# Yearning toward Carrie Buck

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Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, Volume 8, Issue 3, 2014, pp. 335-344 (Article)

Published by Liverpool University Press

# Comment from the Field

## Yearning toward Carrie Buck

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That November day, Carrie had already been locked up for five months, her mother for four years. I read the histories, track the dates, trace the chronology. This story starts in so many places all at once. Starts with Carrie's mother Emma being arrested, deemed feebleminded, and committed to the Colony for alleged sex work. Starts with the Virginia state legislature passing the Eugenical Sterilization Act, which makes state-mandated and -coerced sterilization legal. Starts with Carrie being raped by a nephew of her foster family and becoming pregnant. Starts with her naming that nephew, calling him out as a rapist. Starts with her foster family, the Dobbs, reacting by declaring Carrie feebleminded and committing her to the same state institution that housed her mother.

It is 1924, and Carrie is eighteen. Three years later, her body—poor and white—lands in the U.S. Supreme Court as the judges decide the case *Buck v. Bell*. They declare compulsory sterilization laws constitutional, at which point the state of Virginia sterilizes Carrie and only then releases her. Emma, on the other hand, never gets out, dying at the Colony.

I, diagnosed mentally retarded in 1966, imagine, yearn, stretch toward Carrie, judged feebleminded in 1924. So many bodies have vanished into the whirlpool of history. Carrie, I keep waiting for the histories to mourn, rage, reach toward you, your body as solid as your mother's hand on your shoulder. Both of you look steely-eyed into the camera. You know the photo, you and Emma sitting outside at the State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded. I imagine Carrie's voice—poor, rough, southern. Imagine her head cocked. Imagine how she might tell this story.[1]

1. Whenever possible, I have anchored my imagination of Carrie's voice in what's known of the Buck family, including Carrie, her mother Emma, her daughter Vivian, her sister Doris, her brother Roy, and her first husband William Eagle. To fill in the many holes in the record, I've both fictionalized details based upon actual events and imagined wholesale the shape of Carrie's daily life. All of the other material in this essay closely reflects what is known about eugenics, sterilization, and anti-miscegenation in Virginia in the 1920s.

*Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8.3 (2014), 335–344
ISSN 1757-6458 (print) 1757-6466 (online)

doi:10.3828/jlcds.2014.26

*The news men come around now and again. They always want to know if I missed having children. Ask as if that's the only regret they can imagine. Oh, I got plenty of regrets, but kids are only one of many. Least I've not been a live-in for a long time. Swore when me and Billy got married, I'd keep my own house. No more sleeping in the butt cold back room of whatever cold-eyed missus I cooked and cleaned for. I liked being Missus Eagle.*

I find reams of information, dozens of portraits, a plentiful record of the eugenicists who engineered the case against Carrie—Albert Priddy, and later John Bell after Priddy's death, Aubrey Strode, and Irving Whitehead. They needed their sterilization law determined constitutional and so went looking for a case to take all the way to the Supreme Court. Have the historians forgotten? There'd be no story without Carrie's body.

The body as gristle
and synapse, water
and bone, pure empty
space, the body
as legal precedent.

Imagination becomes a kitchen table, formica yellowed and cracking. Carrie sits sucking hard candy. Keeps talking. Says: *I've seen those pictures. Hell, I sent that bastard Bell my wedding photo when he asked* ("Carrie Buck's Photograph of her Wedding"). *Mr. Bell, he was the big boss man at the Colony. I'd flat out refuse now, but back then Mama still lived up there, and me and Billy dreamed of bringing her to live with us. I thought playing nice with Mr. Bell might help my case. So I sent him that photo of us looking so fine, me grinning up a storm. Billy'd just run his hand through my hair, down my back. That man's hands could be so shockingly soft. We were silly happy that day. And up they went and just cut Billy out of the picture* ("Carrie Buck, from 'The Progress of Eugenical Sterilization'"). *Simply cut the photo in two. Threw out Billy's half. All they wanted was a photo of Carrie Buck for their precious little records. I hated their cameras, their files, their tests. They weren't even tricky, goddamn liars. Back then I thought I could leave all of the heartache behind by becoming Missus William Eagle.*

Aubrey Strode prosecuted the court case named after Carrie Buck and wrote the law under which she was sterilized. Irving Whitehead supposedly defended her. But really Colony superintendent and compulsory sterilization proponent Albert Priddy paid Whitehead for his services. And finally John Bell, the Bell of *Buck v. Bell*, was Priddy's successor, wielding the scalpel in Carrie's

sterilization. Yes, this was a conspiracy. The histories lavish details upon them; turn Carrie into a shadow, ghost, placeholder.

