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Imagining the “Survival of the Unfit” in the Novels of Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird

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<1>In her most well-known novel *The Story of an African Farm*, New Woman writer Olive Schreiner compares the “woman’s sphere” to a too-small shoe that creates impairment: “In some of us … [t]he parts we are not to use have been quite atrophied, and have even dropped off; but in others … they have been weakened and left. We wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them; we know that we are compressed, and chafe against them” (155). A decade later, Schreiner’s fellow New Woman author Mona Caird would use a similar image of deformity to allegorize the social constriction of women. In keeping with Caird’s assertion that “the sphere of woman” was “the seed-bed of disease” (*The Morality of Marriage* 13), the heroine of Caird’s most widely read novel *TheDaughters of Danaus*, laments, “I remember once … seeing a young ash-tree that had got jammed into a chink so that it couldn’t grow straight … I felt like the poor sapling in the cranny, that … was forced to become twisted, and crooked, and stunted … I think most women have to grow in a cranny” (271). These images offer striking commentary on the oppressiveness of Victorian gender roles, and, notably, they use images of disability—missing limbs, stunted growth, deformed appendages—in order to do so.(1) In some respects, this gesture is not unexpected, as it aligns Schreiner and Caird with earlier Victorian feminists such as Charlotte Brontë, who, as Gilbert and Gubar famously observed, used mental illness as a metaphor for rebellion and physical illness as a metaphor for oppression.(2) This co-optation of disability as metaphor was especially common in reform literature of the nineteenth century, which, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes in her study of sentimental novels, frequently positioned impairment as the “semiotic manifestation of social ills” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 84). Within the past twenty years, scholars of literary disability studies have thoroughly critiqued this gesture: Lennard Davis argues that what he terms “metaphorization” can be “problematic in terms of identity because it

disembodies disability and makes it a template for something else" (*End of Normal* 20). In her foundational article "The Corpus of the Madwoman," Elizabeth Donaldson called for a feminist disability studies approach that would reconsider Gilbert and Gubar's influence on feminist criticism by exploring the ways in which the madness-as-rebellion trope ignores embodiment and diminishes the lived experience of disability: "when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion," Donaldson argues, "mental illness itself is erased" (94).

<2>These critiques are certainly applicable to the deployment of disability in much of Schreiner and Caird's fiction, including their most well-known novels. Indeed, with its depiction of Lyndall's subsidence into chronic pain and eventual death after her dreams of freedom are punctured, Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* arguably formed a template for many later New Woman novels that would inflict illness, impairment, and death upon their protagonists in order to allegorize the ways in which patriarchal social norms "crippled" the New Women who challenged them. Though unique in her physical survival, the long-suffering feminist heroine of Caird's *Daughters of Danaus,* Hadria Fullerton, explicitly invokes a similar reading of disability as a signifier for social and moral wrongs, insisting that women's subjugation is "no more 'intended' or inherently necessary than that children should be born with curvature of the spine, or rickets" (209). One could argue that, by embracing the "metaphorization" of disability in order to buttress their feminist critique, Schreiner and Caird are setting the stage for decades of feminist advocacy that overlooked the needs and lived experiences of disabled women.(3) One could argue, too, that in reinforcing the identification of disability with social problems, Caird and Schreiner participate in the project of "enforcing normalcy" that Davis has identified in nineteenth-century novels situated within the "coming into consciousness in English of an idea of 'the norm'" (*Enforcing Normalcy* 24). Schreiner and Caird's novels are certainly laced with normative rhetoric, describing impaired bodies and minds in ways that accord with the "disability myths" that Jay Dolmage has identified in his study of disability rhetoric (31). Schreiner's privileging of "mother love," for instance, ensures that her disabled characters are sometimes infantilized; Caird is fond of treating impairment as an "ethical test" that reveals the moral purity of others; and, in emphasizing the suffering of "compressed" New Women disabled by limiting social norms, both women invoke the expectation that disabled people are to be pitied and garner sympathy in accordance with an individualist charity model of disability.(4)

<3>Such a reading, however, would itself be limited, not simply because it would elide Schreiner and Caird's own lived experiences with disability, but also because recent scholarship in critical disability studies has begun to nuance the field's earlier

rejection of “metaphorization.” Alice Hall argues that since “metaphor and materiality are inextricably linked … to read disability as a metaphor is not to eclipse its physical implications entirely” (174). Building on this insight, Sami Schalk explores the “oscillation” between metaphor and materiality in Black women’s speculative fiction, arguing that “it is imperative from an intersectional perspective to read for the possible metaphorical, allegorical, or otherwise abstract ways in which the fictional representation of disability alludes to race, gender, class, and sexuality as well” (62). And, while metaphor is certainly a feature of normative disability rhetorics, Dolmage has also identified non-normative disability rhetorics that embrace the power of disability to reshape transformative narratives of the body and mind: “this rhetorical work,” Dolmage argues, “should shift body values and roles, becoming a deliberation on embodied possibilities” (192).

