, prettiest mailbox.”³²⁹ In protest to his perception that the new construction is mocking his poverty, Beal assaults the house with rounds of gunfire.³³⁰ In this way, the texts begin to question the right of society to impose values or standards of living upon such communities and, in an unexpected reversal, the Beans and the Jordans come to represent a class of New Englanders who steadfastly portray the old Yankee value of individual freedom. Within this analysis, the elimination of Merry Merry and Willow can also be interpreted as the region’s fading need to argue against the declension narrative. The New England of this era, the texts assert, can expand regional identity and lay claim to the poor and marginalized as symbolic of those who challenge prevailing norms through their resistance to social or political regulation. Therefore, the need to conflate regional identity with literary figures of mental disability dissipated as New England declension narratives gave new meaning to the impoverished and disenfranchised citizens. Once understood to be representative of regional degradation,

³²⁷ Hebert, 17.

³²⁸ Chute, 239.

³²⁹ Chute, 236.

³³⁰ The police arrive during Beal’s assault on the home. Beal does not cease firing upon the home and is shot to death by the police.

the figures of the declension narrative came to more emphatically represent a justifiable opposition to outside forces of control. Thus, the Beans and the Jordans become esteemed for their relentless attempts to retain sovereignty and subsequently, the need to argue *against* the declension narrative dissolved. Under this development, and interpretation, the literary figure with mental disability was no longer necessary to act as a locus for mediating regional exceptionality and identity. Therefore, Merry Merry and Willow are expunged from New England's cadre of effective tropes.

Even so, the reader is still left grasping at the meaning behind the ultimate demise of Merry Merry and Willow in the neo-regionalist texts. In part, this is because the fully understood significance of intellectual disability within the text is elusive. Neither Willow nor Merry Merry can speak for themselves. They attempt to communicate through hand gestures, undecipherable to their textual counterparts and to the reader. Their minds - - frames of reference, internal values, and the like - - are wholly alien to us. Merry Merry's hands move in a "reflex that is difficult to make heads nor tails of,"³³¹ while Willow tries to tell some tale through the use of an unrecognizable object. Yet, the long arc of regional identity and its relationship to literary figures with mental disability has infiltrated northern New England texts. Therefore, the expulsion of Merry Merry and Willow holds import, even if it is confounded or thwarted by the theoretical framework that is currently accepted. Stating that the circumscription of Willow and Merry Merry communicate an assumed impotence of the literary figure of mental disability to reconcile qualms about New England identity, while valid, does not

³³¹ Chute, 43.

account for a full consideration of the figure's complexity. The absolute alterity of Willow and Merry Merry also makes possible a supplemental interpretation that argues for the continued efficacy of literary representations of mental disability in the construction of regional identity. Regional identity is shaped by substance, the available material culture; but it is also shaped by the intangible, a feeling or sensibility that cannot be wholly expressed, nor definitively understood. The literary figure with mental disability may yet hold promise for understanding the construction of New England identity. Through Merry Merry and Willow, these regional texts also argue that the essence of regional identity can only be fully known when reason is dazzled, for its distinctiveness is an indeterminate truth delimited by the text's capabilities and beyond our worldly way of knowing. It may well be that literary figure of mental disability continues to be New England's triumph for representing regional exceptionality.

Conclusion

*Much Madness is divinest Sense –
 To a discerning Eye –
 Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as All, prevail –
 Assent – and you are sane –
 Demur – and you're straightway dangerous –
 And handled with a Chain –
 --Emily Dickinson*

Written in the mid-nineteenth century by New Englander Emily Dickinson, the poem “Much Madness is divinest Sense,” is a fitting way to close this thesis. While built upon cultural attitudes toward mental illness like the texts analyzed throughout the previous chapters, Dickinson’s poem can also be read as a meditation on literary interpretation and interpretational validity. “What really is insane, irrational, foolish, or absurd?” Dickinson asks, “To be ordinary or to be exceptional?” The proclivity for the use of the declension narrative and literary representations of mental disability in regional texts suggests that New England identity has been reliant upon the mutability of mental difference to answer that very question. Like Dickinson’s consideration of madness, this thesis demonstrates that there has been a resistance to one-dimensional or static construction of literary figures with mental disability in New England’s regional texts. Flexibility within the cultural meaning ascribed to mental disability in New England provided the region with a plausible literary figure used to consider challenges made to its perceived distinctiveness over time.