She keeps talking to me, quiet and intense.

*The newsmen never ask about Mama. I hardly knew her before I got to the Colony. I was taken away from her when I was little. Anyway, when I was locked up, my baby girl had been just born. Vivian was her name. I could still feel that Dobbs boy, Clarence Garland, his mean little hands at my throat. I was scared and mad. Mama knew, had been there too.*

*That damn place. Food was bad, beds worse, work harder than at the Dobbs but not by much. If I never scrub another fifty-gallon kettle, ladle out rancid broth, it'll be too soon. The ladies who run the wards could be mean as copperheads or mild as summer colds. When they took a hankering, they'd tie us to our beds, lock us down in the coal bins. But the absolute worst was the boredom, how we'd sweat pure body numbing blankness every damn day, no relief except to make a scene, then blame some imbecile who couldn't talk.*

But those well-funded white men, *their* bodies haven't vanished. Their ideas and legacies are alive and well. Charles Davenport masterminded the Eugenics Records Office with its wall upon wall of cabinets full of human pedigrees. Harry Laughlin lobbied hard for immigration quotas, miscegenation laws, wrote a source book called *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*, and won awards from the Nazis. Arthur Estabrook conducted fieldwork, drew thousands of pedigrees, published dozens of case studies, and testified against Carrie. They named some bodies good, others bad; worked to reproduce the good and dispose of the bad. History is a torrent shaped around them.

The body a spasm, a
chance, a near
miss, fragile as one
egg, one sperm.

*Buck v. Bell* landed in the Supreme Court, which is exactly what they all had planned. Those rich white men up on their bench ruled against Carrie, 8–1, no surprise. Only Pierce Butler dissented; he left no words for the record. On May 2, 1927, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote the majority opinion. History saved his voice for posterity:

> We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices […] in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. (*Buck v. Bell*, 207)

I let Carrie's voice ride over Oliver's. *Mama and me, we talked every day. We'd sit outside when they'd let us, side-by-side just like that day the court man came. Estabrook was his name. He drew those little pictures he kept calling pedigrees and asking all sort of stupid questions, making up some fool story bout Mama, me, and my baby girl. By the end we were so riled, just glowered at him as he pulled out his camera. I started cussing him out, til Mama lay a hand on my shoulder.*

But Oliver didn't stop. He wrote on:

> It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their own kind. […] Three generations of imbeciles are enough. (*Buck v. Bell*, 207)

Carrie, you of course were one of Oliver's three generations. His words have never been overturned. Sham, trickery, travesty—that case was never about protecting your body. I can almost see the word *imbecile* etched on your belly, each letter a thin line of scar. Trapped, hounded, desperate—you were released only after John Bell cut into you on October 19, 1927.

The body as gut
and bowel, hope
and dread,
literal trash

Carrie insists, her words becoming their own torrent. *We'd sit outside, and Mama'd just tell stories. Uncle Pete learning the fiddle. Cousins I never knew I had. Her loving to swim at dusk. She missed it so much, even after all those years locked up, couldn't bear looking at the James River that run behind that damn place. Hurt her not to be able to slip into the water, feel its current against her skin. They always tried to shame us by saying how us feebleminded girls weren't to be trusted. Yeah, I could tell you I wasn't really feebleminded til the cows come home, but that'd be a lie. They called all of us in there feebleminded, didn't matter whether a girl was an imbecile, a drunkard, or just plain poor.*

I trail the histories from Lynchburg, where Carrie was judged feebleminded in 1924, to the Oregon Fairview Home—known for decades as the State Institution for Feebleminded—where I was diagnosed retarded in 1966.

Carrie, how many of us become exactly who the doctors and judges, teachers and social workers, scientists and psychiatrists declare us to be?

I want a history that leans into Carrie's voice. She says: *If you weren't a bit funny when they dragged you into that place and you stayed awhile, you sure*

*turned out that way. By the time I got there, Mama was forgetting things, getting bitter quiet. That place just changes you bad. I've never been the same.*

So many records have been mislaid, forged, burned. If it hadn't been for that court case, Carrie wouldn't even be a placeholder in the histories. Instead, she would be a number, a lost detail, another poor white woman caught in the grind, locked up in a segregated white-only state institution. Two hours due east in Petersburg was the more crowded and less funded black-only Central State Hospital, called the Central Lunatic Asylum until the late 1800s. It housed African Americans deemed insane or feebleminded. I imagine the thousands of black women and men imprisoned there during the time Carrie was at the Colony in Lynchburg. I search for faces, names, stories, but haven't found a single one. I need to ask: in what ways did Carrie's whiteness protect her?