<4>While acknowledging that such rhetorical work in Caird and Schreiner’s fiction involves the “oscillation” between problematic and authentic depictions of disability as it intersects with gender, in the analysis that follows I posit that disability informs their feminism as both a convenient metaphor *and,* more importantly, as a deliberation on the lived experience of embodied difference. I acknowledge the potential for Caird and Schreiner’s lived experiences with disability to influence their feminism, and I argue that their engagement with disability fed an anti-eugenic agenda that informed both writers’ critique of the social Darwinist doctrine of survival of fittest. As Courtney Andree has observed in her study of disability and degeneration at the *fin de siècle*, “disability was figured as one of the central threats facing the British nation at this historical moment.” However, in contrast to fellow New Women such as Sarah Grand and Emma Frances Brooke, whom Andree argues “sought to ‘contain’ and ultimately eradicate disability from the British home,” my analysis takes for its starting point the notion that several of Caird and Schreiner’s novels suggest an allyship between femininity and disability that goes beyond the equation of women’s limitations with impairment. Layered under such awkward metaphors as the atrophied foot and the stunted tree, there is a complex engagement with the intersecting interests of New Women and disabled people as “variant types” whose existence was threatened and devalued by narratives of “fitness.” Indeed, as my analysis will show, both writers deliberately invoke disability in order to challenge intertwining norms around social and bodily fitness, and both explore how disability-centric coalitions of care enable alternative “body values and roles,” making space for visions of a more inclusive future.

Lived Experiences

<5>Before proceeding to an analysis of their work, I would like briefly to address some biographical context that speaks to Schreiner and Caird's lived experiences with both eugenics and disability. Biographers Joyce Berkman and Carolyn Burdett note that Schreiner lived with severe asthma, chronic chest pain, and heart disease.(5) Though she maintained a strong interest in science throughout her life, Berkman explains that Schreiner's early aspirations to a medical career went unrealized in large part due to her illness (25–26). She often lived apart from her husband as she traveled seeking congenial locations and treatment options; one of Schreiner's close correspondents suggested that this pursuit of treatment led to a period of "considerable suffering" from an addiction to pain medication.(6) While less information is available about Caird's health, she, too, frequently traveled abroad independently from her family, and some biographers speculate that this frequent travel was due to poor health. She appears to have visited at least one health retreat in Europe (Blamires 63), and Heilmann cites a "nervous breakdown" ("Wild Woman" 79) as the cause of what the *Review of Reviews* characterized in 1893 as Caird's "protracted experimentalizing with various out of the way cures" (519). Caird and Schreiner were socially acquainted: both were associated with the Men and Women's Club, though Caird was not a full member in part because Schreiner initially opposed Caird's membership (Bland 126). Schreiner seems at first to have considered Caird's views too radical for a group where, as Ledger has observed, "ideologies of eugenics and social Darwinism … were a staple part of the Club's intellectual diet" (74);(7) however, Schreiner later came to admire Caird's "free and brave words" (qtd. in Heilmann, "Wild Woman" 89n28).

<6>As the theories of Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton, and their ilk gained traction among late Victorian progressive circles, social Darwinist and eugenic doctrines came to heavily influence much of New Woman fiction.(8) In positioning Caird and Schreiner as disability-informed critics of these influences, I am building on a foundation of feminist scholarship that charts the contributions of the New Women to evolutionary discourse: Abigail Mann, for instance, has argued that many of these writers should be considered "co-theorists of evolution who examined the social and ethical possibilities it engendered" (44), and Angelique Richardson's influential study *Love and Eugenics* has traced the ways in which New Woman writers—including Caird—engaged with the eugenic notion of "rational reproduction" as a means of liberation for women, often foregrounding plots through which women gained status and agency by choosing with whom to reproduce. While Richardson and Heilmann have identified a consistent anti-eugenic agenda in Caird's fiction and prose,(9) scholarly assessments of Schreiner's engagement with this discourse are

more mixed, and with good reason: Schreiner's correspondence chronicles close relationships with influential eugenic thinkers including Havelock Ellis and Karl Pearson, and she was an active member of the socialist Men and Women's Club, where many participants embraced eugenics and social Darwinism. Ledger contends that Schreiner's "near deification of motherhood" was "closely bound up with the twin projects of eugenics and imperialism," particularly in some of her earlier prose (82). Berkman, however, notes that several of Schreiner's ideological positions shifted significantly throughout her life. Berkman acknowledges inconsistencies in Schreiner's evolutionary rhetoric, but maintains that there are a "considerable number of deeply reflective passages in her fictional and nonfictional writing that confront evolutionary thought and Social Darwinism" (75). More recent critics have uncovered further similarities between Caird and Schreiner's ideas on evolution: Ann Heilmann argues that both women chose to privilege "humanistic, ethically oriented science" over eugenics and evolutionary biology (169), and Elisha Cohn analyzes Caird and Schreiner's novels as texts that that share an experimental narrative form deviating from the "deep structures" driven by sexual selection and natural selection (38). In keeping with approaches that examine where Schreiner and Caird align in their more radical critiques, then, the analyses below will explore the implications of a heretofore-unexamined centrality of disability to both women's anti-eugenic feminist projects.

