Revolution and Cure: Molyneux's Problem, Denis Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*, and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*

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ABSTRACT: This essay traces the influence of Enlightenment philosophy, specifically Denis Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*, on Royall Tyler's American novel *The Algerine Captive*. Focusing on the largely overlooked role of disability in the novel, I argue that *The Algerine Captive* reflects a medical and moral model of disability that draws on Diderot's representation of blindness as a biological defect and a moral lack. Tyler explores American anxieties over whether the new nation would survive the political divisions pervading the country following the Revolutionary War. While sympathy was touted as a means of unity by both political leaders and authors, Diderot's *Letter* and Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* reflect the view of blindness as a disruption to sympathy. I interrogate this framework to show how it promotes the necessity of medical and moral intervention to enable both sight and sympathy. According to the novel, sympathy, like sight, can only be achieved through proper training, by learning to "see" others, and the supposed equality and freedoms of America, correctly.

KEYWORDS: blindness; models of disability; cure; sympathy; American literature; philosophy

> Since of all the external signs that evoke ideas of sympathy and pain in us, the blind are only affected by the sound of suffering, I suspect them, in general, of being inhumane. What difference can there be for a blind man of a man urinating and a man shedding blood without a whimper? –Denis Diderot[1]

Royall Tyler's novel *The Algerine Captive* (1797) employs what Foucault identifies as the two fundamental tropes of Enlightenment philosophy: "the foreign spectator in an unknown country, and the man born blind restored to sight" (65). Thus, *The Algerine Captive* demands consideration of eighteenth-century philosophy as an important context for its narrative progression. This essay examines how Tyler's novel draws from Denis Diderot's *Letter on the*

[1] From Diderot's *Letter on the Blind [Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient]*, which appears as an appendix to Kate Tunstall's book *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay* with her own translation from the French. All quotes in this essay are from Tunstall's book.

Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See (1749) to investigate blindness and sight, nationhood and foreignness, demonstrating that the strength of the new American nation rests on Americans training their vision to see America correctly. Diderot's *Letter* addresses Molyneux's Problem, a thought experiment about how a blind man given sight would perceive the world. It consists of a dialogue between Diderot and an unnamed blind chemist from the small French town of Puiseaux, and the deathbed musings of blind English mathematician Nicholas Saunderson. The conversation between Tyler's physician protagonist in *The Algerine Captive*, Updike Underhill, and a blind man about to be cured resembles Diderot's talks with (and commentary on) the man from Puiseaux. More broadly, Tyler borrows from the instructive nature of Diderot's *Letter*; as the subtitle implies, the *Letter*'s exploration of blindness claims to convey useful lessons to the sighted about the nature of perception, experience, and knowledge.

Although the *Letter* critiques the pitfalls of ocular-centric ways of thinking, as Diderot scholar Kate E. Tunstall persuasively argues, the *Letter* and *The Algerine Captive* aim to guide readers how to see *better*, to see through informed and sympathetic eyes, rather than discouraging readers from relying on sight, or thinking of blindness as a valuable experience in and of itself. Both texts challenge the notion that blind people are pitiable, helpless outcasts. Yet the lessons in both depend on the limitations of blindness to make their points. In the *Letter*, blindness reduces people's capacity for sympathy and religious belief, while *The Algerine Captive* similarly argues that, though blindness does not totally preclude one from social life and fellow-feeling, it threatens one's ability to bond with others. The connection between sight and sympathy plays out literally and metaphorically, as the sighted Underhill learns how to look beyond surfaces and appearances—which can be misleading and divisive—through his encounters with blindness. These encounters enable him to "see" the suffering of others, to "cure" the tensions rampant in the new nation following the American Revolution, to see difference when it matters and look past it when it does not. Underhill's perspective reflects a particular discourse of unity circulating during the period, arguing that while Americans should be attuned to the suffering of others, they must also not let arguments—such as arguments over slavery—divide Americans from one another. Just as the man cured of his blindness must learn how to use vision, so the American citizen must

learn how to sympathetically bond with fellow white, ablebodied citizens to strengthen national identity.

I assert that Tyler's novel uses blindness to make this commentary on American citizenship by engaging what Disability Studies scholars call the medical and moral models of disability (Vehmas, Kristiansen, and Shakespeare 2), which during this period framed blindness as biological defect and moral failing. The conceptual frameworks provided by these models enabled authors such as Diderot and Tyler to interpret and understand blindness as a problem that needed to be solved. Furthermore, as problem-solving frameworks, the models shaped how texts such as *Letter on the Blind* and *The Algerine Captive* grapple with larger, unwieldly philosophical and political questions. In what follows, I discuss Molyneux's Problem, Diderot's take on it, and how Tyler borrows and revises salient details from Diderot. Then, I examine Tyler's novel more closely to reveal its linkages between sight, sympathy, and American citizenship. But first, I outline my use of the moral and medical models of disability, and why these models serve as useful frameworks with which to analyze both Diderot and Tyler's texts.

The Medical and Moral Models of Disability in the Eighteenth Century

In my reformulation of the moral model of disability, I describe it as demanding a moral response to disability, just as the medical model calls for medical action. Disability Studies scholars describe the medical model of disability as framing disability as a biological defect to be treated or cured (Berger 26). It also figures physicians as experts whose authority and paternalistic care objectifies disabled people for medical intervention through largely ocularcentric examination and diagnosis (Stone 105). Critics have less rigorously described the moral model of disability, although descriptions of it tie disability to sin or immoral behavior (Etter 11; Longmore 42). I find this description too limiting to explain the relationship literature forges between disability and morality. By "moral" I mean a response predicated on questions of right and wrong, duty and necessity, hierarchies and priorities of value. Like the medical model, the moral model often calls for a nondisabled person's intervention in the disabled person's life, including pity, charity, discipline, punishment, sterilization, and murder (Block and Friedner). But the moral response I deal with in this paper entails nondisabled people adjusting their behavior or attitudes after their encounter

with disability. I put these actions within the framework of a model because they all depend on larger discourses, systems, and ideologies such as religious belief, social customs, and political affiliations, which might be as abstract and broad as sentimentalism, Enlightenment philosophy, and Judeo-Christian thought, or as specific as the United States eugenics movement or the Muscular Dystrophy Association telethons.