The body as symbol,
metaphor, academic
abstraction, the body
as history.

Carrie's voice, a slow strong drawl, pulls against the histories. She says: *I got no real idea if Priddy or Bell used his knife on Mama. She never said. I just assumed so, but they kept her. I was so happy to get out of there after Mr. Bell cut me. He was so vain about everything that happened up there in Washington DC, as if. The bastard. I was so sad to leave Mama behind. Left hoping to see my baby girl, get off parole, have Mama come live with me.*

Along with the Sterilization Act, the Virginia legislature in 1924 also passed the Racial Integrity Act, outlawing mixed-race marriages. As *Buck v. Bell* moved through the legal system, Virginia's head of Vital Statistics, Walter Plecker, an avowed white supremacist and rabid eugenicist, wreaked havoc with that law. He rewrote birth and death certificates, shredded marriage licenses, threatened interracial couples with jail. He made lists, tracked families, knocked on doors. He sorted bodies, shuffled bodies, categorized bodies as good and bad, valuable and disposable, white and colored. So many bodies surveilled, locked up, cut apart.

Carrie, in those long Jim Crow years, did you know folks who fled, resisted, caved under Plecker's demands? Chickahominy, Rappahannock, and Monacan families, Indians who he believed were pretending to be white; black people; dark-skinned immigrants; poor white women. Hell, Carrie, I wonder if you knew Plecker himself? Did he or his agents knock at your door, joining John Bell and his caseworkers in harassing you and your family?

Obsessed, Plecker wrote thousands of letters, shaming and threatening,

bullying and berating. He didn't care about controlling the sexual behavior of heterosexual white men with their long histories of raping black women. Rather, he targeted new mothers, midwives, babies he unabashedly classified as "mongrel." He told one mother, "This child is not allowed to mix with white children. It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia. It [this child] is a horrible thing" (Black 169). His words have carried through the decades.

The body
as ink on paper:
court order, medical
diagnosis, data
on file.

Carrie's voice reaches me steady, blunt, unwavering. She says: *The Dobbs got to keep Vivian, changed her name to theirs. I didn't even know when she died, eight years old, smart as a whip. That's what I heard when I asked around. I did get off parole thankfully, lucky me. They were watching all of us Bucks. I mean really watching us. They knew where we lived, who we spent time with, how we put food on the table. They harassed my sister Doris bad. She's younger than me by a couple of years. Bell had it out for her. Sent her up to the Colony soon after he let me out. She got the knife too. Later she'd tell the news men she didn't know, but we all knew. Some of us simply didn't have kids to feed, dress, put to sleep. It was a mercy and a grief. We all knew. But Doris, she wanted babies so bad. Every now and then she'd say to me, "If ever I find me a lawyer man, I'm going to sue the pants off those bastards." We'd laugh, but I knew she was dead serious. Good thing she never went back with her shotgun.*[2]

Walter Plecker and John Bell must have known each other. Imagination becomes a boardroom, back room, closed-door meeting. In 1925 Walter rants, "Not a few white women are giving birth to mulatto children. These women are usually feebleminded, but in some cases they are simply depraved. The segregation or sterilization of feebleminded females is the only solution to the problem" (Black 173–74). John agrees, nods, smiles. They both wait, eager for the Supreme Court decision.

Several years later, John tells Walter about finally operating on that Buck girl, never calling her by name. He shakes his head, moralizing, "[She] has a sister who was also delinquent; they come from a long line of defectives.

2. The conversation between Doris and Carrie is fictional, but builds upon the 1980 ACLU case action lawsuit on behalf of the people sterilized by the state of Virginia under the 1924 sterilization law. Doris Buck was one of the plaintiffs.

[…] Sexual delinquency is probably a thing that will have to be contended with for many years, unless she should find a suitable husband, and marry and settle down" (Lombardo 189). But he ends by bragging that after surgery "she was immediately returned to society and made good" (Lombardo 250). They are jubilant: state-mandated and -coerced sterilization finally legal and constitutional.

Carrie, history slammed into your body, an unyielding torrent. Did your bruises ever heal? Did you taste the bitter lack of children, those grim institutional years? Was sex without the risk of pregnancy a complicated thing, an enraged blessing?

The body
a grunt,
a wail,
a gust
of pleasure.

