

**WHEN JOHN-BOY LEARNED SIGN LANGUAGE:
HISTORY AND DISABILITY ON WALTON'S MOUNTAIN**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines CBS Television's historically-based drama *The Waltons* (1972-1981) as a case study in disability and American cultural history. Produced throughout the 1970s and the very early 1980s, but set in the 1930s and 1940s, *The Waltons* affords a unique opportunity to view disability through a layered lens—that is through the historical veneer of the Great Depression and World War Two in which the show was set, as well as through the ideological and material circumstances of the 1970s during which the series was produced. The series was not explicitly about disability, but depicted it often, and in a variety of ways with varying results. Relying on oral research with key figures in *The Waltons* production history, as well as on the show itself as text, I unearthed the story of how and why, under unique cultural circumstances and at the hands of certain groups of people, specific ideas and images about disability filled television screens. These discoveries enlightened me to the fact that, in addition to images and ideas expressed in a visual medium such as television, the circumstances leading to the production of said images and ideas are significant considerations for analysis. This dissertation argues that to properly understand the history of disability on screen and to effectively mitigate its stigmatizing legacy, scholars must look beyond the images of disability that have long graced television screens and consider the people and production processes that brought them to light. As this research demonstrates, the life experiences, professional constraints, material and cultural circumstances, and personal views of those involved in making *The Waltons* influenced the series' depictions of disability, suggesting that when it comes to disability and popular media, what we see is not a straightforward transmission of ideas and beliefs about disability. Rather, these representations of disability are an amalgam of circumstances and influences. Understanding these processes is an important step in understanding the interplay of disability, history, and popular culture. Such an approach would likewise be beneficial for unpacking representations of other identity groups for whom representation is especially significant.

*For my dad, Ron.
Thanks for the history lectures and mini chocolate bars.*

*For my mom, Debbie.
Thanks for teaching me to walk with a purpose.*

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INTRODUCTION

History and Disability on Screen

Screening Stereotypes

Disability on screen has a long and storied history, and understanding that history might be the key to refining representations of disability on television and in the media moving forward.¹ In his essay “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” American disability studies scholar Paul K. Longmore urged “representations of people with disabilities in television, film, literature, and the arts needs more detailed investigation...Such studies should draw upon psychological and social-psychological explorations of the dynamics of prejudice against disabled people.”² The value of this undertaking, he elaborated, “would deepen our understanding of both the images themselves and the social and cultural attitudes they express.”³ Per this scholarly call to arms, this study explores

¹ Studies of disability and popular culture have not been limited to discussions of disability on screen. One of the most widely explored topics related to disability in popular culture is the pejoratively-termed ‘freak show’. Leslie Fielder’s 1978 work *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* is among the earliest scholarly treatments of disability in popular entertainment and culture. Robert Bogdan’s *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s anthology *Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), and more recently Nadja Durbach’s *Spectacle of Deformity* (2009) all have advanced the discussion of society’s relationship to disability through popular culture. Scholarly works which explore cultural representations of people with disabilities as found in art, imagery, literature, and public forum have also received scholarly attention. Edited works such as Eli Bower’s *The Handicapped in Literature: a Psychosocial Perspective* (1980), Alan Gartner and Tom Joe’s edited collection *Images of the Disabled/Disabling Images* (1986), David Hevey’s *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (1992); Dennis Casling’s essay “Cobblers and Songbirds: The Language and Imagery of Disability” (1993), Tom Shakespeare’s “Cultural Representations of Disabled People: Dustbins for Avowal?” (1994), editors Ann Pointon and Chris Davies’ *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media* (1997), Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), Carol Poore’s *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (2007), and the edited collection by Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson *Re-presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (2010) all have advanced understanding of the way disability rightfully insinuates itself into larger culture.

² Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 146.

³ Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 146.

incidents of disability on CBS Television's *The Waltons* as an illuminating inroad to understanding representations of disability in American history and culture. *The Waltons* depicted disability frequently and in myriad ways during its nine-year run. Thus, it is a rich resource in terms of examples upon which to anchor the study. Further, because disability was depicted so frequently on this series that was not, strictly speaking, a series about disability, the historian is inspired to ask how and why disability was deployed so frequently as a narrative device.

As an avid consumer of 1970s television, *The Waltons* had long been on my 'to watch' list of TV. Created by Earl Hamner Jr. and based on his own family's history, *The Waltons* was an American television series about a multigenerational family living through the Great Depression in rural Virginia. The family was comprised of husband and wife John and Olivia Walton, and their seven children: John-Boy, Jason, Mary-Ellen, Ben, Erin, Jim-Bob, and Elizabeth. With them lived John's parents Zebulon and Esther Walton. The show aired from 1972-1981, but depicted events from 1933-1946, positioning it temporally in two distinct historical eras. As such, *The Waltons* represents a complicated meta-history of disability because it purported to be telling stories about the 1930s and 1940s, but its production was firmly ensconced in 1970s American culture. The result was a complex rendering of disability as both an historical experience and a contemporary topic. Watching *The Waltons* turned out to be anything but the light 70s television fare I had imagined it to be. Instead, I was struck that, from the show's outset, *The Waltons* put disability front and center in many of its storylines. Case in point, the premiere episode "The Foundling" (14 September, 1972) revolved around a young deaf girl and her family coming to terms with her deafness. The next episode, "The Carnival" (21 September, 1972), featured Billy Barty, a well-known performer with dwarfism and advocate for

the rights of individuals with dwarfism. *The Waltons* premiere season concluded with a special two-hour episode entitled “The Easter Story” (19 April, 1973), in which matriarch Olivia Walton contracted polio and dealt with temporary paralysis. Such incidence of disability continued throughout the series’ run. Because *The Waltons* frequently featured disability, and because it was among the most popular and critically-acclaimed television series during its original run from 1972-1981, it is a strong source on which to build a case study of disability in American culture.⁴ So popular was *The Waltons*, in fact, that it became quite the American cultural export. The series aired simultaneously in Canada, and while most Canadians watched the series through a Canadian CBS affiliate, some border towns were able to pick up a U.S. signal through their television antennae and view the show that way. *The Waltons* was imported by other countries in short order, typically a year or two after it premiered in the States. Some of the countries which aired *The Waltons* included England and Australia, as well as Germany and Italy, where the actors’ voices were dubbed in German and Italian respectively.⁵ It is doubtless no coincidence that these countries were all heavily affected by the Great Depression, and each was actively involved in the Second World War. Thus, *The Waltons* functioned as something of a history lesson for foreign viewers of the series, who perhaps were keen to contextualize their own histories relative to the U.S. experience in Depression and war, albeit a rural Virginian experience.

This study was first inspired by the whims of a long-time fan of 1970s culture when I, a casual viewer of *The Waltons*, observed its tendency to invoke disability in its storytelling. As a

⁴Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 64.

⁵“Which Countries In The World Were The Waltons Shown? | The Waltons Forum”, *Waltonswbpage.Proboards.Com*, May 15, 2013, <http://waltonswbpage.proboards.com/thread/4026/which-countries-world-waltons#.XGx3c-hKjIU>.

disability historian, this observation piqued my interest, and I soon graduated from casual observer, to fan, and ultimately to critic as I quickly consumed the entire series in anticipation of further disability content. By the time I finished viewing the entire original series, I had a trove of disability content on which to draw, and a new perspective on the scholarly relevance of *The Waltons*. Fellow *Waltons* historian Mike Chopra-Gant observes, “It is very easy to dismiss *The Waltons*, in particular—and often the middlebrow in general—as regressive and politically conservative, appealing to the ‘silent majority’ conservatism, and reproducing the prevailing dominant attitudes within a society.” However, Chopra-Gant cautions that,

such a view is a misguidedly simplistic account of the working of the middlebrow, and overlooks the complicated way that mainstream middlebrow texts like *The Waltons* must continuously rebalance themselves in the ebb and flow of the currents of contemporary politics in order to preserve the verisimilitude of their, admittedly essentially conservative, ideological message; to avoid the situation where they can be summarily dismissed as simply regressive.⁶

I do not interpret *The Waltons* as quite so conservative a text as does Chopra-Gant, for reasons that are elaborated upon throughout this study. Still, I agree with his overall appraisal of how the so-called ‘middlebrow’ tends to be overlooked or misinterpreted. I further agree—especially in the case of *The Waltons*—that television, arguably the loci of middlebrow culture, often walks a fine line between being conservative enough to appeal to the masses, while being dynamic and relevant enough to engage with contemporary culture and politics. The analytical methods used in this study—that is, a dual examination of both producer and product—have been employed specifically to examine *The Waltons* and its treatment of disability. In his book, Chopra-Gant writes that when people found out he was writing a book on *The Waltons*, he was inevitably asked ‘why?’⁷ I too have been asked, ‘why *The Waltons*?’ To that question I say, ‘why not *The*

⁶ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 6.