Historians of disability claim that the moral model predominated in Western countries until it gave way to the medical model during the nineteenth century. Historian Paul Longmore sums up this generalized historical transition:

> It seems likely that in Western societies, until the early modern era, disability was viewed as an immutable condition caused by supernatural agency. In the eighteenth century a medical model emerged which redefined [disability] as a biological insufficiency amenable to professional treatment that could, if not cure, at least correct most disabilities or their functional consequences enough for the individuals to perform socially or vocationally in an acceptable manner. (42)

I want to put aside the specific claim that Western societies saw disability as "an immutable condition caused by supernatural agency" as too reductive. The salient aspect of Longmore's description is its contention that medicine replaced religion as the dominant institution defining disability, a claim historical overviews of disability often make but rarely explore in depth. As Longmore indicates, scholars usually trace the emergence of the medical model to the late eighteenth century. By looking more closely at texts from this time, I aim to show that rather than the medical model "redefining" or replacing the moral model, early medical model thinking drew from moral model thinking.

In American literature, disability was rarely portrayed primarily as a medical issue until the twentieth century, despite the increasing role of professionalized medicine in treating disabled people in actual practice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, early American literary critic Sari Altschuler argues that the first American novels do not use "'disability' as we understand it today at all; impaired bodyminds appear rarely, and when they do, early American novels do not dwell on or stigmatize them" (246-47). It was not until the 1820s when American novels began to mark certain bodyminds as "other" and "lesser." Altschuler explains that this was because before the 1820s, people with impairments were

integrated into their communities and lived with their families. Only when institutionalization became widespread, separating people with impairments from their families, did a construct of disability emerge in American novels (255). In short, Altschuler claims that during the colonial and early national period, Americans did not conceive of a distinctive binary between "ablebodied" and "disabled."

Historians such as Elaine Breslaw and Kim Nielsen similarly argue that the prevalence of impairments and absence of institutional structures meant that conditions we consider as "physical disabilities" today were largely unremarkable before the nineteenth century. Lack of fresh water, poor eating habits, heavy whiskey drinking, and widespread poverty contributed to the frequency of poor health (Breslaw 75). These harsh conditions, combined with debilitating illnesses that left survivors permanently disabled, meant that the attitudes toward bodily difference had to be as flexible as possible: "If the blind, if the slow to walk, if the lame individual could still produce labor, which they were generally able to do in preindustrial North America, physical disability remained unnoticeable" (Nielsen 27).

My argument that *The Algerine Captive* employs medical and moral models of disability complicates Altschuler's contention that disability stigma does not appear in early American literature. Although on the level of representation disability seems to only be a brief moment in the text—the scene of the blind man being cured, which spans only a few pages—the logic of the medical and moral models informs the narrative as a whole. Texts such as Tyler's already began to construct an ablebodied/disabled binary in less overt, but nonetheless important, ways. I do not argue that Tyler's novel should be taken as representative of early American novels, but it is an example of how a logic of disablement can exist without a major disabled character. Because the novel interweaves its medical discourse of blindness with a moral framework, readers may gloss over the novel's "pathologization" of blindness intrinsic to the medical model. This logic of disablement may obscure its discourse on disability, which suggests that a revaluation of early American literature may reveal some neglected works as significant to Disability Studies.

The moral model, on the other hand, corresponds to what many critics have identified in pre-twentieth-century literary depictions of disability—though they often use isolated terms such as pity or sentimentalism, without fitting them into a larger framework such as the

moral model. As I say above, the moral model frames disability as something that demands emotional, religious, or ethical responses. While these responses vary widely, I find it useful to think of them as interrelated because they connect disability with questions of right and wrong, duty and value. Examples include Cotton Mather attributing his stuttering to sin (Nielsen 39), and Olaudah Equiano, in his *Interesting Narrative,* proudly declaring that he comes from people without deformity (52; vol. 1, ch. 1), fearing disfigurement and amputation (69; vol. 1, ch. 2), and believing that God punishes a fellow sailor by making him lose an eye (86-87; vol. 1, ch. 3). Such instances suggest a fearful attitude toward disability, either because people regarded some types of disability as too horrifying to live with or as a sign of God's disfavor. In a somewhat different religious and affectual context, Disability Studies critic Mary Klages discusses disability within sentimentality, which emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and interpreted disability as a "natural sign" of "inevitable suffering and misery" that would then "inspire the sympathy and affections of the nondisabled" (20-21). This form of the moral model was expounded upon by Christian writers and Enlightenment philosophers, who often wrestled with questions about how disabilities such as blindness and deafness affect perception, knowledge, and sympathy. These examinations shaped Tyler's construction of blindness.

Diderot and Tyler Talk to Blind Men

I argue that the conversations between sighted and blind men in Diderot's *Letter* and Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* reinforce Western philosophy's longstanding connection between blindness and ignorance, perception and understanding. Socrates asks in Plato's *Republic*: "Well, does there seem to be any difference then, between blind men and those men who are deprived of the knowledge of what each thing is?" (qtd. in Paulson 12). The usefulness of sensory disability to explore larger philosophical questions explains the popularity of what came to be known as Molyneux's Problem, which engaged Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Edmund Burke, Thomas Reid, and Denis Diderot (Tunstall 4-5). Molyneux's Problem asks whether someone born blind, who knows shapes such as cubes and spheres only by touch, would be able to distinguish those shapes by sight alone, if granted the ability to see. Locke first addressed this in the second edition to his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1694), Book 2,

Chapter 9, "Of Perception." Locke theorized that the newly sighted man would not be able to tell the objects apart until he could compare his visual impressions with his sense of touch. Locke does not care so much about what this tells him about blind people, but rather how it illustrates caution for sighted people about bias in sensory experience: "This I have set down, and leave with my reader, as an occasion for him to consider how much he may be beholden to experience, improvement, and acquired notions, where he thinks he had not the least use of, or help from them" (187). In other words, Locke warns readers not to let habit or tradition hinder your acquisition of knowledge, but to continue to hone and refine your senses—and thus your understanding. The use of a blind-man-turned-sighted as a means to improve those already sighted became a frequent theme among those who addressed Molyneux's Problem.