The declension narrative has generally been accepted as a significant factor in the construction of New England identity.³³² By association, literary figures with mental disability have often supported narratives of a degraded New England, as popular interpretations have been predicated on the notion that the region viewed mental difference as a debased form of human expression. Colonial New England's conceptions of mental disability did, indeed, acknowledge a difference between typical New Englanders and those identified as having a mental disability. However, an inclusive attitude toward individuals with mental disability also developed within the Puritan ethos. The Puritan viewpoint supported inclusion of people with mental disability into the broader community, affording them a certain respect. As the literary trope of mental disability was used metaphorically to communicate one's relationship with God, individuals with mental disability, while othered, were also incorporated as valued members and afforded a modicum of societal respect. Thus, as the narrative of regional exceptionalism began to be replaced by one of regional decline due to social and historical changes at the turn-of-the-century, northern New England texts could skillfully employ literary figures with mental disability to consider and put forth a rebuttal to discourse of regional degradation.

In "The Hereditary Barn," for example, mental disability is imbued with several competing attributes; it is atypical and, manifested as depression, may result in self-

³³² For more on New England declension narratives see Joseph A. Conforti. *Imagining New England*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 2001; Anne Myles, "Restoration Declensions, Divine Consolations: The Work of John Foxe in 1664 Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly*, (March 2007), 80(1), pp. 35-68; Robert Paynter, "Time in the Valley: Narratives About Rural New England," *Current Anthropology*, 43, Supplement: Repertoires of Timekeeping in Anthropology (Aug. - Oct., 2002), pp. S85-S101; Robert Pope, "New England versus the New England Mind: The Myth of Declension," *Journal of Social History*, 3(2), (Winter, 1969-1970), pp. 95-108.

destruction. At the same time, when comparing the assumed irrationality of generations of Joslin men with the superstitions and prophecies of the other villagers, the text not only challenges the legitimacy of the declension narrative, it also exposes the absolute constructed natures of both mental disability and regional identity, thereby rendering the declension narrative ineffectual. Rather than succumb to popular discourse of a denigrated New England, "The Hereditary Barn," uses the damaging discourse as a starting point to reconsider perceived threats through the multivalent trope of mental illness. In the end, New England identity triumphs as the text overcomes the narrative by transforming it to little more than neighborhood gossip. Still, despite such challenges to the declension narrative, concerns about regional viability dominated public and literary discourse.

When New England's pre-eminence was threatened as the West captured the nation's attention and became the vehicle for the discourse of freedom, re-invention, and unrestricted opportunities near the turn of the twentieth century, *Alexander's Bridge*, demonstrates how the imaginative locus of Boston and other strong characteristics associated with New England might also be used to counter the declension narrative. Through the characters of Winifred and Bartley Alexander, the author fashions a marriage between New England and the West. Fears abounded that the capable, entrepreneurial, and hearty folk of New England had fled to the promise of the West, leaving behind only the apathetic, ill and aged residents of the region. In order to counter this assumption, Winifred's good health and vitality are emphasized, as is her revered ancestral lineage, intelligence, and practiced restraint. Bartley, on the