⁷ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 1.

Waltons?' Practically-speaking, these methods are transferable to any television text, and any area of scholarly concern, not the least of which includes race, gender, sexuality, and class. It just so happens that *The Waltons* and its treatment of disability captured my scholarly imagination, and this study is the end-result. Many times during my research and writing, inquiring minds also asked, 'why not *Little House on the Prairie*?' The show had a recurring blind character.' If readers are interested in how this analytical approach applies to *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), or any other television series for that matter, I encourage them to pursue that interest. When applied to television histories, this approach affords scholars the opportunity to see past the seeming mundanity of the television text, and allows them to appreciate the cultural and socio-political complexities historically associated with producing such a massively consumed and highly regulated form of art.

By the grace of the television DVD boxset, I was able to watch the entire series of *The Waltons* in originally broadcast sequence over a short period of time, and I observed that disability remained a consistent theme throughout the course of the series' original nine-year run. Having viewed all 221 original episodes of the series, I next re-viewed and critically assessed all episodes relevant to disability. What I discovered in deconstructing these episodes mainly reflected earlier arguments made by scholars of disability with regards to problematic representations of disability in television. Scholars such as Lauri Klobas and Longmore, both from the United States, have identified that when it comes to disability in television and film, the majority of disabled characters are resigned to similar fates. Often disabled characters are vehicles through which to explore issues of morality and personal character. Too often, they note, disabled characters are invoked to highlight the virtues of the 'able-bodied saviour', a character without a disability who somehow redeems the moral characteristics of the disabled

character—for example, by encouraging them to have a better attitude about their disability.⁸ On *The Waltons*, this is so in the instance where eldest son John-Boy befriends a recently blinded woman named Ruth Thomas in “The Job” (21 November, 1974). Born sighted, Ruth has only been blind for a short time when she meets John-Boy. Rather than interpreting Ruth’s frustrations and fears about her blindness as a natural period of adjustment to a new set of circumstances, John-Boy and his family perceive Ruth as bitter and sheltered, and encourage her to socialize more and venture out into the world on their terms.⁹ In other cases, the ‘able-bodied saviour’ provides material solutions to mitigate a character’s disability—for example, by introducing the character to sign language, or constructing a ramp in a wheelchair-inaccessible environment. The Waltons take on both feats, the former in “The Foundling” when they meet a young deaf girl whose parents feel ill-equipped to handle her disability, and the latter in “The Obstacle” when the Waltons endeavour to help a friend of John-Boy’s adjust to life as a paraplegic following service in WWII.

Other tropes common in disability representation, according to Longmore and Klobas, involve depicting disabled characters in seemingly incongruent, but nonetheless repetitious ways. They may be either maladjusted to their disability, or so well-adjusted to their disability that they provide an emotional education for their non-disabled counterparts about what it is like to live with a disability, and to be a resilient individual generally.¹⁰ Some depictions of disability, such as that of John Merrick in David Lynch’s *Elephant Man* (1980), rely on a narrative of horror,

⁸See Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), and Lauri Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film*, (Jefferson: McFarland, 1988).

⁹ *The Waltons*, “The Job”, aired November 21, 1974 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2006), DVD.

¹⁰ See Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), and Lauri Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film*, (Jefferson: McFarland, 1988).

perverse curiosity, and pity to tell their tales.¹¹ According to American disability advocate and writer for the Disabled People's Association Jorain Ng, disabled characters might be monstrous outcasts, or on the opposite end of the spectrum they might be saintly or even semi-mystical figures, such as Forrest Gump in Robert Zemeckis' 1994 film of the same name.¹²

Another common stereotype applied to disabled characters in film and television is one of asexuality. Disabled characters are seldom objects of desire and romance in television and film. In 2017, American writer and disability advocate Keah Brown rewrote this narrative and started a movement when she coined the hashtag '#disabledandcute', a response to the historically asexual, infantilizing, and generally lacklustre representations of disabled bodies in popular media. Correspondingly, U.S. Comedian and disability rights activist Maysoon Zayid has made a career of reframing disability through her comedy routines, and her speaking engagements. Her work spotlights disabled joy, and advocates for authentic and diverse representations of disability on stage, television, and film. As Zayid has made clear through her work, roles for characters with disabilities frequently are awarded to actors without disabilities, and are often written as white.¹³ Zayid has been instrumental in shifting this perspective through her work in the entertainment industry as a disabled woman of colour.

While *The Waltons* engaged in many of these problematic stereotypes, the series did not appear to propagate egregiously offensive or deliberately discriminatory images of disabled people. Rather, it appeared the opposite was intended by these disability-themed episodes. Thus,

¹¹ Jorain Ng, "Heroes, Villains, and Victims: Images of Disability in Movies," *Vox Nostra: A Voice of Our Own, Disabled People's Association*, <https://disabledpeoplesassociation.wordpress.com/2014/10/31/disability-in-movies/>. See also Nadja Durbach's *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 33-57.

¹² Jorain Ng, "Heroes, Villains, and Victims: Images of Disability in Movies," *Vox Nostra: A Voice of Our Own, Disabled People's Association*, <https://disabledpeoplesassociation.wordpress.com/2014/10/31/disability-in-movies/>.

¹³ Maysoon Zayid, "Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair," *Women's Media Center*, February 8, 2017. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/disability-and-hollywood-a-sordid-affair>.

when it comes to disability on screen, it is rarely as simple as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ disability representation, but ‘better’ and ‘worse’ disability representation. And the distinction sometimes resides in the origins of those representations. In the case of *The Waltons*, there were often problematic components in its depictions of disability, but also complicating factors which explained, though seldom justified, these images. This is not to say that good intentions or so-called ‘rational’ explanations account for poor representation. They do not. This is to say that the circumstances which lead to the production of such images needs to be taken into account if one wants to get at the heart of what drives these issues.

Though evidently well-intentioned in their construction, nonetheless, disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* often relied on a series of tropes, as well as inauthentic casting, in their narratives/storylines, and thereby contributed to the legacy of problematic portrayals of disability on screen. I could not ignore the problems with the material before me, nor could I censure a television series without understanding how and why these transgressions occurred. Popular entertainment does not exist in a vacuum, and the finished product of a television series or film is a visual artifact resulting from a multifaceted and complex production process. Each person involved in this process has a distinct job to accomplish, a chain of command to follow, and a set of personal and professional circumstances that inform the decisions they make, and ultimately shapes the final product for audiences. Thus, it is incumbent upon historians to examine more deeply the context behind some of the most enduring images on television, particularly those that revolve around such culturally significant topics as disability.