"Variant Types": An Allyship between Femininity and Disability

<7>Schreiner and Caird's fiction is heavily populated with disabled people: in some cases, their narratives feature protagonists who become disabled, as with Caird's Viola Sedley, who experiences mental illness in *Wing of Azrael,* and Schreiner's Lyndall, who lives with severe chronic pain following the birth of her child in *Story of an African Farm*. When not directly experienced by the protagonist, disability is nevertheless present in either a family member (Caird's heroine Graine in *The Stones of Sacrifice* and Schreiner's Rebekah in *From Man to Man* have sisters who live with mental illness) or a close friend (Undine's friend Diogenes has a spinal cord injury; Alpin's mentor Cosway Cheyne lives with a mobility impairment following a railway accident). Again and again, the novels insist on an allyship between femininity and disability, acknowledging the intersecting interests of women and disabled people as "variant types"—to borrow a phrase from one of Caird's essays—of whom a eugenic society exacts sacrifice.

<8>Published posthumously in 1928 but written in the mid-late 1870s and early 1880s, Schreiner's semi-autobiographical first novel, *Undine*, exemplifies this trend. From childhood Undine is perceived as "odd," "mad," and eccentric. Raised in South

Africa, Undine travels to England whereupon she embarks on a courtship with a shallow lover, followed by a brief and unfulfilling marriage that results in the death of her infant child and then her husband. Widowed and impoverished, Undine returns to South Africa, finding kinship with the only person who takes an interest in her: a young girl she nicknames Diogenes. Diogenes sits alone all day in a tub at the mining camp, explaining to Undine, "I can't walk; my back's hurt" (311). While Undine dedicates nearly all her time, energy, and finances to rehabilitating a miner called William Brown, Diogenes dedicates her attention to reviving a small rose plant. When the plant blooms at long last, Diogenes sacrifices her only source of joy and beauty, gifting it to Undine shortly before Undine herself dies, "weakened," bodily and mentally, from a "long life of servitude and dependence" (250). As she would later do in *Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner grapples with a Darwinian teleology that portrays this kind of suffering and sacrifice as a form of progress: at one point Undine imagines herself like one of the tiny sea creatures whose accumulating skeletons built "land that … has become tree and grass and a million forms of life;" at another she demands "Why sacrifice the living to the dead, the present to the past? The past is a fruitless dream, the present only is living and demands all things" (346). While Heilmann has suggested that Schreiner "embraced the notion of self-sacrifice" ("Wild Woman" 71), I would argue that in *Undine*, as in many of her novels, Schreiner clearly dwells on the suffering engendered by such sacrifice: Undine's attempts to suppress her "queer and strange and odd" nature (46), her fruitless pursuit of a "piece of perfection" (113), lead her only to disappointment after disappointment, to "tumult and agony" (374). As Undine lies dying in the novel's final chapter, she imagines that her suffering might make way for a better world, reasoning, "Would [Nature] build better, she must pull down first" (375), yet in the wake of Undine's lifetime of pain, it is difficult to imagine that Undine has entirely come to accept the "naturalness" of such a system. Indeed, Undine's suffering is rendered as an explicit and affecting spectacle for both characters and readers—the kind of spectacle Casey Cothran has identified as a strategy deployed by Caird and fellow activists, who drew attention to the damaged bodies of women in order to position "suffering not a sign of victimization but as a means of protest" (64).

<9>The awareness that a teleological notion of "progress" entails the sacrifice of the marginalized is a source of even more intense anxiety in Caird's writing. In her most well-known novel, *The Daughters of Danaus*, which was published in 1894, Caird focuses on the sacrifice of women's ambition and potential required by heterosexual marriage. At the start of the novel, the New Woman analog Valeria DuPrel enjoins that "sacrifice has been the means of progress from the beginning of all things" (104). It soon becomes clear that such a sacrifice will be demanded of the novel's

heroine Hadria Fullerton, as she is forced to abandon her dreams of studying music composition in Paris in order to support her husband and family. The constant demand for self-abnegation, combined with social limitations on women's work, ultimately forms for Hadria a "vast abyss, black and silent," as her attempts to find fulfillment through running away to Paris, composing experimental music, and conducting an affair with the intellectual Professor Theobald ultimately fail, one after another, and both duty and social censure continually pull her back into the domestic sphere. Succumbing to this abyss is figured as martyrdom, as Hadria's becomes another of the "bodies of women, hurled down to the depths of the pit of darkness, in order that the survivors might, at last, walk over in safety" (375). Though Hadria cannot help but bring a sense of teleology to her own sacrifice, the ruin of her potential is portrayed as both inevitable and unnecessary, the fruitless repetition of a pattern that damages women who do not "fit" into their proscribed sphere.