other hand, is characterized not only by his creative and inexhaustible ambition, but also by his unspecified origins and his inability to control his baser instincts, which ultimately led to his demise. The textual construction of their marriage argues for New England's partnership and continued influence in the story of the nation's manifest destiny. Representative of New England, Winifred is construed as necessary to balancing out the unwieldy predilections of the West, as portrayed through Bartley. To be sure, Winifred admires and accepts all of Bartley's attributes; she, too, appreciates the exhilaration found in moving beyond prescribed norms, even as the text shows her constant effort to exercise control over her impulses. Thusly, *Alexander's Bridge* mitigates the narrative of regional decline not only by juxtaposing mental disability with Bartley and the West, but also by acknowledging New England's *potential* to derail, as inferred by Winifred's behavior. Despite Winifred's natural inclinations, her ability to maintain control and order of herself, and Bartley, promotes a belief that New England's inherent fortitude will prevail. In this way, *Alexander's Bridge* recognized the association between New England and the declension narrative; the text did not disassociate New England from the narrative entirely. Instead, it used other attributes ascribed to regional identity as an antidote to re-invigorate New England's perceived identity crisis.

Likewise, in *Katahdin*, Molly Spotted Elk effectively used regional declension narratives and tropes of disability to argue for the plight of the Penobscot in early-twentieth century New England. Penobscot understanding differed from Eurocentric views of disability in that disability was not necessarily the result of a cognitive or physical impairment. In contrast, the Penobscot viewed disability as a quality that

separated an individual from the larger group. Cruelty, avarice, or any other anti-social behavior might, in fact, be considered a more undesirable impairment than being lame or mentally ill. The traditional tales as re-told in *Katahdin* overlay Penobscot constructions of disability with mainstream New England constructions of disability. That is, understanding themselves to be disenfranchised from New England as a larger community, the text suggests that the Penobscot have been disabled and the author appropriates the conventions of regional declension narratives. At the same time, the relative acceptance of individuals with physical and cognitive impairments in Penobscot culture bestowed emotional strength and advantageous qualities to the literary representations of disability in *Katahdin*. Ultimately, *Katahdin* uses regional declension narratives and disability to align the Penobscot with New England. Therefore, the text claims Penobscot inclusion in the prevailing construction of regional identity.

The ethnic inferiority ascribed to the Penobscot and other Native American tribes in New England was also assigned to the rural underclass of the region. When eugenics evolved as a scientific field of inquiry and applied social policy in early-twentieth century New England, its proponents quickly seized upon familiar tropes of mental disability and declension narratives to advance their cause. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family*, although unveiled to the public as a scientific report, was, for all intents and purposes, a declension narrative. Not only did *The Kallikak Family* link mental disability to heredity, as had long been the unsettling concern of many New Englanders, it also associated all other forms of anti-social activity with mental disability. New

England's narrative of declension shifted ever so slightly to align itself squarely with the poor, ignorant, and marginalized, as well as those with mental disabilities.

Whereas the local color or regionalist texts of late-nineteenth century New England constructed literary characters in rural settings who were recognized for their oddities, their nostalgic and sentimental portrayals mildly rebuffed the declension narrative. In contrast, the neo-regionalist authors of the late-twentieth century who contended with decades of eugenic practice bolstered by the narrative of regional degeneracy, adopted harsh, fierce, and provocative characterizations as they probed at New England's identity. Placing "trailer park trash" and "shack dwellers" at the center of the texts, *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* embrace the declension narrative and populate the pages with shambling, inbred, miscreant families. Although the extended Jordan and Bean clan members are profuse, they each have one member with an intellectual disability. As literary representations of mental disability, the characters of Willow Jordan and Merry Merry Bean perform dual labor within the neo-regionalist texts.

First, they squarely address a variety of social issues facing individuals with intellectual disability during the historic period when the shame and gravity of eugenics policy came to light. As people with disabilities were provided more rights and the movement was made to reduce reliance on or to close mental institutions, the texts suggest apprehension about community reintegration, rehabilitation, social services, reproductive rights and the sexuality of people with mental disabilities. The elimination and containment of Willow and Merry Merry at the height of disability rights advocacy

in New England and throughout the nation is as alarming as it is perplexing. Given the protracted use of literary figures with mental disability in New England texts, however, this thesis demonstrates that they continue to perform cultural labor in the consideration of regional identity.