This is precisely what I did in the case of *The Waltons*. I interviewed nearly all of the surviving original cast members, as well as some writers, directors, producers, and production assistants of the series. I inquired generally about the work they did on the series, and

specifically about the series' disability-themed episodes. See appendix D for more on the kinds of questions I asked my interviewees. From these interviews, I unearthed the story of how and why, under specific sets of cultural circumstances and at the hands of specific groups of people, certain ideas and images graced television screens. Most significant was that the binary, which I had naively presumed to exist between television as power structure and disabled people as its hapless casualties, eroded as I became familiar with the cast and crew and their stories. The following chapters elaborate on these discoveries and demonstrate that the circumstances leading to the production of images and ideas are just as revealing as the images and ideas themselves.

When one moves beyond television images themselves, and explores the context and production history behind those images, a nuanced history of disability on screen begins to emerge. What audiences see on television is filtered through the various constraints and influences always acting on television production—time, money, competing visions and interests, personal experience and frames of reference, availability of resources, be it equipment or personnel, etc.—and therefore the final product is a mediated version of an artistic vision. In the case of *The Waltons* what was said and shown about disability was further mediated by the fact that story-lines about disability had to bear some historical authenticity per the show's setting. However, these storylines also had to resonate with the 1970s audience for which they were intended, and they were crafted by people living through and experiencing the culture of the 1970s. Therefore, one cannot assume that a given portrayal of disability on *The Waltons*, or any other television series, is an accurate reflection of a production team's intentions and ideals. Rather, these portrayals reflect the constraints of the fictional universe in which they are being told, as well as the professional needs, interests, experiences, and limitations of those creating that fictional universe.

The significance of this particular study is apparent when one considers that *The Waltons* was a cultural artifact in which millions of Americans were engaged. Series' creator Hamner Jr. recalled fondly

By the end of the [first] season *The Waltons* was number one in the ratings and when the Emmys were handed out in May of 1973, Cecil Smith wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, 'The Waltons, to nobody's surprise, was voted the best series and won five other awards'...The series would stay on the air for nine full seasons. On some Thursday nights it was seen by as many as fifty million viewers. It won many awards in the years to come¹⁴

Considering its critical acclaim and mass appeal, *The Waltons'* legacy in American history cannot be overlooked. Disability historians would do well to pay attention to ubiquitous pop cultural artifacts like *The Waltons*, given their reach and influence.

The subject of this study is timely and relevant, as increasing attention is being paid to diversity, or lack thereof, in the media. Attention is being paid, in part, as a result of social media movements such as #OscarsSoWhite, a critique of the 2016 Academy Awards, which disproportionately favoured white nominees over nominees of colour. While the 2017 Academy Awards saw a marked improvement in the representation of people of colour, the Academy's attempts at increasing diversity did not extend to disability. U.S. disability justice activist Gregg Beratan lamented "As long as Hollywood prefers caricatured performances by nondisabled actors crippling up, we will be denied the opportunity of seeing the many wonderful disabled actors display their talents and earn acting awards."¹⁵ In 2019, disability communities responded to the Academy Awards' long-standing exclusion of nominees with disabilities with a hashtag of their own, #OscarsSoAble. Beratan affirmed what other scholars and activists have observed

¹⁴ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 64.

¹⁵ Gregg Beratan, as quoted in Maysoon Zayid, "Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair," *Women's Media Center*, February 8, 2017. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/disability-and-hollywood-a-sordid-affair>

when he elaborated that, even in instances where characters with disabilities *are* featured in significant storylines, such stories inevitably default to one of three major tropes: “You can’t love me because I’m disabled!” ‘Heal me!’ or ‘Better off dead.’”¹⁶ People with disabilities are not content with mere representation on screen. They desire authentic and affirmative representations of their experiences, as well as inclusive and representative casting of performers with disabilities.

Poorly rendered images of disability on screen are equally, if not more, harmful than the erasure of disability from popular media. In her blog post “No, Bad TV Portrayals of Disability are Not Good Learning Opportunities,” Canadian disability studies scholar Kim Sauder responded to a comment by a Twitter user who claimed that despite, or perhaps even because of, its inauthentic portrayal of autism, the Netflix series *Atypical* represented a good opportunity for neurotypical viewers to learn more about autism. The Twitter user implied that viewers would respond to these problematic images with curiosity and a critical eye, and take it upon themselves to become further educated about the subject of autism. As many people with disabilities know, this is rarely the case, and the consequences of these problematic images

¹⁶Gregg Beratan, as quoted in Maysoon Zayid, “Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair,” *Women’s Media Center*, February 8, 2017. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/disability-and-hollywood-a-sordid-affair>. Some recent examples of these pitfalls include the following: The 2016 film “Me Before You”, based on the novel by JoJo Moyes, is a classic and injurious example of the ‘better off dead’ trope. The 2017 biopic “Greatest Showman” is a version of sorts of the ‘heal me’ trope. It features Hugh Jackman as P.T. Barnum, cast as the able-bodied saviour of those performers with disabilities whom he employed in his circuses. Another common issue with disability on screen is that actors with disabilities are seldom hired to fulfill the roles of characters with disabilities. The films “Wonderstruck” (2017) and “Blind” (2017) received backlash from disability communities for hiring actors without disabilities for the principle disabled characters in the films. It should be noted that in the case of the former, a deaf youth was hired to portray the younger version of Julianne Moore’s deaf character in the film. In television, the Netflix series “Atypical” (2017), about a character on the autism spectrum, received criticism for both its casting of an actor not on the spectrum, as well as its inauthentic portrayal of autism. ABC’s pitch for its forthcoming Fall drama “The Good Doctor” (2017) has raised concerns among disability activists. According to ABC, the titular character is “Alone in the world and unable to personally connect with those around him” and he “uses his extraordinary medical gifts to save lives and challenge the skepticism of his colleagues.”¹⁶ Critics have pointed out that this description is alienating, and marginalizing to people on the autism spectrum. Further, they cringe at the suggestion that disability is an “extraordinary gift” rather than a matter-of-fact aspect of a person’s identity.

extend far beyond a poorly rendered show. The assumption by some viewers that these kinds of portrayals range from harmless TV, to ‘learning opportunities’, “ignores the harm that can occur if people watch harmful portrayals of disability and believe and internalize those messages.”¹⁷

Undoubtedly, much of what lay Americans know and believe about disability is informed by what they see in popular culture. As U.S. scholar of media and diversity Carlos Cortes put it, “media products—such as movies, television shows, newspapers, and talk radio segments—ultimately function as public textbooks. That is, whatever the pedagogical intention (or absence of intent) of mediamakers, their media products teach. When those products deal with diversity, they therefore *teach* about diversity.”¹⁸ Since the reactions that non-disabled Americans have and the choices that they make when encountering disability in their own lives are highly influential to the status of disability, it is crucial that scholars and stakeholders alike take seriously all factors which serve to create disability consciousness in the United States, including television representation. As Sauder noted, “Disabled people don’t have the luxury of just ignoring harmful representation.”¹⁹ According to U.S. public relations and disability specialist Tari Hartman Squire, “‘People’s values, attitudes, and perceptions are based not only on their real-life experiences but on the perceptions created and shaped by the media, primarily television.’”²⁰ American television scholar Jack A. Nelson corroborated this assertion and explained, “In 1991, a massive study of television viewing in America demonstrated that television has been a major

¹⁷ Kim Sauder, “No, Bad TV Portrayals of Disability are Not Good Learning Opportunities,” *Crippledscholar*, August 25, 2017. <https://crippledscholar.com/2017/08/25/no-bad-tv-portrayals-of-disability-are-not-good-learning-opportunities/>.

¹⁸ Carlos E. Cortés, *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach About Diversity*, (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2000), xix.

¹⁹ Kim Sauder, “No, Bad TV Portrayals of Disability are Not Good Learning Opportunities,” *Crippledscholar*, August 25, 2017. <https://crippledscholar.com/2017/08/25/no-bad-tv-portrayals-of-disability-are-not-good-learning-opportunities/>.