<10>Caird interrogated this pattern most thoroughly in her 1915 novel *The Stones of Sacrifice*. In this novel, which follows the fates of several Scottish families, Caird again advances the idea that women are sacrificed to traditional gender roles much as disabled people are marked out for social sacrifice by eugenicists and social Darwinists. The novel's central character, Graine, experiences a similar string of thwarted ambitions. Yet in exploring more fully the narratives of Graine's sisters and friends, Caird explicitly expanded the sphere of consideration in her feminism to include the marginalized more broadly. The novel's focus on the concept of "vicarious sacrifice" is used to critique the way in which Graine makes herself ill in the name of duty, but also to link women's self-abnegation to other social problems, including the exclusion of disabled people. As Graine's former lover Alpin becomes disenchanted with a socialist group, his awakening allows Caird to portray vicarious sacrifice as a feature that characterizes not only oppressive patriarchy but also any ostensibly progressive ideology that embraced exclusion of the "unfit." After his mentor Cosway Cheyne is disabled in a railway accident, Alpin realizes that the lives of people like Cheyne hold little value for his eugenicist and socialist friends:

> Vicarious sacrifice; that was the long and the short of it: the same hideous idea that had set up those grey old Stones on the moors above Culmore; the same idea that still was torturing many a martyred soul to this day. It lay at the root of the vivisector's doctrine, as of course one had always realized. But one had not realized that it lurked also in the heart of most socialist dogma. In the foreground, a sincere, nay a passionate concern for human welfare; at the back of it all, a steely resolve to seek that welfare at the cost of no matter what

martyrdom to any being weak enough to be made the scape-goat for the people's sins. (179)

Alpin's fallout with the socialists complicates the simple equation of femininity to disability that had served so much of earlier Victorian feminism. By acknowledging the lived experience of disability and the value of disabled lives, Caird delivers a warning to feminist contemporaries such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Jane Hume Clapperton: any so-called "progressive" ideology that embraced eugenics had more in common with oppressive traditions than its supporters might like to admit.

"The Alternatives": Supplanting Fitness with Care

<11>In addition to problematizing the sacrifice of variant types, both Schreiner and Caird engage in what Sally Ledger has characterized as "contesting the logic of evolutionism on its own terms" (27), portraying the doctrine of survival of the fittest as antithetical to human progress. In a social Darwinist model, Caird'sHadria Fullerton warns, "the smallest, meanest, poorest, thinnest, vulgarest qualities in man and woman are those selected for survival, in the struggle for existence" (292). Schreiner would go further in her final novel, *From Man to Man*, which was posthumously published in 1926. The novel features a protagonist named Rebekah, who is a philosopher and a student of natural history. While she too struggles with expectations of self-sacrifice, this struggle gives rise to explicit debates with eugenic thinking. During one of these intense debates, Rebekah asks herself, "The fittest survived!—the fittest for what?" She quickly supplies an answer, reframing the survival of the fittest as the "survival of those most fit to destroy" (216, 221). Anticipating one of the arguments of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Rebekah contemplates how many women have been "destroyed" by this doctrine, asking "What has humanity not lost by the suppression and subjection of the weaker sex by the muscularly stronger sex alone?" (219). Rebekah moves beyond the suggestion that women are impaired by patriarchal oppression to extend explicit consideration to disabled people. Still debating a phantom eugenicist, Rebekah accuses "You say, at least let us kill out the hopelessly unfit, the invalid and the sickly and the consumptive: under this law you may ordain to destruction the bright, the lovely and most beneficent of the race" (197).

<12>Schreiner not only rejects the doctrine of survival of the fittest but offers an alternative to the violence and competition such a doctrine implies. Rather than the "fittest," Rebekah argues, it is "those who have loved and aided each other most [who] have survived" (220). Rebekah offers a vision of human society founded upon an ethic of care akin to that propounded by scholars of feminist disability studies:

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“From the time when, in a dimly living form, amoeba sought and touched amoeba, and, meeting, broke out into a larger form and divided into fresh forms, life has been governed, step by step, through the long march and advance in stages of life, by union; love and expansion of the ego to others has governed life” (209). Schreiner’s system anticipates Eva Feder Kittay’s foundational proposal for a disability-informed “ethics of care based on vulnerability” (xv). Her vision of interwoven amoebas also bears a resemblance to the disability justice “care webs” foregrounded by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in *Care Work*; these webs, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, operate as models of communities that shift perceptions of access and care “from an individual chore … to a collective responsibility that’s maybe even deeply joyful” (28). This vision is explored, if not fully realized, in Schreiner’s fiction through the depiction of interdependent caring relationships, many of which are centered on disability.