The declension narrative, as employed in *A Little More Than Kin* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, builds upon familiar tropes of New England identity through construction of the Jordan and Bean families. Although reprehensible behavior is frequently displayed throughout these families, Willow and Merry Merry are the recipients of somewhat more thoughtful conduct. In an unconventional sense, they are the revered characters of their respective texts. Their circumscription, then, seems inexplicable and suggests that New England has, indeed, met its fatalistic prophecies. At the same time, Willow and Merry Merry are mute; their attempts to communicate through gestures fail to result in understandings between them and the other characters in the texts. Although the texts reveal attributes that demonstrate their able-ness through performing labor or their reproductive capacity, their ability to think and communicate in conventional ways forcefully advances their othered status.

This thesis establishes that representations of mental disability in New England texts from the turn of the twentieth century to the late nineteenth century have resisted one-dimensional constructions. Willow and Merry Merry follow this pattern and hold interpretational validity in the cultural work of the region's identity construction, although textual constraints placed upon them suggest literary representations of mental disability may have reached their capacity to sustain New

England identity. The imaginative identification of literary figures with mental disability used so skillfully to negotiate the region's anxieties previously, however, transmuted into an absolute alterity too remote to be accessible for definitive interpretation and gestures toward the construction of a New England identity that is beyond the spoken or written word and exceeds the scope of common understanding. In this construction of mental disability, the text artfully recreates New England identity as something that is both nebulous and real, a manifestation of emotion that suffers when confined to the page and public discourse.

Despite its limits, discourse and interpretation is what is available to illuminate or resolve the meaning of cultural works. In considering an alternate, or perhaps more complicated, interpretation of the meaning behind literary figures with mental disability in northern New England texts, it is critical to acknowledge that the very presence of mental disability in the texts indicates that it is a signifier of cultural meaning within the region. It is not merely worthy of literary analysis because the trope has been prevalent for well over a century in regional texts. A richer and more complete understanding of how conceptualizations of mental disability have been used to create New England identity clearly demands it. The lack of fixity with respect to the regional construction of mental disability has opened up an alluring line of inquiry into factors used to create and comprehend New England identity. This thesis, however, is only a starting point for considering the influence of disability on regional identity in all of its complexity. It is a gesture toward other possible areas of interest in New England studies that are likely to

broaden understanding of the construction of regional identity through the ways that disability shapes, and is shaped by, its cultural products.

The limitations of time and scope necessarily meant that some texts were excluded from this analysis. As Dickinson's verse indicates, regional poetry would be another fruitful avenue to explore. Robert Frost's poem "A Servant to Servants," for example, is a hauntingly desperate piece told from the point of view of a once institutionalized woman caring for an insane brother-in-law who is locked in the attic of the family's farmhouse. "Her Kind," by Anne Sexton, vividly traces the steps of a wildly out of control woman in the woods, perhaps a witch, and may be attempting to consider mental illness in the context of the Salem witch trials.³³³ Like the texts considered in this thesis, these regional poems use mental disability as a signifier of mobility, restraint, and resistance based upon familiar cultural tropes and contestations regarding regional identity.

Among the most important texts to consider and include in a literary disability studies analysis, which are regrettably absent from this analysis, are those produced by New Englanders *with* mental disabilities. Lauren Slater's *Prozac Diary*, for one, recounts her experience with bi-polar disorder and a sense of her chemically-altered self once she begins taking Prozac. Notably, her autobiography repeatedly uses various images or phrases to link her with other New England writers, like Anne Sexton and Susanna Kaysen, who also had mental illness. Exploring the connections between gender, mental

³³³ Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Good Man Brown*, also related to his perceptions of the Salem witch trials, might be placed under the lens of literary disabilities analysis to excavate still other factors in the construction of regional identity and mental disability. *Good Man Brown* struggles with maintaining his reason and doubts his own perceptions after experiencing a moral failure.