Tyler's novel echoes accounts of newly developed cures to certain kinds of blindness, which portrayed medicine as a solution to Molyneux's Problem. Not long after Locke's *Essay* appeared, his hypothesis was proved correct; operations in the early eighteenth century confirmed Locke's conclusion (Larrissy 21). William Cheselden, an influential English surgeon, removed congenital cataracts from a thirteen-year-old boy in 1728 (Klages 14). The boy had difficulty adjusting to vision, initially unable to distinguish distance, form, and size (Paulson 29). This story was reproduced numerous times in newspapers, sometimes romanticized and embellished, and philosophers referenced Cheselden's account for their own purposes. Voltaire, for example, in *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* (1738), edits the story to cast the boy as stubbornly holding on to his blindness, while he portrays Cheselden as a triumphant agent of Enlightenment science (Paulson 30-31). The circulation of this scene of cure, both in popular accounts and in philosophical discourse, shows that the medical model of blindness had already gained traction in eighteenth-century Europe. Tyler's novel indicates that this view was also in circulation in the United States by the late eighteenth century. As in European accounts, Tyler's narrative constructs blindness as a "problem" that medicine should solve, with doctors portrayed as agents of progress. But like the philosophers who grappled with Molyneux's Problem, Tyler saw blindness as a "problem" that allowed for meditations about more than the power of medicine.

One reason that I claim that Denis Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* influences Tyler's novel is because, unlike other formulations of Molyneux's Problem, both feature a dialogue with blind men as a crucial element. Diderot begins by bemoaning the fact that he and the letter's addressee—identified only as "Madame"—were excluded from witnessing a curative surgery on a blind girl. Without being able to witness the operation, Diderot decides to interview a man identified only as "the blind man of Puiseaux" in the first part of the letter. The second half is devoted to the blind mathematician Nicholas Saunderson, describing his work and reporting a deathbed dialogue that scholars have determined to be highly fictionalized (Tunstall 45). Diderot aims to investigate the nature of blindness, to ask whether blind men want to be cured, and to determine whether sight bestows benefits denied to blind people. Like Diderot, Tyler approaches these questions through narrative, and investigates how blind people's limitations can reveal the limitations of the sighted, with suggestions on how to correct those flaws.

Tyler uses pathos to restage newspaper accounts of operations that cured blindness to reflect on anxiety about blind people's ability to bond and sympathize with others, and more general debates about sympathy: Do you need to literally see someone's tears to understand their suffering? To what degree can/should people feel sympathy for others whose suffering they do not directly witness? What relationship does sympathy have with slavery and citizenship? In an early chapter of *The Algerine Captive*, Updike Underhill's physician mentor performs a public surgery on a blind man to give him sight; three days later, an astonished audience looks on as he fails to recognize his fiancé by sight. The onlookers in the room remain silent as he surveys them, but it is not until his fiancé cries aloud that he identifies her. Newspapers reported grateful patients thanking their doctors and tearfully seeing their wives or children for the first time, despite these operations being extremely painful (according to the doctors' own accounts). I will return to this scene, but for now I want to note that Tyler's revision hinges on the emotional intensity of the near failure of loved ones to come together.

Critics of the novel often neglect this early scene, missing its potential to provide key insights about how vision works throughout the novel. I argue that the novel engages Enlightenment blindness discourse, especially Diderot's use of blindness as instructive for the sighted, to

teach Americans the proper way to view their country and their roles as citizens. Scholars usually focus on the novel's latter half, when Underhill is kidnapped and enslaved in Algeria. Americanist critics have debated the novel's messages about racism, slavery, and national identity. Cathy Davidson argues that it embraces a tension between American patriotism and criticism, whereas Jared Gardner claims the novel's scenes of slavery only serve to shore up the link between white supremacy and American superiority. My research finds that Matthew Pangborn is the only critic who analyzes this scene. He correctly points out that Tyler "plagiarized" from several sources for his chapter on the blind man, including Locke, Reid, and Cheselden (7, 22-23 n.12). However, he does not identify Diderot as one of Tyler's sources. He reads Tyler's incorporation of blindness as a critique of Locke and Burke's elevation of sight as the superior sense. In contrast, I argue that *The Algerine Captive* upholds the dominance of sight. Understanding Diderot's *Letter* as a source for the novel crucially enables an interpretation that traces how both texts use blindness to teach sighted people how to see better.

Diderot's *Letter* and Tyler's *Algerine Captive* explore the possibilities of touch as a means for blind men to know the world, only to have their narrators remark on the limitations of touch. In both narratives, the blind men give primacy to touch in how they experience the world, and even argue for touch being greater than sight. Both Diderot and Underhill react with amusement to this claim, although it does force them to contemplate ways to see more carefully. Tyler's blind man argues passionately for the superiority of touch:

> It was amusing, in a gayer hour, to hear him argue the superiority of the touch to the sight. Certainly, the feeling is a nobler sense, than that you call sight. I infer it from the care nature has taken of the former, and her disregard to the latter. The eyes are comparatively poor, puny, weak organs. A small blow, a mote, or a straw may reduce those, who see with them, to a situation as pitiable as mine; while feeling is diffused over the whole body. (39; vol. 1, ch. 9)

Pangborn sees this as Tyler's critique of a "spectatorship" mindset within American politics, a visual way of knowing that distanced seer and seen, which justified slavery and claimed to know people's character based on skin color. For Pangborn, Tyler's blind man thus offers a "haptic" way of knowing, as touch indicates the resemblance of humans to each other,

whereas visual markers such as color create divisions. Touch requires knowing the other rather than just seeing them as a distant object (Pangborn 12). However, while Tyler does point out that visual markers can be unreliable, Underhill's experiences continue to be routed primarily through a visual framework. The argument about touch serves to hone and strengthen the power of sight rather than weaken it.