<13>The first of these relationships develops between Undine and Diogenes. Self-exiled to the Kimberley, Undine finds herself destitute, grieving her child and bereft of human connection. When she can take time away from her ironing work, Undine visits Diogenes and the two share stories, Diogenes relating the genesis of her impairment and explaining her plans for her beloved rose plant, while Undine spins allegorical fairy tales. Undine soon comes to refer to the young woman as “MY ONLY LITTLE FRIEND” (334). Before Undine’s death, Diogenes tells Undine “I love you better than anything, better even than my rose bush” (358). The image of Undine caring for Diogenes caring for her rose bush seems a perfect figure for the system of “nested dependencies” that Martha Stoddard Holmes (2), Talia Schaffer (195), and other critics have identified in Victorian fictions that valorize interdependency, yet the community of care that the two women have established ultimately cannot save Undine, who drains her savings, resources, and eventually her life in the one-sided relationship with miner William Brown. William recovers his health thanks to Undine’s nursing and returns to England using Undine’s money, but for Undine, sacrifice ultimately wins out, and she dies alone under the African stars.

<14>Like Undine, *From Man to Man*’s Rebekah is driven by an ethic of care, though Rebekah’s motivations are often explicitly coded as maternal. In the early chapters of the novel, the birth of her fragile sister Bertie is portrayed as a significant event in Rebekah’s life: a young Rebekah instantly declares Bertie “my baby” and insists “I only want to take care of it and teach it” (47, 71). Though her marriage and her own children disrupt the intensity of that care, Rebekah nevertheless offers Bertie a safe haven after Bertie’s reputation is ruined and then works tirelessly to find Bertie while Bertie is immured in the London home of the controlling man who had

essentially purchased her services as a mistress. In defense of her care for Bertie, and in a challenge to the ethic of "rational reproduction" that animated the writing of many of Schreiner's fellow New Women, Rebekah insists, "Everywhere mother-love and the tender nurturing of the weak underlies life, and the higher the creature the larger the part it plays" (210). If, as Berkman has argued, Schreiner sought to "envision alternatives to the social and symbolic order of oppositional and deferential patterns embedded in colonial Victorian views of human differences" (6), it seems clear that caring—maternal care, disability care—is one of the essential pillars of the alternative value system Schreiner imagines. Before Schreiner's manuscript breaks off, Rebekah leaves her husband Frank after numerous infidelities; in the last extant chapter, the narrative jumps ahead by 5 years and readers learn that Rebekah, while continuing to seek news of Bertie, has left Cape Town and moved to a farm in the South African countryside with her children and with Sartje, the child of Rebekah's husband and an unnamed servant woman, whom Rebekah has adopted and "treated in all ways as her own child." From *Man to Man* is unfinished, so it is difficult to determine whether the tyranny of sacrifice would catch up to either Bertie or Rebekah, though Schreiner's husband later speculated that she'd intended for an ailing Bertie to be found in a brothel and brought for care to Rebekah's farm. The farm offers a clear vision of the kind of "community of caregivers" that disability often enables in Victorian fiction, as Schaffer points out (192), and it's worth noting, too, that with the inclusion of Sartje, Rebekah explicitly expands her community of care to include women of color. Without an ending, however, it is challenging to assess whether the emphasis on "mother-love" in Schreiner's most "womanly" book would ultimately reproduce hierarchical assumptions in her vision of care.(10)

<15>While Caird, too, embraced an ethic of care, she often portrayed motherhood as an "oppressive patriarchal institution" (Heilmann, "Wild Woman" 69), and was cautious of the ways in which gendered expectations to provide care could limit women. Thus, rather than "mother-love," Caird tended to stress building coalitions of care across diverse groups. Richardson has noted that Caird was "acutely aware of the need to value difference" (200); this attitude is expressed most clearly in Caird's 1897 essay "The Suppression of Variant Types," in which Caird warns that "average humanity … is becoming more and more the real potentate in the democracy," and insists that "the health of society depends upon its power of producing variations in the type" (*The Morality of Marriage* 199, 210). In her fiction, Caird explores the liberatory possibilities of coalitions among society's variant types: as Hadria and her sister speculate in *Daughters of Danaus,* "A conquering race … governs its subjects largely through their internecine squabbles and jealousies. *But what if they combine——?*" (473). While such "combinations" of

oppressed people are sometimes rendered in Caird's writing as feminist sisterhoods, they are also explicitly presented as alternatives to the "vicarious sacrifice" demanded by eugenics. Professor Fortescue—whom Caird often positions as the voice of wisdom in opposition to New Woman stand-in Valeria DuPrel's misguided dogma—articulates this clearly as the two debate the doctrine of survival of the fittest. Fortescue explains, "It is not to the cowardly sacrifice of the unfortunate that we must trust, but to a more brotherly spirit of loyalty, a more generous treatment of all who are defenceless, a more faithful holding together among ourselves—weak and strong, favoured and luckless" (104).