²⁰ Tari Susan Hartman as quoted in Jack A. Nelson, “Broken Images: Portrayals of Those with Disabilities in American Media,” in *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 2.

force in changing attitudes [toward disability]. ‘Television started as an agent of social control,’ wrote the authors of the study, ‘but became an agent of social change.’”²¹

In the best-case scenarios, depictions of people with disabilities on television and in media are positive impetus for social change. Recently there have been some authentic, multi-dimensional, and affirmative portrayals of disability in various entertainment media.²² On American television, ABC’s *Speechless*, and Freeform’s *Switched at Birth* have contributed positively to the canon of disability on screen in similar ways. They both feature major characters with disabilities, portrayed by actors who off-screen live with the disabilities they portray. Both shows incorporate a variety of disabilities into their storylines. The former focuses most on the experience of cerebral palsy, while the latter delves into deafness most heavily. Though both shows sustain discussions of disability throughout their series, they do so in ways that are nuanced. They demonstrate how disability can represent a significant facet of a person’s life, but they eschew the fallacy that disability is definitive. In other words, storylines are rarely *about* disability. By contrast, on series like *The Waltons* and many of its contemporaries in the 1970s and 1980s, when disability appeared it was most often a source of drama, and presented as a specific plot point.²³ In the case of *Switched at Birth* and *Speechless*, stories are about issues

²¹ Jack A. Nelson, “Broken Images: Portrayals of Those with Disabilities in American Media,” in *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, edited by Jack A. Nelson, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 2.

²² In television, recently *Sesame Street* introduced Julia, a muppet with autism, to its cast. *Sesame Street* is no stranger to the organic incorporation of disability on its series. Deaf performer Linda Bove was cast as Linda the Librarian in 1971, and held that role until 2002. A 2017 episode of Netflix’s *Master of None* titled “New York, I Love You” garnered attention and praise for its portrayal of an ASL-using deaf character. The character was shown to be a woman of colour, a bodega worker, a New Yorker, a friend, and a lover, who just happened to be deaf. On stage, a wheelchair-using actor with muscular dystrophy was cast alongside Sally Field in *The Glass Menagerie* (2017) on Broadway. And for the first time in its professional stage history, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* (Indiana Repertory Theatre 2017) will feature an actor with autism in the role of Christopher, himself a character with autism. In film, an actor with Down Syndrome has been hired to portray a major character in the Hollywood feature *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2017), while deaf actor and comic C.J. Jones was recently seen in the blockbuster film *Baby Driver* (2017).

²³ See Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988),

related to family, education, economics, romance, current events, community, and the ways in which disability is delicately and sometimes unconsciously entwined in each of these things. Such storytelling is accomplished by employing actors with disabilities, as well as through hiring disability consultants who ensure that the rendering of disability on these series is authentic and affirmative.

The significance of these kinds of portrayals cannot be underestimated. Citing a study conducted by U.K. psychologists Michelle Clare Wilson and Katrina Scior in 2014, *The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* found that

positive attitudes [towards people with disabilities] were contingent on exposure and interaction. The more time someone spent with people with disabilities, the more their implicit associations improved. These results contribute to the body of evidence that has been amassed since the 1950s when Gordon Allport proposed the Contact Hypothesis. Broadly speaking, the hypothesis ‘suggests that increased contact with out-group members can help to improve attitudes towards them.’²⁴

On a more personal level, U.S. disability activist David M. Perry, and father to a son with Down Syndrome, explained,

the creators of *Speechless* and the family drama *Switched at Birth*...are talking to people with lived experience with disability, casting disabled people to play disabled characters, and using the structure of their respective genres to tell stories that ring true to a parent like me. And by incorporating unconventional families—which resemble my own in their battles over access and stigma—into classic American television genres, they are directing contemporary dialogues about disability straight at a mainstream audience.²⁵

Sarah Kurchak, a Canadian writer with autism, affirms these ideas, writing, “Seeing a part of yourself reflected back in the stories you love is an incredible experience, one that can make you feel like you matter, like you have a place in this world even — or especially — when you’re

²⁴ Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, “The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television,” *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 4. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

²⁵ David M. Perry, “The Shows Shaking up Disability Representation on Television,” *Pacific Standard*, March 7, 2017. <https://psmag.com/news/the-shows-shaking-up-disability-representation-on-television>

being yourself.” For Kurchak, who gained what she believes to be useful insight into neurotypical social mores through watching television, the impact of positive disability representation was even greater. She explains, “If you’re a person who also relies on those stories to teach you about the world, meaningful representation also provides you with something else: a template to help you make all of those life-changing things a part of your reality.”²⁶

If the logic holds that positive portrayals of disability engender positive perceptions of people with disabilities, then it stands to reason that negative or stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities negatively impact the status of people with disabilities in society. Entertainment media which fails to include people with disabilities in its casting and production processes ultimately excludes people with disabilities from affirmative self-representation. Speaking on behalf of the Ruderman Family Foundation, Danny Woodburn, a popular American entertainer with dwarfism, and American disability advocate Kristina Kopic articulated “This is nothing short of a social justice issue where a marginalized group of people is not given the right to self-representation.” In order to combat this marginalization, they suggest, “We must change this inequality through more inclusive casting...teaching the media to hold the industry responsible, avoiding stereotypical stories, and ultimately through the telling of stories that depict people with disabilities without focusing on the disability.”²⁷ Both The Ruderman Family Foundation (2002)—a philanthropic foundation which promotes disability civil rights,—and USC Annenberg’s School for Communication and Journalism (1971)—through their Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative (2007)—have been involved in identifying media

²⁶ Sarah Kurchak, “I have autism. Watching television helped me more than therapy,” Vox, April 10, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/10/15223982/autism-julia-sesame-street-muppet>

²⁷ Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, “The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television,” *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 2. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

shortcomings when it comes to disability representation. The goal of these organizations is not simply to find fault, but to provide practical solutions and support for media outlets to make proactive and meaningful change in their portrayals of disability. Providing a roadmap for how to improve portrayals of disability on screen is one thing, but understanding why these problematic portrayals exist in the first place is another. It is difficult to convince people to change their practices without understanding why they engaged in those practices in the first place. As Sauder put it, “We need to know what happened so we can challenge it.”²⁸

American scholars of mass media and contemporary culture Christopher Smit and Anthony Enns observed that “Historically, the scholarship on cinema and disability has followed the assumption that negative images of people with disabilities on the screen create negative situations for people living with disabilities in society.” They note that “Early criticism on cinema and disability frequently attacked films for presenting derogatory and discriminating images of people with disabilities.”²⁹ Though this project is likewise concerned with the specific portrayals of disability on *The Waltons*, it is equally concerned with how and why these representations of disabilities were produced. To effectively understand and critique the images they see on screen, scholars and critics must know the context behind how the images got there. U.S. cultural historian Robert Niemi explains that treating film—or television, as they case may be—as an artifact means:

dealing with the aesthetic, personal, and political character of the people who conceived it, the historical moment in which it was spawned, the film's genre kin and antecedents, the resources the filmmaker had at hand, the commercial requisites that shape tone and

²⁸ Kim Sauder, “No, Bad TV Portrayals of Disability are Not Good Learning Opportunities,” *Crippledscholar*, August 25, 2017. <https://crippledscholar.com/2017/08/25/no-bad-tv-portrayals-of-disability-are-not-good-learning-opportunities/>.

²⁹ Christopher R. Smit, and Anthony Enns, *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2001), x. They cite Laura Mulvey’s seminal feminist critique “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), and Martin F. Norden’s *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994) as influential texts.

narrative structure, the concrete circumstances of the film's production, and the sort of critical and popular reception it received.³⁰

Bearing this in mind, I set out to understand how an historical artifact and its depictions of disability might look when studied through this lens.