Underhill finds touch too limiting to be an adequate form of perception, noting that the blind man's claim about the supremacy of touch is "amusing." And Underhill continues to think of blindness as a lack that demands cure, as these words come shortly before he describes the operation that gives the blind man sight. Underhill also calls attention to the blind man's inadequacies: "Notwithstanding his accuracy and veracity upon subjects, he could comprehend; there were many, on which he was miserably confused. He called sight the touch of the eyes" (40). The blind man of Puiseaux offers a similar description of sight: "Sight, so he is bound to conclude, is a kind of touch that applies to objects other than our faces and which are located at a distance from us" (Tunstall 173). Both Underhill and Diderot find this comparison of sight to touch reveals that blind people cannot comprehend certain aspects of visual perception, and so regardless of their other strengths, they lack a crucial way of perceiving the world.

Due to their reliance on touch, blind people are limited to their nearest proximity, and are barred from forms of visual representation in art. Despite his compensatory gifts, Underhill reports the blind man's inability to interpret pictures:

> But he could have no idea of pictures. I presented him a large picture of his grand father, painted with oil colours on canvass; told him whose resemblance it was. He passed his hand over the smooth surface and mused. He repeated this; exclaimed it was wonderful; looked melancholy; but never asked for the picture again. (40)

Although Tyler's blind man suggests he is content and happy with his situation, and conveys no desire to be cured, Underhill takes the necessity of cure for granted. Underhill provides no "why" for the cure, but the failure to recognize the picture implies a lack that leads into the matter-of-fact introduction to the operation in the next paragraph. The blind man's examination of his grandfather's portrait elicits sadness because he is not able to connect with his relative in the same way that a sighted person would, and because his sense of

touch cannot perceive the image embedded in a two-dimensional surface. The implication is two-fold: that blind people have a limited ability to appreciate art, and lack a crucial means of identifying with their loved ones. The medical cure follows from what I would describe as a sentimental moment of failure—the failure to recognize his grandfather within the image.

Similarly, in the *Letter*, Diderot finds the blind man of Puiseaux's sense of superiority to the sighted to be misguided, while revealing useful insights about sightedness. Diderot asserts that blind people so little comprehend sightedness that they do not know what they are missing (until a sighted person introduces the idea to them, at least):

> On this matter, our blind man told us that he might have thought himself to be pitied for lacking our advantages and have been tempted to see us as superior beings, had he not on hundreds of occasions felt how much we deferred to him in other ways.[…] This blind man, we said to ourselves, has as high a regard for himself as he does for those of us who can see, perhaps even higher. Why then if an animal has reason, which we can hardly doubt, and if it weighed its advantages over those of man, which it knows better than man's over it, would it not pass a similar judgment? (176)

Diderot's sarcastic comparison of blind people to animals suggests that as an animal would have little comprehension of the advantages of being human, so blind people cannot comprehend the advantages of being sighted. Comparisons of disabled people to animals cast disability as a threat to being human; while we should question the human/animal binary as much as the ablebodied/disabled binary, these comparisons frame disability as a "lack" that justifies exclusionary attitudes and practices. For example, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theorists of language claimed that because deaf people lacked spoken language, they were closer to animals than hearing people, which culminated in the "Oralism" movement of the nineteenth century, forcing deaf people to speak orally and rely on lip-reading, rather than communicating through sign language (Bourke 46, 52-53).

In fairness to Diderot, his primary point here is not to argue that blind people are less human than sighted people; yet the disabled/animal comparison reinforces the text's overall reduction of blind people to objects of study. Diderot uses the blind man's sarcasm to comment on a general form of positional bias, in which we think that the perspective from which we speak is always the best and most correct one. Diderot continues by musing that

animals would find that their instincts make reason unnecessary, whereas humans neglect the importance of instinct. Thus, he seems to be suggesting that whatever one's position, blind or sighted, human or animal, one should not deny one's shortcomings, or neglect the potential advantages of another perspective: "We have such a strong tendency to overstate our qualities and underplay our faults that it would almost seem as though that man should be the one to do the treatise on strength, and animals the one on reason" (176). In some ways, Diderot attacks hierarchical thinking in such passages, warning readers about thinking of themselves as above others.

Unfortunately, the casting of disabled people as animals relies on a notion of disability as lack that overshadows this passage's more radical sentiments, especially given other generalizations Diderot makes about blind people being less modest, less humane, and less religious. Also, in what I claim as a striking instance of a moral model of blindness, Diderot frequently refers to blind people's limitations as a means to instruct his readers about their own limitations, which values blindness primarily for the ways it teaches the sighted moral or philosophical lessons. This accords with the way other philosophers used blindness in Molyneux's Problem as a springboard for exploring philosophical problems. As Disability Studies critic Mary Klages says, eighteenth-century philosophy combined empiricism, science, and sentimentalism to portray "sensory disability, particularly blindness, as a kind of laboratory, a place where empirical investigations and experimentation could provide useful knowledge about the condition of the nondisabled" (15). Blindness fascinated philosophers such as Diderot because of its ability to increase the scientific and moral progress of the sighted.