<16>In keeping with this prescription, Caird's novels consider visions of communities "holding together" around disability in ways that also offer potential liberation from confining gender roles. In her 1889 novel *The Wing of Azrael*, Caird uses Gothic tropes to emphasize the hierarchical violence of traditional Victorian marriage. The novel's heroine, Viola Sedley, forms an affinity with rheumatic gardener Old William, in whose "bent" and "crumpled" form she recognizes a fellow sufferer. While seeking an alternative to the unhappy marriage toward which she is being shepherded, Viola, who has been raised to believe that unmarried women are "cumberers of the ground," experiences an "ecstasy" of "fellow-feeling" watching William forced to garden in a rainstorm that aggravates his illness (1: 143, 148). Both Viola and William, Caird implies, are constrained not by innate inferiority but by unjust circumstance, and Viola engages in a brief fantasy of an alliance forged on these grounds. She imagines saying to William, "Let me come to you and comfort you; let me be a daughter to you; let me work for you and for myself; and then perhaps your lot might be brighter, and then I should not need to seek the favour of any man for the sake of house and home, or to avoid remaining here to be a burden to my father and the world" (1: 148). This vision of an alliance, founded in a "dyad of care" akin to those Martha Stoddard Holmes has located in earlier Victorian fiction (3), offers a brief glimpse of the liberatory possibilities of social structures informed by neither social Darwinist competition nor by patriarchal oppression. Unfortunately for Viola, she cannot bring herself to speak about, let alone act upon, such an alternative. In contrast, Alpin Dalrymple, the male protagonist of *The Stones of Sacrifice*, actively seeks alternatives to relationships structured by patriarchy and capitalism; he founds a socialist group reminiscent of the Men and Women's Club, yet he eventually breaks with his fellow socialists over their insistence that the sacrifice of individual rights is an acceptable price to pay for overall social advancement. As previously mentioned, the disabling of Alpin's mentor Cosway Cheyne in a railway accident is one of the "lightning strokes" (223) that illuminate Alpin's rejection of socialism. Alpin cares for Cheyne through the accident's aftermath such that "he owed his recovery to Alpin's devotion and constant

presence" (228), but interestingly it is Cheyne's refusal to decry vivisection that ultimately solidifies Alpin's disenchantment with his former mentor's philosophy: Alpin realizes bitterly that even Cheyne subscribes to the "Law of Sacrifice," reasoning that for Cheyne "it was … only a matter of being unimportant and defenceless enough" (240). Against this principle, Alpin strikes out to find an alternative set of ideals, one that would perform the "tremendous evolutionary task of superseding that ugly law." Alpin's "new creed" is at the heart of several unconventional coalitions formed by the novel's end, including Alpin's "individualistic marriage" to Claudia in which the two share separate apartments with only a conjoined living room. The new creed also informs the couple's radical humanitarian group called "the Alternatives," who seek to interpose the "positive, living substitute of sympathy for the negative idea of sacrifice" (384).

Survival of the Unfit: Imagining Futures for Disabled Women

<17>While their coalitions of care offered vivid "alternatives" to the cruelty and competition inherent in social Darwinism, Caird and Schreiner's most transgressive challenges to eugenic thinking arise not from direct debate but from their ability to imagine futures for disabled women.

<18>Schreiner's husband, S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner, added a note to the 1926 edition of *From Man to Man* explaining what Schreiner had revealed to him about her plans for the unfinished ending. According to Cronwright-Schreiner, Bertie was not fated to survive despite being found and brought to Rebekah's farm. Rebekah, however, "lived on," escaping the fate of *Story of an African Farm*'s Lyndall, raising her biological and chosen children on her own amidst the sunny flats of the Karoo (482–83). Interestingly, her survival in a world which had again and again deemed her "unfit" is a fate shared by none other than *Undine*'s Diogenes. Shortly before her death, Undine consoles her flagging spirits by imagining a day when Diogenes will look back fondly on their friendship: "in the years to come," she predicts, "Diogenes shall grow into a great, coarse, red woman as her mother was before her—the mother of many children, the wife of many husbands whom she may drop as easily as she does every hour the words that are not choice." Into such a future, Undine imagines, "there will come hours when the one pure and tender memory of her childhood will come back to her" (359). While the future Undine imagines for Diogenes is certainly not idyllic, it *is* a future, and as such it stands in stark contrast to the fate of Undine herself, Lyndall, and many, many other protagonists of New Woman fiction and their disabled kin. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer proposes the term "crip futures" for visions of "futures that embrace disabled people, futures that imagine disability differently, futures that support multiple ways of being" (45). Though

perhaps not a fully realized "crip future," the future Schreiner envisions for disabled women—for "mad" Rebekah and "crippled" Diogenes—gestures toward a more inclusive world, even as it remains one of her most vivid negations of what she called the "theory that humanity can be perfected on earth only by the stronger jawed, longer clawed, biggest bellied preying on the smaller" (22).