Investigating these factors of film and television production as they co-mingled with disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* is the methodological thrust of this work. This study, then, builds on previous studies of disability on screen by delving into a specific historical television artifact, *The Waltons*, and by focusing on its production of disability, in addition to its disability-themed content. New oral research with cast and crew members affiliated with the series helps to explain why disability was portrayed on *The Waltons* as it was. Longmore explained that oral history offers the historian the power to “cross-question their sources, probing memories and unpacking their deeper layer of meaning.”³¹ He wrote, “Like all forms of evidence, oral-history data has its limitations, but, Ronald Grele has noted, the usefulness of any source depends on the kind of information one is seeking and the sort of questions one wants to answer.”³² Since I am very much concerned with learning what were the contributing factors and intentions behind *The Waltons* frequent disability story-lines, the usefulness of oral testimony is apparent. How disability is portrayed on television is accessible from watching it unfold on screen, but how it got there requires conversations with those who orchestrated its production. Traditional documentary evidence furnishes the details, but oral research attends to ‘motivation

³⁰Robert Niemi, *History in the Media: Film and Television* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), xxii.

³¹ Paul Longmore, in his notes in “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History”, in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 88.

³² Paul Longmore, in his notes in “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History”, in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 87-88. See also Alistair Thomson, “Memory and Remembering in Oral History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77-95; and Mary Kay Quinlan, “The Dynamics of Interviewing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23-36.

and mood'³³, key components of this analysis.

According to British sociologist Philip Elliott, who penned one of the first television production case studies in 1972³⁴, “The self-denying ordinance which has kept sociologists from studying the artist, has led to a concentration on the artistic output...Simplification and generalization are inherent in this approach of examining artistic content for its social meaning.”³⁵ Elliott elaborated,

Studying the production process does not mean simply examining consciously articulated production intentions, nor simply treating technological and organizational systems as determinants and constraints on a creative process. These can be studied, but within the broader aim of comprehending the production situation, the occupational cultures which develop within it, and investigating the way these articulate with wider cultural systems based on the social positions of different groups and the conflicts of interest between them.³⁶

Considered from this perspective, a more complicated history of disability on screen emerges than that which has been traditionally explored.³⁷

How and why disability has been invoked in pop cultural artifacts such as *The Waltons* is a high stakes issue. Due to the popularity and prominence of *The Waltons* in American culture, it is easy to imagine its many invocations of disability had some bearing on public consciousness.

³³ Paul Longmore, in his notes in “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History”, in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 88.

³⁴ Coincidentally, the same year that *The Waltons* premiered on television.

³⁵ Philip Elliott, *The Making of a Television Series: A Case Study in the Sociology of a Culture*, (London: Constable, 1972), 8-9.

³⁶ Philip Elliott, *The Making of a Television Series: A Case Study in the Sociology of a Culture*, (London: Constable, 1972), 10.

³⁷ Martin Norden’s *The Cinema of Isolation* explores both images of disability on screen, and the time periods and industries within which they were created. However, Norden focused only on physical disabilities in his work, and his work was concerned with the film industry, which, as his book makes clear, is in many ways distinct from the television industry. In Norden’s words, he “attempted to account for the fluctuating relationship between mainstream American society and its physically disabled minority, how the movie industry’s evolving portrait of people with physical disabilities has reflected and contributed to that relationship, the major movie-industry people responsible for this imagery, and a sense of the form (especially as it relates to issues of audience positioning), content, and general popularity of the films themselves.” Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), x.

President of the Waltons International Fan Club Carolyn Grinnell explains how one particular episode of *The Waltons* informed her perspective on disability, and influenced the way she reacted to disability when it touched her family later in life. She writes:

Every time I watch ‘The Foundling’ I want to reach out to those special children [children with disabilities]. In the fall of 1995 I really learned what it was like to know a special child. Justin, our two-year-old grandson, was diagnosed as being autistic. Five years later we once again received devastating news. He had cancer...Our faith, love, and family togetherness and our host of friends sustained us. John-Boy and his family reached out and embraced a child with special needs. It made a difference. As we continue to watch *The Waltons* and glean lessons from those various episodes, may we reach out to those less fortunate.³⁸

It is interesting to observe Grinnell and her family’s reliance on ‘faith, love, and family togetherness’ here, as this was a common coping mechanism for the Walton family when confronting adversity, and in particular, disability. The Walton family’s tendency to incorporate faith and family togetherness with medical intervention when dealing with disability is discussed in detail later in this study. That *Waltons* devotee Grinnell pursued a similar course in dealing with her grandson’s disability and illness is revealing. Naturally, a *Waltons* devotee would be particularly inclined to find meaning in the series storylines, but it is not a stretch to imagine that such storylines likewise made an impression on other viewers. According to Smit and Enns “Depictions and portrayals of persons who live with disability in motion pictures have changed over time, sometimes reflecting, at other times influencing, societal attitudes and beliefs.”³⁹ Therefore, the history of these invocations cannot be overlooked, and *The Waltons* cannot be discounted as insubstantial entertainment. It, like any other mass-consumed cultural artifact,

³⁸ Carolyn Grinnell, as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 67.

³⁹ Christopher R. Smit, and Anthony Enns, *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2001), viii.

must be regarded as an artifact that was informed by and had the power to inform the wider culture of which it formed a part.

American media and mass communications scholars Robert Richter, Linda Richter, and Stanley Rothman cited a particularly illuminating example of the cultural resonance of television when they wrote:

TV sitcoms are no longer a laughing matter. Once dismissed as fluff and fantasy, the lessons that Hollywood teaches are now seen as serious business. The wake-up call was Dan Quayle's much-derided 'debate' with Murphy Brown during the 1992 presidential campaign. This exchange smacked of the surreal, as the vice president of the United States criticized the child-rearing techniques of a fictitious television anchorwoman. Yet it inaugurated a serious debate over family values that would not have taken place without the participation of a fantasy character whose recognition factor probably approached Mr. Quayle's, and whose Q rating was surely higher.⁴⁰

It should be noted that during that same campaign, incumbent President George H.W. Bush declared that America's salvation depended on families who were “a lot more like the *Waltons*, and a lot less like the *Simpsons*”, a fact which corroborates the assertion that *The Waltons* was a highly visible, culturally significant, and enduring symbol, and that what *The Waltons* said about disability and other topics mattered.⁴¹ Chopra-Gant states, “It is certainly accurate to observe that American television has, throughout its history, consistently shown considerable interest in representations of family life: the television family is very nearly as old as the medium itself and shows no signs of declining importance.”⁴² For a political party increasingly interested in ‘family values’ throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it is unsurprising that then-Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush turned to television and invoked among the most popular representations of

⁴⁰ S. Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1994), 3.

⁴¹ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 64.

⁴² Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 61.

family to assert his position. Historically, ‘the family’ as a construct has been “ubiquitous in political discourse”⁴³. According to British media and cultural studies specialist Deborah Chambers, “Family values rhetoric is carefully reconstructed by each new generation of politicians in western anglophone nations in the steadfast belief that the discourse of family crisis will be a vote catcher.”⁴⁴ Clearly this was Bush’s hope when we spoke of the crisis of family in pop-cultural terms.

In the early 90s, *The Simpsons*—a satirical cartoon meditation on the American family—had a pop cultural presence as strong as *The Waltons* once had in the 70s. Used as a cultural shorthand, *The Simpsons* reputedly represented the antithesis to *The Waltons*. Whereas *The Waltons* represented the durability of the American family in the face of hard times, *The Simpsons* represented the decline of American family values in modern times. In referencing both *The Simpsons* and *The Waltons*, Bush was able to articulate in a succinct way that he was attuned to the apparent concerns and crises of American families at the end of the millennium, while assuring voters that he had a vision for their salvation. Chopra-Gant astutely observes that the Republican party had been developing a paradoxical rhetoric of progress through regression for years by the time Bush was up for re-election in 1992. In his 1972 State of the Union Address, then President Nixon opined, “The secret of mastering change in today’s world is to reach back to old and proven principles, and to adapt the with imagination and intelligence to the new realities of a new age.”⁴⁵ In its own way, the secret of *The Waltons* success was precisely in its ability to “reach back to old and proven principles” while adapting its storylines “with

⁴³ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 62.