disability and the role of cultural producer of regional texts may enliven understandings of the work of New England's literary texts and identity construction. More significant, however, would be to locate and analyze texts produced by ordinary New England residents who have mental disability. Places like Creative Works in Portland, Maine, and Spindleworks in Brunswick, Maine, now provide opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to create and publish their own literary works. Attempting textual analysis for the ways in which a sense of regional identity can contribute to one's identity as someone with a mental disability may produce insight into lived experiences of individuals with mental disability in New England past, present, and future. Literary analysis and interpretation of the work of these men and women is crucial for meaningful consideration of mental disability and regional identity, in addition to providing equitable consideration and validity for their voices to be heard alongside more prominent authors. Many possibilities exist to extend analysis of the reciprocity between mental disability and identity in New England's texts.³³⁴

Interest in the field of Literary Disability Studies, likewise, continues to grow and will doubtless hone disability theory, as it turns an inward eye to critique current analytical models and to offer new perspectives for the literary interpretation of disability. This is no longer a nascent period for literary disability studies, it is a moment of expansion and lucidity. For example, in a foreword to *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse and Disability*, (2012), disabilities scholar Lennard J.

³³⁴ Other cultural products such as New England's visual art, public art, and architecture, when considered through a disabilities studies perspective, also have capacity for informing the development and construction of regional identity.

Davis described the book's publication as a seminal moment in literary disabilities studies. The first of its kind, the book is a collection of essays that analyze *Jane Eyre* from a variety of disabilities studies perspectives. Furthermore, while several literary journals such as *Texts and Performance* and *Critique* have printed articles in the past that analyzed texts through a disability studies lens, more recently, interest in the field has generated a new journal dedicated to the study of disability in literary texts. The *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, issued from Liverpool University Press, was founded in 2006. Its director, Dr. David Bolt announced that he will be editing *Literary Disability Studies*, the first in a series of books dedicated to the exploration of literary topics from a disabilities studies perspective; it will be published in 2015. The current movement, organization, and exploding interest indicates that literary disabilities studies has become established as a valid field of academic inquiry with much to offer in understanding culture and humanity. The existing interpretations of New England's literary texts and disability, as well as the conversations about the cultural work of such texts in the construction of regional identity, will benefit greatly from the energy and progressive theoretical application that will no doubt be forthcoming.

Afterword

At this moment in the history of the United States, it is easy to be dismissive of cultural studies in general, and by extension, disabilities studies, if one is not an academic. The radical political and social foment that created the milieu that birthed cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s and led to the identification of, lines of questioning around, and attempts to dismantle oppressive social structures is often perceived as having largely accomplished its aims outside of academic study and discourse. My own desire to enroll in the ANES program at the University of Southern Maine reflects a similar attitude. It was, after all, meant to be an escape from the present day with an unacknowledged belief at that time that cultural studies, though important to an understanding of ourselves, was an esoteric discipline. The interdisciplinarity that is at the heart of cultural studies, which includes accounting for lived human experience in all its diversity, lacks the objective, compartmentalized trend for identifying a 'problem' or need and then proposing solutions with projected outcomes that have quantifiable results. Today, these are the respected indicators for success or progress.

I'm experienced in using the framework of logic models in a variety of venues meant to address social or educational issues: seeking funding for non-profit organizations, designing individualized instruction for students with special education needs, or seeking legal redress for people with disabilities. The rationale for most of the proposals is gleaned from research, especially in special education, where educators and public schools are legally required to base instruction on scientifically validated methods

and outcomes in relationship to standardized indicators. However, the foundation for much research is seldom scrutinized for the cultural influences and assumptions that drive it. That's where cultural studies illuminates a myriad of underlying motivations. But cultural studies is messy by contrast, and more frequently extends lines of questioning rather than offers of streamlined solutions. As such, culturally-approached disabilities studies³³⁵ is deemed an unreliable or invalid means for arriving at practical applications in our day-to-day undertakings.

For example, in order to become a certified special education teacher in Maine, I am required to take courses with a specific number of credit hours in topics like instructional methods and psychological or medical conditions, which are considered to be disabilities; there is no requirement for completing coursework in the history or law of special education, nor for analyzing societal attitudes toward students with disabilities. To be sure, there have been cursory references to historical milestones, but they are seldom plumbed for the variety of cultural assumptions and aims that lie at the base of all decisions made in special education. Little to no weight is given to cultural studies approaches in the professional development of special educators.