<19>Perhaps even more than Schreiner, Caird too, invited readers to envision alternate futures for women: Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in her afterword to *The Daughters of Danaus*, praised Caird for her "brave decision to let Hadria live," noting that this choice runs counter to the "powerful influence of the European fictional tradition that kills women" (513). Caird's choice to subvert conventions in this way, I would argue further, leaves a space for the "survival of the unfit" that grew increasingly capacious throughout her work, expanding to include disabled women. In *The Wing of Azrael*, for instance, it is left unclear whether Viola Sedley will survive after she stabs her abusive husband. Pushed past her breaking point by her husband's cruelty, Viola is explicitly diagnosed with insanity by the novel's narrator, who observes "if sanity has for its standard the condition of the average mind in similar circumstances, Viola must certainly have been pronounced to have gone far beyond that boundary-line" (2: 137).(11) Like Bertha Rochester, Lucy Audley, and earlier Victorian madwomen, Viola is enabled by her madness to strike out violently against domestic oppression; however, Caird is vague about whether Viola will share their fate. Instead, the novel ends on a literal cliffhanger in which Viola disappears over a steep hill toward the sea. Her lover, Harry Lancaster, grimly forecasts Viola's death, speculating that she is intent on "giving herself to the sea," even while he also acknowledges a potential escape route: "though the fatal cliff lay beyond the ridge, the boat lay beyond it also, and Viola knew of it" (3: 221). The novel ends as clouds cover the moon, plunging the final, dramatic scene into "rayless, impenetrable darkness" (3: 224). While critics such as Patricia Murphy and Ann Heilmann have interpreted this ending as a reference to suicide,(12) my reading aligns more closely with that of Marina Cano, whose recent analysis concludes that Caird's stylistic choices imbue the ending with a "sense of flux and living, which imply that Viola's life, like feminine writing and the feminine self, is after all open-ended" (9). The ending's explicit and deliberate obscuring of Viola's fate, I would argue further, invites readers to participate in what Christian Lewis has theorized as "narrative side-stepping," a mode of reading that "embraces expansive narrative possibilities for disabled characters" and acknowledges how they make space for themselves "beyond the boundaries of normalcy and narrative" (462–63). The novel's invitation to side-step Viola's death ultimately constitutes a refusal entirely to foreclose a future for Viola as a disabled woman, leaving open at least the potential for more expansive possibilities.

<20>These possibilities are explored more thoroughly in *The Stones of Sacrifice*, not only through the anti-eugenic proclamations of Alpin and Claudia's "Alternatives," but also through the novel's treatment of Leah Galbraith, Graine's "mad" sister, an "extraordinary girl [who] would assuredly have been burned for a witch in the Middle Ages" (10). Not quite an antiheroine nor exactly a cautionary tale, Leah is a complex character whose actions enable some of the novel's most radical challenges to social conventions around marriage and gender. Leah's rebellious dissatisfaction with her lot in life is sharpened into an obsessive defiance by the poor parenting of the "stern Calvinist" Galbraiths, whose restrictions she says have induced her to "go mad with misery" (95). Flying in the face of her family's expectations, Leah pursues a string of increasingly transgressive experiences, dabbling in witchcraft, taking a lover, committing forgery, running away from home, engaging in sex work, and eventually joining a Romani company. While Leah's choices are certainly not celebrated by the novel's narrator or characters, they are nonetheless validated as alternatives to domestic stagnation: Leah herself "contrasts her life with that of the respectable; and says that at least she has some choice and freedom," and Leah's defiance prompts Claudia to acknowledge that "women really couldn't subsist on nothing but virtue" (337, 342). Leah's final appearance in the novel finds her "wandering … half dreamily" back into her sister Graine's life long enough to explain that she has joined the Romani, married, and borne two sons, "wild little devils like their forbears" (442). Though her fate is not the ideal "individualistic marriage" of Claudia and Alpin, neither is it the immolation, suicide, or withering away that had so often befallen the Victorian madwomen, fallen women, and New Women who did not "fit" their proscribed spheres. Caird takes pains instead to acknowledge Leah's survival, and to envision for her a future that is defiantly drawn to include not only motherhood (transgressive enough in light of eugenic discourses about degeneration) but even a taste of happiness: "The life is well enough," Leah insists, "Rough, of course, and there are hard times –but we have the sky above our heads and the wind in our faces" (442).