Diderot emphasized Molyneux's Problem's implications that whatever capabilities blind people have, they still miss out on a fundamental way of experiencing the world. Diderot, in fact, finds it remarkable that blind people can speak, given that they have a more restricted resource of sensory experience to draw from. Diderot reacts with astonishment at the blind man's descriptions of quotidian details. With a bite of sarcasm, the blind man comments: "It is clear to me, Gentlemen, that you are not blind, since you are surprised at what I can do. So why aren't you also amazed that I can speak?" (178). Diderot concludes that it is, in fact amazing, and that a "blind man is bound to find it more difficult to learn to speak, since the

number of non-sensible objects is greater for him than it is for other people." While obviously blind people can speak, Diderot's point is that their understanding and use of language (like calling sight "the touch of the eyes") is likely to be diminished in comparison to sighted people. Visual metaphors hold a central place in religious and philosophical thought (Tunstall 7), which perhaps explains why *Enlighten*ment thinkers were so interested in blindness. Many also believed physical sight to be crucial to understanding, being the most important and flexible sense in gaining information since it could perceive things at a distance (Pangborn 3). As Locke says, vision is the "most comprehensive of our senses" (188). If sight was privileged over other senses, then it was necessary for certain intellectual and aesthetic faculties. Diderot and Tyler found the mere fact of not being able to detect "objects" pointed to an even greater lack, the perception of *human* bodies and their signs of suffering. Although Diderot and Tyler handle this issue somewhat differently, they share an anxiety over the relationship between sight and moral sense, as well as the way that blindness can teach the sighted how to "see" better. For Tyler, this lesson figured into how Americans can transform into better citizens.

Sight and Sympathy in the New Nation

Within normative discourses of national identity, blindness and other disabilities represent not only physical and mental differences, but also and more importantly, threats to national identity. Like Enlightenment philosophy, *The Algerine Captive* treats blindness with an ambivalent fascination and anxiety about whether blind people fit within an "enlightened" society based upon ideals of equality and sympathy. Americanist scholars such as Elizabeth Barnes have argued that sympathy was crucial to shaping American identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "Sympathy was to be the building block of a democratic nation, and democracy, so the story goes, was a defining element of the United States" (Barnes x). If blindness could disrupt sympathy, it could thus also disrupt democracy and nationhood.

I argue that *The Algerine Captive*'s celebration of cure suggests sightedness as better suited than blindness to early America's vision of a democratic, sympathetic society, an early example of what Disability Studies critics Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell call ablenationalism (114). Furthermore, the novel plays upon the lesson of Diderot's *Letter* that

sight needs to be trained by experience: as the newly sighted man must learn to physically navigate his world, so too must Underhill learn to navigate the contentious early American landscape and sympathetically identify with his fellow Americans. This parallel offers an explanation to the novel's tonal shifts and seemingly contradictory sentiments towards America. Although by no means a sentimental novel, *The Algerine Captive* does suggest the usefulness of *regulated* sympathy. The novel's first half employs the irony and humor of picaresque tales, as Underhill travels from place to place trying to establish his medical practice, but finds conflict rather than acceptance. The second half engages a more serious tone as Underhill encounters slavery, both American and Algerian. It is through these encounters that sympathy emerges—at first felt by a white man towards African slaves and then invoked by a white slave from African masters. When captured, Underhill declares that, if released, he will devote his life to fighting slavery: "Grant me, I ejaculated, once more to taste the freedom of my native country, and every moment of my life shall be dedicated to preaching against this detestable commerce" (106; vol. 1, ch. 32). Yet upon his return to the States, Underhill engages a rallying cry for national unity, and his intentions to start a family and set up his medical practice, without any mention of fighting slavery.

While this contradiction has perplexed scholars, I assert that the novel uses slavery as a means to bolster sympathy between white, nondisabled Americans, rather than between Anglo-Americans and Africans (or between disabled and nondisabled people). This "redirection" or training of sympathy accords with the training of sight insofar as both can only be adjusted properly through experience and distance. Only after being forced to view America at a distance, from within the confines of Algerian captivity, does Underhill come to see the picture of the enlightened post-revolutionary nation that certain political leaders and authors promoted: America as the fullest culmination of Enlightenment ideals on Earth. I interpret the novel's engagement with blindness as a guide to traverse its complicated attempts to reconcile those ideals with practices that violated them, such as slavery.

Understanding *The Algerine Captive*'s treatment of blindness as a form of difference to be erased by medical and moral intervention reveals its overall approach to difference and its solution to the problem of slavery: the erasure of difference that disguises itself as embrace of difference. While recognizing and even praising difference, proper citizenship entails

painting over the cracks in America's picture to maintain an image of unity. As such, the novel fits within American ablenationalism's exclusion of disability to justify the exclusion of other marginal identities, and constructs a normative version of citizenship. Historian Douglas Baynton (2001) examines the mutually constitutive relationship between ableism and American identity, arguing that disability has been used as an underlying concept to justify the exclusion of women, blacks, and immigrants from political rights and social power. With these exclusions already in place during colonial times, post-Revolution Americans had to contend with a new nation declared to be founded on principles of equality that continued to disenfranchise everyone besides a small number of white, propertied males. And even among that minority, divisions were rampant between Federalists and Democrats, between North and South. When considered alongside the divisions within the United States in the 1790s, *The Algerine Captive*'s scene of cured blindness and new sight served as a powerful metaphor for the new nation, wherein the training of sight and sympathy models how citizens could bridge geographic and ideological gaps while maintaining abled, racial, and national ones.