My imagination of Carrie may just be another placeholder, but even so, she continues: *I never got Mama out. Me and Billy could barely keep a roof over our heads. Billy worked himself to the bone, traveling and digging ditches, mucking out pig pens, hauling rock. His homecoming was always sweet. His hands grew rough, torn up, knobby, but still. He never brought much money home. I didn't care, liked him near. But for a good long time all I got for cleaning was my meals. Still we would've done anything to have Mama here. I wrote to Bell over and over. Really begged him. About a decade before Mama died, I wrote*: "Dr. Bell, I would just love to take my mother out for the winter. […] We will send her the money to come on and I will fix for her if you think she can make the trip alright. I am planning on sending her the money some time in September or October. I don't know for sure when, but as soon as I can get it" (Lombardo 215). *They might've released her if we could've ever paid her bus ticket.*

I keep reading this unyielding torrent called history. In the last decade, historians have discovered that Carrie wasn't *really* feebleminded; neither was Emma, nor Vivian. They're in uproar. They repeatedly use Vivian's report card—one A, three Bs, and one C—to prove their discovery (Lombardo 190). These details have become a revelation. Historian Paul Lombardo called his recent book *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*. He has uncovered many details, fitting this story together in a new way and conclusively establishing *Buck v. Bell* as a sham trial never intended to protect Carrie. But why is it so important to proclaim Emma, Carrie, and Vivian not imbeciles? Why are Lombardo and

other historians so surprised that the diagnoses of imbecile and feebleminded are political fabrications?

It might be comical if it wasn't so serious, so many lives hanging upon that single slippery word—*feebleminded*. Sex workers, immigrants, people of color, poor white people, people with psychiatric disabilities, people with epilepsy, so-called sexual deviants, blind people, deaf people, physically disabled people, unmarried women who had sex, effeminate men, prisoners, intellectually disabled people were all deemed feebleminded at one time or another. The list kept shifting over the decades, but the meaning of that word stayed the same—inferior, immoral, disposable. Eugenics declared feeblemindedness genetic; its followers firmly believed the material conditions of poverty and violence to be hereditary defects. Through it all, feeblemindedness drew its fundamental power from the hatred and fear of disability. But, tellingly, within their white, Western cultural framework, which draws a rigid distinction between body and mind and defines humanness through the mind, eugenicists leveraged ableist hatred and fear using the word and concept "feeble*minded*," not "feeble*bodied*." Intellectually disabled people became the metaphor, measure, justification for sterilization, immigration quotas, imprisonment, and long-term surveillance.

Carrie, recent historians seem to think the court case and your sterilization might have been less a travesty if you had been intellectually disabled. They want to believe in *real* imbeciles. I, diagnosed mentally retarded in 1966, imagine, yearn, stretch toward you, judged feebleminded in 1924.

The body
a live wire
singing fear,
hope, desire.

I listen to Carrie's words dappling through me. She says: *I knew Mama's health wasn't good, something about her heart. I didn't get to see her again. Roy (he's my baby brother) and me hitched down to see her after we got more news about her health. She'd already been dead awhile. Buried at that damn place, just the number 575 on her gravestone, though I hear tell of a new marker with her whole name, but I've never seen it* (Black 122; "Emma Buck's Grave").

There's another photo from 1982, just before Carrie died. She is seventy-six years old, living in a rural nursing home for poor people, staring into another camera. She looks nothing like her younger self, except for the same steely eyes, the same mouth set in the same forbidding line ("Last Photograph").

Carrie, doctors waited all over the country for your sterilization to be proclaimed constitutional, that court case slicing through decades of bodies.

Carrie stays stubborn, unbroken, ready. She says: *They come around with their cameras and microphones every once in a while, like I was some famous person or what happened is some fancy story. Sometimes I hear their cars pull up, and I just close the curtains. Holler* "Go away. I can't talk" (Franklin). *There never was a camera I liked but the one on me and Billy's wedding day.*

The body
as protest,
resistance,
everyday truth.

Beyond the histories, I imagine a congress of sterilized women and men—raging, fierce, grief filled. Puerto Rican women sit with Appalachian men. First Nations teenagers sit with self-described mad women. Disabled folks who have lived their entire lives locked away in state-run hospitals sit with southern Black women who know all too well the words *Mississippi appendectomy*, the meaning behind them. Women of color ordered by judges or paid to take Norplant sit with women tricked into signing tubal ligation consent forms. They won't be asking for apologies nor giving absolution, but rather holding remembrance, demanding reparation, planning revolution.

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