⁴⁴ Deborah Chambers, 2001, as cited in Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 4-5.

⁴⁵ Richard Milhous Nixon, State of the Union Address, 1972, as quoted in Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 27.

imagination and intelligence to the new realities of a new age". The way this formula applied to the series' depictions of disability is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Interestingly, while there are many correspondences in our readings of *The Waltons* as a cultural text, Chopra-Gant's examination of family dynamics and gender politics on *The Waltons* is an example where we diverge. Chopra-Gant largely sees *The Waltons*' presentation of gender and family as having something of a boomerang effect. That is, in instances where characters appear to depart from the traditional strictures of a gendered and conservative southern family life, their choices ultimately reinforce some essential element of those values. For example, Chopra-Gant points out that although eldest son John-Boy strives for a career in the literary world, a sphere which Chopra-Gant argues is a feminized one, John-Boy's anxieties about this pursuit are bound up in his belief that he must pursue a career which will one day support his family. John-Boy is self-conscious about his passion for writing, and worries what his father will think of his desired departure from the decidedly more masculine family business of mill-work. As it happens, John Sr. harbours no specific misgivings about his son's desire to engage in the supposedly feminine practice of writing. His only concern is whether the writing trade will furnish his son with the resources he needs to head a household and support a family. When John-Boy ultimately gives in to his passion for writing, he does so with the understanding that he must find a way to monetize this passion, and prepare for his prescribed role as the male breadwinner."⁴⁶ Similarly, when eldest daughter Mary-Ellen elects to pursue a profession outside the home, rather than exclusively staying at home to serve the needs of her family, she chooses nursing for her career. Her choice of nursing as a profession, traditionally regarded as the purview of women, therefore reinforces the prescribed role of caregiver assigned to women in

⁴⁶ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 95-125

the era of *The Waltons*, and is not radical a departure from the family culture after all. This is especially true in Mary-Allen's case, as she works as a nurse in her husband's medical practice. In this way, even in her profession Mary-Allen persists in serving her husband, and therefore does not transgress the dictates of her feminine role.⁴⁷

When *The Waltons* as a cultural text is taken at face value, Chopra-Gant's observations are fascinating and astute. Considering that a sizeable portion of *The Waltons* fan-base that I encountered during my research appears to engage more heavily with the TV show as text than with the outside forces which created that text, Chopra-Gant's interpretation of the series is not only astute, it is important. However, since my reading of *The Waltons* is influenced by my engagement with the production team who created the series, my interpretation of the show is necessarily different. Whereas Chopra-Gant sees the show as something which uses liberal constructs as a way to ultimately reinforce conservative family values, my interpretation of the show is, essentially, the opposite. Based on feedback and evidence I accumulated through oral research, I perceive *The Waltons* as more so a reflection of the liberal values of its production team, couched in the traditional, familial, Christian values of its characters, and of the family on which it was based. The subsequent chapters of this study bear this out.

Disability Historiography: A Brief Review

During the past quarter of a century, the prevailing model governing disability scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has been a critical-social one. The social model of disability, the roots of which began in the U.K., is predicated on the belief that disability is experienced as a result of encounters with systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and sets of assumptions made by

⁴⁷ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 126-153.

the wider society in which the supposedly disabled individual operates. That is, disability is not the result of individual bodily impairments or specific functional limitations, and this is counter to the perspective of the previously dominant medical model of disability, a model which was most widely applied in medical, technological, rehabilitative, and institutional domains⁴⁸. The medical model “individualizes and pathologizes the disability as a deficit residing within the person”.⁴⁹ As Canadian historian Dustin Galer so succinctly explained,

Disability history is a subfield of ‘critical disability studies,’ which distinguishes itself from the vast array of literature about disability, primarily in the fields of medicine and rehabilitation, by centering analysis on the subjective experience and agency of people with disabilities within a socially constructed environment rather than the ‘objective’ projections of others, which are usually nondisabled professionals writing from their respective fields.⁵⁰

As American scholar of exceptional education Nancy Rice explains, “Like African American studies, women’s studies, and Latino/a studies, which were outgrowths of the civil rights and women’s movements, disability studies’ roots are in the disability rights movement of the 1960s.” She notes that, “In the United Kingdom the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), formed in 1972, was instrumental in politicizing disability in the U.K. and abroad.”⁵¹ Indeed, one of the earliest published explanations of the social perspective of disability was that by British activist and writer Paul Hunt, founder of UPIAS. Speaking on behalf of the union, Hunt explained:

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society... To understand this, it is necessary to grasp

⁴⁸ Catherine Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’”, *The American Historical Review* 108:3, (2003): 765.

⁴⁹ Melanie Panitch, *Disability, Mothers, and Organization: Accidental Activists* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

⁵⁰ Dustin Galer, “Packing Disability into the Historian’s Toolbox: On the Merits of Labour Histories of Disability,” *Labour/Le Travail* 77 (Spring 2016): 258.

⁵¹ Nancy E. Rice, “Disability Studies,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/disability-studies>

the distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called ‘disability’, of people with such impairment. Thus we define impairment as lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.⁵²

In its earliest incarnations, Disability Studies was practicality-inspired, politically-driven, and motivated by the pursuit of inclusion for disabled people.

Stateside, deaf activist and educator Frank Bowe expanded on these notions in his 1978 work *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People*, one of the earliest monographs to explore the social perspective of disability. Bowe wrote: “For two hundred years, we have designed a nation for the average, normal, able-bodied majority, little realizing that millions cannot enter many of our buildings, ride our subways and buses, enjoy our educational and recreational programs and facilities, and use our communication systems.”⁵³ He urged, “We must see that each of us...has played and plays a role, however small, in creating these obstacles, and that each us can contribute to their removal.”⁵⁴ Bowe’s words echoed those of Hunt, as both men identified the social apparatuses which limited disabled people in their quest for inclusion, autonomy, and personal fulfillment in their respective communities. However, as these ideas took root in the United States, American disability activists pursued a rights-based approach to their activism. That is, they saw the protection of their rights through legal channels as paramount to the success of the disability rights movement. Rice notes that in the U.S., “the

⁵² Paul Hunt speaking on behalf of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation in 1976, quoted in Raymond Lang, “The Development and Critique of the Social Model of Disability”, http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lc-ccr/lccstaff/raymond-lang/DEVELOPMENT_AND_CRITIQUE_OF_THE_SOCIAL_MODEL_OF_D.pdf, (accessed July 9, 2015), 8. See also Paul Hunt ed., *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman), 1966.

⁵³ Frank Bowe, *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1978), viii.

⁵⁴ Frank Bowe, *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1978), vii-viii.

disability rights movement advocated for legislation relating to the civil rights of individuals with regard to employment, education, and accessible transportation.” Taking up the mantle of UPIAS, “the Society for Disability Studies...was started in 1982 by a group of American academics led by activist and writer Irving Zola.”⁵⁵

Both Hunt and Bowe lived with disabilities, and this was a characteristic common to many of the intellectual architects of the social model of disability. Born in South Africa, but later residing in Britain, Vic Finkelstein was among these scholars, and in 1981 he published an essay which elaborated on the social model of disability. Of people with disabilities he wrote “To many of us, the single factor which unites us together in our struggles is that it is our society that discriminates against us...The cause, then, of disability is the social relationships which take no or little account of people who have physical impairments.”⁵⁶ Finkelstein elucidated for non-disabled readers the essence of the social model of disability when he explained how their status as non-disabled individuals was predicated largely on the fact that the majority society was designed with their needs in mind. In his essay he argued that if this model was correct, “then it should be possible to prove that other social groups can become disabled in an imaginary society which took no account of their physical status. In such an imaginary society it would be possible for physically impaired people to be the able-bodied!”⁵⁷ Throughout the 1980s, the social model of disability continued to gain traction, thanks to other disabled British activists and authors,

⁵⁵ Nancy E. Rice, “Disability Studies,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/disability-studies>

⁵⁶ Vic Finkelstein, “To Deny or Not to Deny Disability”, in *Handicap in a Social World*, eds. Ann Brechin, Penny Liddiard and John Swain (Suffolk: The Open University Press), 1981, 34. See also Vic Finkelstein, *Attitudes and Disabled People: Issues for Discussion*, (New York: World Rehabilitation Fund), 1980.