Despite regional and ideological differences, American political leaders shared a belief in the power of sympathy—imagining oneself in another's place in order to understand, bond with, or act on behalf of others. The secularized, politicized notion of sympathy, inspired by Scottish philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume, promised to create a stable society if its citizens studied and embraced sympathy in their lives. An air of turmoil pervaded America in the 1790s, fueled by debates over centralized government vs. state autonomy, a growing divide between North and South, and fear of war with France. As historian Gordon Wood puts it, "Except for the era of the Civil War, the last several years of the eighteenth century were the most politically contentious in United States history" (209). Political thinkers and authors alike turned to sympathy for a solution to this contentiousness, drawing on Enlightenment philosophy on sympathy. Unfortunately for disabled people, the importance of the senses in the operation of sympathy led some philosophers to worry that any perceived limitation of the senses, such as blindness, might also limit moral capacity.

Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* epitomizes the belief that congenitally blind people were denied a necessary means of sympathy with others, and thus subject to indifference and

solipsism. The epigraph to this essay, from Diderot's *Letter*, illustrates this idea well: "Since of all the external signs that evoke ideas of sympathy and pain in us, the blind are only affected by the sound of suffering, I suspect them, in general, of being inhumane. What difference can there be for a blind man of a man urinating and a man shedding blood without a whimper?" (179). Diderot draws this conclusion from the blind man of Puiseaux's habits of stealing, defying authorities, and fighting. Diderot also implies that he married a sighted woman out of desire for her help rather than love (36). Blind people might be widely considered *objects* of sympathy, but not *producers* of it. According to Diderot, because the visual signs of suffering—tears, pained expressions, bleeding—are not perceptible to blind people, they have less access to others' pain, which reduces their capacity to identify with those in pain.[2] Some scholars, such as Tunstall, defend Diderot by saying that the *Letter*'s irony turns on sighted people's assumptions about the blind in order to point out their own flaws (80). Also, since Diderot was an agnostic or atheist, his casting of blind people as unbelievers identified them with his own metaphysics (82).[3] These factors, Tunstall argues, mean that Diderot's *Letter* offers a complex rhetorical position that seems to portray blind people as inferior, but actually favors blind peoples' skeptical approach to morality and religion.

Nevertheless, Diderot uses blind peoples' flaws to attack those of the sighted, reducing blind people to moral and philosophical lessons. Diderot's lack of religious belief does not make his *Letter* any less moralistic. During the post-Revolutionary period, American thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson argued, following moral sense philosophers such as Adam Smith, that humans had an inherent moral sense, which meant that morality need not be based on spiritual principles. Jefferson claimed that atheist philosophers were as driven by morality as religious thinkers: "Diderot, D'Alembert, D'Holbach, Condorcet, are known to have been among the most virtuous of men. Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God" (541). Certainly, Diderot's *Letter,* by including the voices of blind people and showing their capabilities, humanizes blind people in a way uncommon for its

[2] Diderot would later revise his opinions when he interviewed Mademoiselle Mélanie de Salignac, an educated, aristocratic blind woman who defended her capacity for moral sentiments (Klages 16).

[3] Critics have paid more attention to the second part of the *Letter*, in which Saunderson claims his blindness prevents him from believing in God, since he cannot perceive the supposed wonders of God's creation. I would argue that this accords with my contention that blindness is used for didactic purposes.

time. Locke and Voltaire, for example, were more abstract or dismissive about blind people. But the *Letter*'s purpose in refining readers' perceptive abilities and attacking religious thought contributes to the moral and medical models' tendency to turn disabled people into objects, rather than agents, of action. Diderot's use of blindness to teach a moral lesson accords with a frequent criticism Disability Studies scholars level against literature's discourse on disability: disabled people are used as ethical tests to improve their nondisabled counterparts (Dolmage 42-3). The reduction of disabled people to moral "lessons" erases the needs and desires of disabled people, and allows only the nondisabled to grow and change—unless, via medical intervention as in *The Algerine Captive*, a disabled person transforms into a nondisabled person.

The novel's scene of curing blindness demonstrates that as the limitations of blindness illustrate sight's superiority in fostering sympathy, so new sight's initial failures suggest the need for trained, experienced sight to correctly practice sympathy. As mentioned earlier, during his apprenticeship to become a physician, Underhill witnesses an operation in which his mentor gives a blind man sight. After three days, the blind man's loved ones gather around him as the doctor removes the bandage from his eyes, and the newly sighted man attempts to identify his fiancé by sight alone from the crowd of faces. The experiment revises Molyneux's Problem to foreground sympathetic identification:

> In passing his eye a second time over the circle, his attention was arrested, by his beloved [fiancé]. The agitations of her lovely features, and the evanescent blush on her cheek, would have at once betrayed her, to a more experienced eye. He passed his eye to the next person, and immediately returned it to her. It was a moment big with expectation. Many a finger was raised to the lips of the spectators, and many a look, expressive of the silence she should preserve, was cast towards her. But the conflict was too violent for her delicate frame. He looked more intensely; she burst into tears, and spoke. At the well known voice he closed his eyes, rushed towards her and clasped her in his arms. (41; vol. 1, ch. 9)

Locke focused on whether a newly sighted man could identify cubes and spheres. In the above passage, Tyler instead asks whether the man can identify loved ones. The stakes are higher than merely identifying a geometric object. If the newly sighted man cannot

recognize his fiancé, he lacks a fundamental way of knowing others. As Underhill says while describing the scene, his bride-to-be might be "the fat scullion wench, of his father's kitchen; or in the person of the toothless, palsied, decriped [sic] nurse, who held the bason [sic] of gruel at his elbow." Underhill applies an ableist politics of appearance to the scene—imposing visual standards of beauty now that the man has gained sight. But more importantly, he implies that blindness bars blind people from a certain level of access to others. Although they can know people through touch, *The Algerine Captive* claims that blind people have difficulty distinguishing between others at a distance, a significant fact in a narrative whose protagonist must travel to a distant land to truly "see" his own nation. The blind man can recognize people by touch or sound, but not yet by sight; he closes his eyes to run to her. The implication is not that as a blind man he lacks feeling for his fiancé, nor that as a newly sighted man he will continue to neglect the use of sight, but that he cannot recognize her silent suffering at a distance, and must learn to train his sight to do so.