In Maine, all educators are required to develop professional plans that identify goals intended to improve our effectiveness. As part of my recent plan, I included completion of this thesis. In my current school district, teachers consult with building principals about their plans. Through collaborative discussion, principals offer suggestions and approve the plan. After a thorough explanation of my thesis, my

³³⁵ There is a distinction between disability studies as a cultural study, which has been the approach of this thesis and disability studies that focuses on disability from an educational, legal, and medical category.

principal would not permit it to be one of my professional goals. He said it sounded, “neat,” but did not see how it would improve my effectiveness as an educator, especially because it didn’t involve teaching methods or instructional practice. In short, while a cultural approach to disabilities studies helps me understand a range of influential factors in the construction of disability and the culturally-mediated responses of how we choose to educate students with disabilities, the fact that it isn’t likely to directly improve a student’s scores on standardized testing or achieve a desired outcome identified in an individual education plan (IEP), it was deemed irrelevant to my professional growth and usefulness to my school. A recent experience, however, highlights the persuasive power of cultural narratives about identity and disability; it has been important and useful to my work as a special education teacher.

My official teaching designation is ‘Autism Resource.’ This means that I provide case management for any student in my junior high school who receives special education under the category of Autism. I also write and implement behavior plans, co-teach in general education classes, and provide small group or individualized instructions. One of my favorite quotes from a special education colleague is, “I always say if you know one person with Autism, well, you know one person with Autism.” That means that I necessarily need to understand and approach each of my students as unique individuals and to be flexible to their educational needs. Due to this, I am sometimes consulted about or become responsible for students who do not have an Autism diagnosis, but who present challenges to other educators. Several weeks ago I

was pulled into an informal conversation amongst a group of general education teachers who constitute a team providing education to one such student.

I had worked with the student the previous year and knew him well. While he had learning disabilities related to expressive language and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), it was most often a high-level of anxiety resulting from his own observations that he was not performing like his peers in educational settings that impacted his performance. He also exhibited extremely entrenched avoidance behaviors to hide his insecurity about his perceived intellectual abilities. Conventional ways of demonstrating his knowledge, especially through writing, often led him and his teachers to conclude that he was intellectually incapable of doing the work. In addition, his behaviors were challenging and disruptive, particularly because he could not positively self-manage his anxiety. His current team of teachers were questioning whether he should continue to be educated in the general education setting.

When I was called into the impromptu afterschool meeting, the other team members had been pouring through the student's cumulative file. In it were various academic and psychoeducational assessments, which were required to qualify the student for special education services. The team's question to me was, "doesn't this Full Scale IQ (FSIQ) number mean he is retarded?" I explained that the FSIQ fell within the range of what would be considered mild intellectual disability, but pointed out other subscores that ranged from 'below average,' to 'average,' and some to 'above average.' In addition, the entirety of the psychoeducational report indicated the student to be within most norms and that the FSIQ had dropped 10 points from the previous

assessment cycle. The examiner's recommendation was to interpret the FSIQ with extreme caution because it was inconsistent with the majority of other assessment scores. In addition, the examiner suggested that the student's observable level of anxiety may have been a factor impacting the reliability of the FSIQ score. I emphasized that my experiences with the student during the previous year would lead me to conclude that he was at least of average intelligence, but that his disabilities did significantly impact his ability to learn. I made some recommendations to the team about how assignments or approaches might be modified to improve the student's ability to be successful, especially behavioral support for managing his anxiety. Still, the team was unsatisfied.

The overwhelming evidence in the student's cumulative file that the student did not have an intellectual disability was not sufficient for accomplishing the unstated objectives of the team. Before I go further, it's important to pause here briefly to state that this team is comprised of intelligent, thoughtful, energetic and compassionate educators; among them is a parent of a child with Autism. I enjoy a respectful and supportive relationship with each of them individually and as a whole. Their tenacity in focusing on the FSIQ score was surprising, however, especially given my prior collaborations with the team. When my explanations about the student's apparent intelligence and assessment results did not suffice, the conversation shifted and it became clearer to me.