⁵⁷ Vic Finkelstein, “To Deny or Not to Deny Disability”, in *Handicap in a Social World*, eds. Ann Brechin, Penny Liddiard and John Swain (Suffolk: The Open University Press), 1981, 34.

such as Paul Abberley⁵⁸.

Over the course of the decade, the social model of disability morphed from an almost exclusively political movement to an academic discipline. Rice cites British sociologist Michael Oliver, himself disabled, as propelling the movement into academic terrain with his book *Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach* (1990), “in which he analyzed how a social issue such as disability gets cast as an individual medicalized phenomenon.”⁵⁹ With the support of U.S. contemporaries such as Harlan Hahn, Gary Albrecht,⁶⁰ and Paul Longmore, this perspective spread among activist and academic circles alike, and before long, disability studies as a distinct discipline emerged.⁶¹ Though the social and rights-based models of disability took some time in gaining authority over the medical model, their persistence well into the twenty-first century is a testament to their power and utility in disability studies.

Once Disability Studies as an academic discipline became established, the kinds of scholars interested in the field grew. Rice explains, “While the political movements initially led social scientists to explorations of disability, researchers in the arts and humanities have also taken up the study of disability.” She points out, “The interdisciplinarity that characterizes the field allows for a variety of methodologies and approaches to be applied to the study of

⁵⁸ See Paul Abberley, “The Concept of Oppression and the Development of a Social Model of Disability,” *Disability, Handicap & Society* 2:1 (1987): 5-19; Paul, Abberley, “Work, Utopia and Impairment,” In *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*, edited by L. Barton. (Harlow: Longman, 1996).

⁵⁹ Including, but not limited to “narratives of disability; analysis of representations of disability in literature, the arts, the law, and the media; challenges to the absence of disabled researchers in academia; the writing or rewriting of histories of disability; creation of visual art, performance, and poetry that highlights the experiences of disabled people in a world built for the nondisabled; philosophies of justice that speak directly to the interests of the disabled.” Nancy E. Rice, “Disability Studies,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/disability-studies>

⁶⁰ See Gary Albrecht, and Judith Levy, “Constructing Disabilities as Social Problems,” in *Cross National Rehabilitation Policies: A Sociological Perspective*, edited by Gary Albrecht, (Sage: London, 1981); Gary, Albrecht, *The Disability Business: Rehabilitation in America* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁶¹ See Harlan Hahn, “Towards a Politics of Disability: Definitions, Disciplines, and Policies,” originally published in *Social Science Journal* 22 :4 (1985): 87-105, accessed from <http://www.independentliving.org/docs4/hahn2.html>; Paul Longmore, “Uncovering the Hidden History of Disabled People”, in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 41.;

disability.”⁶² Like other categories of analysis, the study of disability is enriched by “narratives and analyses of the experience of living with a disability and how that intersects with race, class, and gender.”⁶³ Integrating disability with these categories of analyses has produced such rich additions to the canon as Marta Russell’s various writings on capitalism and disability, now anthologized in a new book edited by Keith Rosenthal *Capitalism and Disability: Essays by Marta Russell* (2019), as well as Ravi Malhotra’s edited collection on Russell, *Disability Politics in a Global Economy* (2016), Carolyn McCaskill et al’s *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure* (2011), editors Kathleen Brian and James Trent’s *Phallacies: Historical Intersections of Disability and Masculinity* (2017), and Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined: (dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018).

Since the topic of this study is an historical one, it is relevant to note that the social model of disability was particularly resonant in the simultaneously emerging field of social history, and that a significant historical literature inspired by the social model of disability emerged as a result.⁶⁴ In 2003 American disability historian Catherine Kudlick published a review essay on

⁶²Nancy E. Rice, “Disability Studies,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/disability-studies>

⁶³ Nancy E. Rice, “Disability Studies,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/disability-studies>

⁶⁴ In 1987, Paul Longmore contributed an essay to *Reviews in American History* titled “Uncovering the Hidden History of Disabled People”. Reflecting on this contribution in 2003, Longmore wrote “Because Stanley Kutler, the editor of *Reviews in American History*, recognized the importance of that field [the history of disability] he authorized me to write the review essay...In it I tried to sketch out a preliminary general interpretation of modern American disability history.”⁶⁴ Longmore reviewed what he determined to be among the most notable examples of contemporary American disability history scholarship at that time, namely Hugh Gallagher’s *FDR’s Splendid Deception* (1985), Harlan Lane’s *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (1984), and Peter L. Tyor and Leland V. Bell’s *Caring for the Retarded in America: A History* (1984). Through his review he concluded that modern American disability history indicates “that whatever the setting, whether in education, medicine, rehabilitation, social-service policy, or society at large, a common set of stigmatizing values and arrangements historically have operated against such [disabled] persons. They also corroborate recent work in other disciplines that is redefining ‘disability’ as primarily a socially constructed condition.”⁶⁴ Paul Longmore, “Uncovering the Hidden History of Disabled People”, in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 42. In the years subsequent to Longmore’s review essay a substantial disability history literature proliferated. Some highlights include Longmore’s own edited collection of essays, co-edited with Lauri Umansky, *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (2001), Susan Burch’s *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (2002), and before that Joseph P. Shapiro’s *No Pity: People*

disability historiography, and speculated on its potential in the future. In “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’”, Kudlick wrote “One need not identify oneself as disabled in order to reap the benefits of this up-and-coming field.” Rather, the field and the scholarly works produced therein “help historians ask and attempt to answer the overarching questions central to our mission as scholars and teachers in a humanistic discipline.”⁶⁵ Kudlick concluded that “disability should sit squarely at the center of historical inquiry, both as a subject worth studying in its own right and as one that will provide scholars with a new analytic tool for exploring power itself.”⁶⁶

Just as both the social model of disability, and disability history proper found their footing, scholars began to question whether the social model was a perfect fit to encapsulate the complexity of the disability experience. Scottish sociologist Bill Hughes and British psychologist Kevin Paterson’s 1997 essay “The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment” explored the limits to a purely social model of disability. They argued “The social model of disability proposes an untenable separation between body and culture, impairment and disability. While this has been of enormous value in establishing a radical politics of disability, the cartesianized subject that it produces sits very uneasily in the contemporary world of identity politics.” As such, they advocated “not for the supersession, but for the expansion of the social model” and proposed “an embodied, rather than a disembodied,

with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement (1993), Steven Noll’s *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst: Institutions for the Mentally Retarded in the South, 1900-1940* (1995), Douglas Baynton’s *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language* (1996), Martin Pernick’s *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of “Defective” Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (1996), and Henri Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability* (1999).

⁶⁵ Catherine Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’”, *The American Historical Review* 108:3 (2003): 764.

⁶⁶ Catherine Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’”, *The American Historical Review* 108:3 (2003), 765.

notion of disability.”⁶⁷ In this way, Hughes and Paterson, along with other disability scholars and activists, advocated for more holistic approaches to discussions of disability. Disability scholars and activists struggling to reconcile an exclusively social approach to disability acknowledged the veracity of the perspective that certain societal conditions contribute to the disabling of an individual, but they quibbled with the perspective that impairment is incidental to disability. They argued that in addition to understanding the social and structural mechanisms which render a person living with impairment disabled—that is, less able to navigate and thrive in their society as compared to an individual living without impairment—impairment itself should once again be fore-grounded in discussions of disability. As Hughes and Paterson put it, “it is an irresistible fact that impairment enters into the experience and politics of disability and is central to the lives of disabled people. Forms of resistance, and the struggle for bodily control, independence and emancipation are embodied.”⁶⁸

Arguments which espouse the notion that impairment must once again be fore-grounded in disability studies should not be construed as a neo-revisionist backlash against the social

⁶⁷ Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson, “The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment”, *Disability and Society*, 12:3 (1997): 326.