In addition to the novel's scene of cure promoting blindness as a means to reveal proper vision, it also portrays the physician (Underhill's mentor) as a figure endowing and endowed with both medical and moral value. Underhill comes to emulate these qualities as he struggles to establish himself as a physician. The chapter closes with a meditation on how the cure benefits the couple as well as Underhill's mentor. The cure not only gives a man sight, it also cements the bond between the engaged couple, strengthening the promise of matrimony. In the process, the physician proves his medical prowess and his moral worth. Underhill compares him to Jesus in his miraculous healing powers and benevolence, illuminating how the cure impacts the nondisabled doctor, and reinforcing Diderot's moral model conception of blindness as useful to the sighted. While the couple joins together happily, Underhill claims his mentor's happiness exceeds theirs, since a man who could "restore life and usefulness, to the darling of his friends, and scatter light in the paths of an amiable young pair, must have known a joy never surpassed" (42) except "by the satisfaction of our benevolent Saviour," who also made the blind to see. This connection to Jesus paints the physician as a messianic figure with the power to save the blind man from an implied lifeless and useless existence, and implies that the sighted man—now vital and useful—will make a better husband and father than a blind man would. Sight, healing, and sympathy link together in a way that models social and professional relations: proximity and affection are

not enough, but must be routed through a properly trained vision to ensure rehabilitation. The doctor is a source not only of scientific knowledge, but of morality; Underhill later describes him as having taught Underhill about both medicine and virtue (58). Underhill suggests that medical treatment of blindness not only benefits the blind by making them sighted, it ultimately benefits sighted doctors through spiritually uplifting sympathetic acts.

The physician's role in facilitating domestic bonds through sight and sympathy establishes a dynamic that plays out in Underhill's changing relation to America itself. The novel suggests that while Underhill fails initially to identify with his fellow Americans, the "cure" for both Underhill and America's troubles combines ablenationalism and sighted sympathy. By harnessing the moral and medical values of the physician, and learning to see fellow citizens and country correctly, Underhill fosters domestic (in both senses of the word—familial and national) attachments. Understanding the novel's version of sympathy and its relation to national identity necessitates working through the novel's complex handling of sensory, racial, and national difference. *The Algerine Captive*'s explorations of slavery and life in Algeria have made critics of the novel speculate about whether it promotes or condemns slavery, and whether it encourages or shows antagonism towards international relations.

But like the novel uses blindness to explore sightedness, so I view the novel's exploration of slavery to reflect on white American identity, or more precisely, what it means to be a white American during the tumultuous 1790s, when white Americans were so often at odds with each other. While some authors such as Equiano invoke sympathy to bridge difference by calling upon whites to act on the behalf of black slaves' interests, authors such as Tyler invoke a version of sympathy that collapses difference. According to Barnes, sympathy in eighteenth and nineteenth century narratives relies on familiarity (sameness) even as it seeks to create it, "encouraging readers to participate in a fantasy of democracy that would fulfill its promise of equality by negating diversity in the cause of union" (Barnes 2). *The Algerine Captive* acknowledges difference, and even takes it up as a central problem, because to pretend otherwise would ring false to most Americans. Yet, by juxtaposing the first half's satirical take on America with the second half's earnest longings for return to home while in Algerian captivity, the novel implies that the differences between white,

ablebodied citizens are less important than between those of other races, religions, and nations—which illustrates the novel's problematic promotion of ablenationalism.

Just as Underhill believes that the blind man must be cured of his misguided notions about the superiority of touch over sight, so Underhill must be cured of his separation from fellow Americans, transformed by his tribulations in slavery into a more sympathetic attitude toward America. Ablenationalism, in other words, works to erase Underhill's critical attitude toward America as it seeks to erase disability and other forms of difference. Underhill only turns to medicine as a profession because his learning of classical languages makes him unsuited to his family's farming life. His learning does not equip him to be a teacher either; as a schoolmaster, he creates antagonism between himself, his pupils, and their parents. Later, he unwittingly insults a young lady with Greek poetry, which provokes one of her admirers to challenge Underhill to a duel; Underhill mistakes the challenge as a compliment to his poetry. Underhill has high ambitions as a physician—at odds with the benevolence attributed to his mentor—seeking "practice, fame, and fortune" (62; vol. 1, ch. 17). Failing to establish a lucrative practice in New England, he travels to the South, "condemning the illiberality and ignorance of our own people, which prevented the due encouragement of genius..." (74; vol. 1, ch. 22). But he finds no success in the South either: "I found the southern states not more engaging, to a young practitioner, than the northern….The gains were small, and tardily collected..." (82; vol. 1, ch. 25). He is offended by Southerners' immoral habits, such as swearing, drinking, gambling, and slavery—despite the fact that his next step is to serve aboard a slave ship as a surgeon. He leaves his own country to work in a trade he claims to despise, which suggests that Underhill's problem is running from his difficulties without any self-reflection about his own complicity in them.

As blindness reflects and strengthens bonds between the sighted, so Tyler invokes sympathy toward racial others only to solidify bonds between white Americans. Ablenationalism tries to disguise itself by appearing to appreciate difference, even to sympathize with those marked as disabled, racial, or national others, while actually working to exclude people marked with those differences. Underhill attests to his disgust at the cruelties that American whites inflict upon African blacks aboard a slave ship—separation of families, rape, whipping, and unhealthy living conditions. These cruelties provoke him to declare, "I thought

of my native land and blushed" (95; vol. 1, ch. 95). The horrors of American slavery that Underhill witnesses provoke a crisis of conscience. However, I interpret this crisis as the novel's investment in teaching Underhill about seeing sympathy as enabling critical sentiment toward America while simultaneously defusing those concerns.