One of the teachers said, "He says his mom didn't finish school. Isn't she...I don't know how to say this, but isn't she retarded?" There it was, the 'ah ha' moment for me.

This student was dominating their time and exhausting them as a group, while showing little in the way of demonstrable academic progress. If the student's FSIQ and other numeric indicators weren't going to relieve the team of being responsible for his lack of progress, then maybe genetics would. Genetics, after all, is beyond the influence of classroom teaching. However, the conversation didn't rest at the possibility of the student having an inherited intellectual disability, it quickly extended into questions about the student's family and socio-economic status: What does dad do for a living? Does he work at all? Does mom work? Check the file to see if he gets free or reduced lunch.³³⁶

Since I worked closely with the family the preceding school year I was able to say: Dad did work. He was laid-off and is attending college. He has stated that this is partially motivated by his desire to be a good example for his son. Mom talks openly about her difficulties with reading. She bought a tablet so she can download audio-books. She had expressed that this was a means to show her son different ways to be a good reader and to not give up. He does not receive a free or reduced lunch. His parents may not be sophisticated, but they were responsive to every phone call I made or meeting I arranged. They advocated for their son's needs, which they understood extremely well, and made it clear that they wanted him to be held accountable for his behavior. As my response didn't align with the narrative linking intellectual disability, genetics, socio-economic status and familial behavior that eschewed cultural norms, it

³³⁶ This is not to say that socio-economic status is not a contributing factor in a student's ability to be successful in school. In fact, it is acknowledged that students of lower socio-economic populations face obstacles that impede their academic success. When those obstacles are removed or lessened, students tend to perform better. However, directly linking socio-economic status to disability and genetics is based upon invalidated assumptions, which can be connected to declension narratives, as this thesis suggests.

frustrated the team. The conclusion we were left to make in the face of this anecdotal evidence was that we were working with a student who needed intensive supports and inventive instruction. It requires a significant amount of time, energy, patience, and clever use of resources, but collectively we are helping the student to make incremental progress. More importantly, the student isn't being relegated to a classroom corner where little is expected of him or in a self-contained classroom where he cannot benefit from grade-level curriculum. I am constantly aware, however, that the narrative is still lurking in the minds of my colleagues.

In various expressions, the declension narrative of New England's degenerate families and mental disability persists among my special education colleagues, as well. There are infrequent comments made about second-generation special education students (often compared to generational welfare), concerns about the potential for these students to pro-create, and on one occasion, referring to particular family as 'The Beans,' an allusion to Carolyn Chute's novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. The literary representation of disability persists as a powerful influence over educational and social responses; the narrative of declension and disability continues to perform cultural work, which is so familiar and popularized that it escapes notice or critical evaluation in many of our day-to-day lives. My sensitivities to that support me in advocating for a different response for my students and from my colleagues; it enables me to counter against prevailing assumptions that might result in disadvantaging an individual student or groups of students. There are many conscientious teachers employed by our schools. Requirements for completing training or coursework influenced by cultural or

disabilities studies would, however, improve professional awareness and provide benefit to students, school districts, and the families they serve.

Disabilities studies explore the centrality of cultural constructs that cumulatively contribute to the marginalization, disempowerment and, at times, exclusion of people with disabilities. A number of legal statutes protect people with disabilities from overt discriminatory practices, but it is societal perceptions that drive ideologies that continue to result in subtle biases that have the power to significantly restrict individuals with disabilities. As cultural objectives change, the potential for literary representations to support positive progress for people with disabilities is relatively unacknowledged in public venues, but it is, nonetheless, potent. We must be aware of how past and present narratives of declension, identity, and disability mediate our personal interactions with the concept of disability, as well as the policies and practices that issue from them. We must also be ever mindful to the perpetual work of improvising familiar narratives and literary representation for communicating unresolved tensions regarding disability, identity, and culture in our daily lives.

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