Conclusion

<21>In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Kafer propounds a "politics of crip futurity" that acknowledges the power of imagining "more accessible futures … in which disability is understood … as political, as valuable, as integral" (3). While I would argue that both Caird and Schreiner gesture toward such a politics by exploring alternative possibilities for disabled women, I must acknowledge, too, that the "crip futures" both writers imagine are partial and brief. Their depictions of disabled women oscillate between chronicles of lived experience and reformist parables, constrained by feminist rhetoric about impaired feet and the stunted trees. And

neither writer could clearly imagine a meaningful alternative to teleological conceptions of human development and “progress”: in this way, as Ledger has argued of Caird, both use “the language of the dominant discourse when attempting to challenge it” in a manner that ultimately limits their critiques (28).

<22>Nevertheless, I have sought to highlight the ways in which disability enables their narratives’ radical challenges to eugenic thinking, their rejection of fitness in favor of care, and their explorations of imagined futures for disabled women. Taken together, I would argue, Schreiner and Caird’s novels are texts that ultimately function to redefine disability, positioning it less as a “problem of heredity and sexuality” that New Women could gain agency by conquering (Andree), and more as a lived experience of difference that intersects with gender and reaffirms the social, moral, and evolutionary value of variance in type. This redefinition of disability models a challenge to biological determinism in a way that enhances the feminist project; anticipating the insights of contemporary feminist disability studies, Caird and Schreiner seem to recognize that “integrating disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory” (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 3). Finally, their redefinition of disability also makes space to re-envision the form of the New Woman. With their insistence on disrupting bodily norms and their refusal to be bound by biological determinism, Caird and Schreiner ultimately invite us to consider more closely the role disabled women played in shaping the New Women.

Notes

(1)Historian Anne Borsay observes that the bent tree, in particular, was a common trope used to depict disability in historical medical texts such as Nicholas Andry’s 1794 treatise *Orthopaedia* (97)(^)

(2)Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* is perhaps the most prominent example of this type of critique as applied to Charlotte Brontë’s work: Gilbert and Gubar famously explore Caroline Helstone’s illness, Lucy Snowe’s dementia, and Bertha Rochester’s madness as expressions of feminine discontent and rebellion against “imprisonment in roles and houses” (280).(^)

(3)In this article, I will use identity-first language (e.g. “disabled person”) as opposed to person-first language (e.g. “person with a disability”). I acknowledge that some individuals, affinity groups, and academic and professional fields privilege person-first language for its insistence on the full humanity of people with disabilities. I acknowledge, too, that some individuals, affinity groups, and academic

and professional fields privilege identity-first language for its emphasis on disability as an identity category, or to indicate their adherence to the social model of disability, which posits a distinction between impairment (defined as physical and/or mental limitation) and disability (defined as social exclusion and oppression) (Shakespeare 197). Given my focus here on how Caird and Schreiner challenge their era's conception of disability as a separate and stigmatized identity category—as well as my scholarly affiliation within critical disability studies—I have chosen to use identity-first language.(^)

(4)The perception of disability as an individual problem to be solved through pity or sympathy (as opposed to rights) has been identified by activists and scholars as the "charity model" of disability, thanks in large part to the role played by charity advertising campaigns in perpetuating such stereotypes. Paul Longmore identifies Dickens's Tiny Tim as the prototypical "poster child" and a cultural figure "central to framing the cultural, social, and political meaning of disability" (39)(^)

(5)See, for instance, Berkman 14–15; Burdett 5–6.(^)

(6)In his examination of Schreiner's relationship to socialist Edward Carpenter, Stephen Gray notes that Carpenter characterizes the period from 1887 to 1888 as "two years of considerable suffering" for Schreiner, suffering that was "evidently on account of withdrawal from morphia addiction" (55).(^)

(7)For a detailed account of the debates about contemporary science and pseudoscience that informed the Men and Women's Club, see Bland, chapter 1.(^)

(8)For a detailed survey of the links and fissures between socialist movements and eugenic thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Redvaldsen; for influence of these ideas on the New Women, see Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*; and Ledger, chapter 3.(^)

(9)See Richardson, "'People Talk a Lot of Nonsense'" and *Love and Eugenics,* chapter 8; see also Heilmann, "Wild Woman," 85.(^)

(10)Ledger, among others, acknowledges the imperialist logic inherent in Schreiner's "transcultural concept of maternity," which showcased a lack of awareness that "motherhood was a radically unequal experience for white and black women in South Africa at the time" (76).(^)

(11)It is not my intention to propound a stigmatizing medical diagnosis for Viola or any of the "mad" women discussed in this essay; rather, I invoke this passage in the

spirit of Merri Lisa Johnson's feminist psychiatric disability studies approach, which acknowledges the value in "making illnesses in literature visible as illnesses, recognizing a disability identity in the text" (258).(^)

(12)Heilmann reads this moment as the culmination of Viola's "suicidal urge towards extinction" (182); similarly, Murphy interprets the ending the as the culmination of Viola's backward-looking life, as she is "drowned within … enveloping history" (187).(^)

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