Sympathy, like sight, must be trained; sympathy can become a threat to unity if invoked to defend particular ideological positions such as Federalism or Republicanism, pro-slavery or anti-slavery. Appropriate sympathy looks past diversity to reinforce sameness (Barnes 4). This properly trained, American version is what I call "sighted sympathy." Tyler wants readers to recognize slavery as a problem, but portrays the solution as cultivation of sighted sympathy rather than abolitionism. Americanist critic Sarah Sillin claims that the central concern of *The Algerine Captiv*e is how Americans can prove their "sympathetic virtue" while practicing slavery (106). She points out that though Underhill sympathizes with the slaves, he is complicit with slavery via his position on the ship, implying that the novel conveys sympathy as ineffective towards ending slavery (107). Underhill soon finds himself in the position of a slave in Algeria—and at moments, his black captors seem more sympathetic toward him than American white captors are toward their slaves. Yet it is not his captors' sympathy that he desires, but his return to America.

Having engaged the first trope of Enlightenment philosophy (that of a blind man given sight) the novel employs the other (the traveler in a foreign land) to enable Underhill to see his country differently, to reconcile his critical views of the first half with his desire for freedom in the second. Underhill figures as the cosmopolitan traveler who learns about other cultures in order to become a better citizen of his own country: Underhill's "cosmopolitanism comes not at the expense but in the service of the nation" (Holt 485). As with ablenationalism, the cosmopolitan's interest in foreign others actually serves to make the traveler identify more with those most similar to them—those at home. Comparing his situation to the prodigal son of the Bible, whose destitution sends him back to his father's house, Underhill says: "Let those of our fellow citizens, who set at nought the rich blessings of our federal union, go like me to a land of slavery, and they will then learn how to appreciate the value of our free government" (124; vol. 2, ch. 3). His conflation of the Christian parable of reconciliation with his distant viewing of America indicates his realization that despite his differences with other

white Americans, despite Americans' own practices of slavery, he belongs with them. The parable's familial dynamic resonates with the modeling of political bonds on domestic ones; sympathy works best through those who are familiar. Underhill clings to his Christian Americanness though he is offered freedom if he converts to Islam; he chooses slavery over freedom, even if it means remaining a slave himself (White 20-1). His captors test his allegiance to America and Christianity, only to strengthen those ties. As sighted men learn from blind men, so do white citizens learn from enslaved Africans and free Algerians.

It is tempting to view Underhill's earlier denunciations of American slavery as earnest, and his final celebrations of America as "the freest country in the universe" (225; vol. 2, ch. 37) as ironic. Yet the parallels between blindness as a tool to benefit the sighted align too strongly with Underhill's encounters with slavery and foreign others as a tool to rally sympathy for his own nation. Despite the novel's complicated approaches to difference, and its apparent critiques of America, it nevertheless presents America as the best possible version of democracy, superior to the Islamic theocracy of Algeria. Aware of the turbulent political times, it enables critique, so long as that critique is not too strident. As mentioned earlier, when taken as a slave to Algeria, Underhill initially declares that, if freed, he will fight slavery for the rest of his life, but he never follows through on this promise. The novel's (in)famous ending calls not to abolish slavery, but to stand together as a nation: "Our first object is union among ourselves. For to no nation besides the United States can that antient [sic] saying be more emphatically applied; BY UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVIDING WE FALL" (226; vol. 2, ch. 37). He aims to marry, establish his physician practice, and to "support...our excellent government, which I have learnt to adore, in schools of despotism" (225)—linking marriage, medicine, and citizenship as his newfound goals, as opposed to the "fame and fortune" and elevation of "genius" he sought earlier. The novel presents the transformed Underhill as the model American citizen: established physician and family man, sympathetically bonded to other Americans, witness to miraculous cures and foreign tyranny.

Conclusion

While viewing disability as a medical or moral issue is not inherently harmful—medical treatments can benefit disabled people, and moral thinking underpins the social justice

thrust of Disability Rights and Disability Studies—the medical and moral models crystallize ableist notions of disability as a lack that requires intervention to "fix" that lack, usually by nondisabled people and without the input of disabled people. I have used the relationship of these models as a lens to read Denis Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* because I believe that tracing how these models mutually reinforce each other reveals a powerfully stigmatizing discourse on disability intent on eradicating difference. Enlightenment philosophy played a huge role in constructing this medical/moral discourse, which proves especially alarming because it is so adept at disguising itself as oppressive or exclusionary. In Diderot's *Letter*, what appears to be identification with blind people turns out to be a means to exploit them for the benefit of the sighted. And in *The Algerine Captive*, blindness works to enforce ablenationalism. The curing of blindness bolsters multiple registers of normativity—ablebodiedness, whiteness, and a narrow conception of American citizenship. Disability thus solves multiple problems: how to elevate the protagonist's profession of medicine; how to promote unity in a turbulent landscape pervaded by diversity; and how to prove America's "sympathetic virtue" when it practiced slavery, which violated the tenets of sympathy and equality said to drive the American Revolution.

These solutions would come to justify the next two century's horrific deployments of disability to support scientific racism, xenophobia, and eugenics. Looking back on the cruelty of those practices, it may seem as though their practitioners must have elevated scientific, political, and economic gains over moral sentiment. In actuality, it was their moral reasoning that, at least in part, made those cruelties so acceptable. Scientific racism argued that slavery benefited Africans who were unfit for freedom; immigration restrictions purported to strengthen Americans by barring unhealthy foreigners; and eugenics claimed their programs of institutionalization and sterilization promoted fitness and minimized the misery of disabled people. As we wrestle with today's thorny questions of dismantling white supremacy's brutal treatment of African Americans, interrogating the prejudice towards foreign people targeted by immigration reform, and questions over genetic research driven by the desire to prevent and cure disabilities, it is not a lack of morality that is the problem. Rather, the problem is morality that disguises itself within scientific and political attitudes, and exploits marginalized groups for the benefit of those in power.

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