⁶⁸ Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson, “The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment”, *Disability and Society*, 12:3 (1997): 326. See also Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson’s “Defending the Social Model” (1997) and “The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?” (2002), as well as Tom Shakespeare’s edited collection *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives* (1998), especially Gareth Williams’, “The Sociology of Disability: Towards a Materialist Phenomenology”, in which he argues that “The fact that disability is profoundly influenced by both social forces, such as class, and differences in the subjective experience of bodily impairment, means that the nature of oppression in relation to disability is not easy to see or articulate, and people speak in different voices.”⁶⁸ For a personal and feminist account of disability, see Jenny Morris *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (1991), *Able Lives: Women’s Experience of Paralysis* (1989), and *Encounters With Strangers: Feminism and Disability* (1996). Morris privileges the voices and embodied experiences of individuals with a range of disabilities and identities, and the work with which she is involved frequently focuses on experience and narrative as much as theory. More recently, her essay “Impairment and Disability: Constructing an Ethics of Care That Promotes Human Rights” (2001) spoke directly to the importance of both the social model and the experiential model of impairment in disability studies. Of the social model’s contemporary applications to disability rights she wrote “The social model of disability gives us the tools not only to challenge the discrimination and prejudice we face, but also to articulate the personal experience of impairment. Recognition of difference is therefore a key part of the assertion of our common humanity and of an ethics of care that promotes our human rights.”

model of disability, nor a return to the medical model of disability. Rather, such arguments are meant to complement the social model of disability which, in part, speaks to the lived experience of individuals with disabilities as they negotiate their social and physical environment. For some individuals with disabilities, their impairments are not incidental to their being, but fundamental to their identity and their daily experience. To deny the existence of impairment and its attendant features, some scholars and activists argue, is to deny individuals with disabilities the right to have honoured the complexity and individuality of their experience.

Canadian disability studies scholar Melanie Panitch points out in her work *Disability, Mothers, and Organization*, “Disability studies grapples with the relationships between individual lived experience and macro social analysis.”⁶⁹ Panitch drew on C. Wright Mills to clarify this point and referred to the distinction he drew between “public issues of social structure” and “personal troubles of milieu”.⁷⁰ The above cited approaches to disability studies are better at conveying the macro social analysis component of disability studies, but they are less effective at communicating the subjective experience component. Like American feminist disability scholars Jenny Morris and Carol Thomas before her, Panitch’s work follows the feminist adage that “the personal is political”. Panitch explains that following this adage allows scholars to “give voice to the subjective experience of disability...rather than focus only on objective barriers and structures”.⁷¹ An increasing number of scholars have capitalized on the scholarly value of exploring the embodied experiences of individuals with disabilities in recent years.⁷² Ideally, individuals with disabilities themselves will be the authors of their own histories,

⁶⁹ Melanie Panitch, *Disability, Mothers, and Organization: Accidental Activists* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

⁷⁰ Melanie Panitch, *Disability, Mothers, and Organization: Accidental Activists* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

⁷¹ Melanie Panitch, *Disability, Mothers, and Organization: Accidental Activists* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

⁷² Hugh Gregory Gallagher’s *FDR’s Splendid Deception* (1999), Catherine Kudlick and Zina Weygand’s anthology *Reflections* based on Therese Adele Husson’s life and writings (2002), and Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner’s

as they ought to be empowered to define their own experiences. In some cases, they are. Paul Longmore's *Why I Burned My Book* (2003) is a fine example, as are Jenny Morris' anthologies. However, in cases where the opportunities or the sources are unavailable to capture the disabled actor's voice, but enough sources exist to reconstruct the lives of said actors, a person-centered approach is still beneficial as it foregrounds individuals with disabilities in disability narratives.

Contrarily, this study advocates for a focus on lay Americans and their everyday encounters with disability in their culture, rather than for a focus necessarily on individuals with disabilities, disability stakeholders, or events and things generally regarded as the purview of disability. The choice to produce a disability history in which historical actors with disabilities are largely absent is a thorny one. In his 2012 essay on the present work and future prospects of disability history, Canadian historian Geoffrey Reaume declares, "Whatever form our past takes in the future, we can only interpret it if we make a deliberate effort to maintain and continue to collect our documentary heritage that is all too easily forgotten and discarded – like so many disabled people were in the past and still are today."⁷³ I agree with Reaume's assertion that this objective is of the utmost importance, and that authorial standpoint is significant in disability history. However, as a non-disabled person who benefits from the power structure between the non-disabled and disabled, the ways in which I explore and deconstruct the instances and institutions through which such power exists are necessarily different.

As a non-disabled ally, it is incumbent upon me firstly to acknowledge that such a power structure exists, and secondly to understand how I—not necessarily as an individual⁷⁴, but as a

Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson (2007) are a few notable examples which have employed a more personal rather than systemic approach to disability history.

⁷³ Geoffrey Reaume, "Disability History in Canada: Present Work in the Field and Future Prospects," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, 1 (2012): 36.

⁷⁴ Though an examination of self is important too.

member of a larger category of identity—benefit from and perpetuate such a dynamic. It bears noting here that I have lived with a mental illness and an eating disorder since childhood. I consider these both disabilities, however, I have never claimed a disability identity as a result of these experiences. I cannot point to many moments in my life where I felt personally excluded, belittled, exploited, or endangered as a result of my mental illness and eating disorder. I am aware that many people living with similar circumstances have felt this way, and I endorse them embracing a disabled identity. This has not been my experience, and therefore I am not inclined to co-opt a disabled identity. That being said, my relationship to these things, as well as society's relationship to me, might evolve, and it is possible that one day I will develop a disabled identity. As it stands, since I do not identify as a person with a disability, I feel better equipped to comment on the non-disabled hegemony and its role in complicating and obscuring the disability experience, rather than on the disability experience itself. I acknowledge that this may be interpreted as attempting to insert myself into a history where I do not belong. I myself am inclined to wonder where I fit in the narrative. Yet, as the spouse of a deaf person, and the mother of a child with a chronic illness, I see daily that I am a part of their disability narrative. I feel an obligation to suss out the relationship between myself as a non-disabled person, and the people with disabilities who make up such a large part of my world. As Kurchak has long advocated, people without disabilities who find themselves intimately connected with disabled people should stick to their own vantage point when examining that relationship. Specifically, she is concerned with the set of parents of autistic children who claim to speak for their kids, who share their stories without permission, and who oftentimes profit from doing so.⁷⁶ This, she argues, is exploitative as well as misrepresentative of autistic experiences. I cannot deny that my

⁷⁶ See Sarah Kurchak's extensive coverage on this topic on Twitter via @fodderfigure.

life is significantly impacted by disability. I am also aware that that impact is distinctively different for me, as compared to my husband and daughter who are actually disabled. Therefore, I am mindful of the differential in power I experience, and I endeavour to ‘stay in my lane’, so to speak, in the work that I do. As an historian, I can accomplish this balance by tracing the roots of power as they stem from specific social constructions. I am something of a pop-culture aficionado, and have long been fascinated by retro popular culture. I was thus inclined to explore the origins of power as they resided within a medium which had a profound influence on me growing up.⁷⁷

By rights, many disability histories focus on historical actors that are either disabled themselves, or who are well-versed in disability and/or invested in the status of disability.⁷⁸ As Reaume points out, this is not only proper, but necessary in developing a representative canon of disability history. Though their merits are undeniable, these approaches reveal less about how disability is perceived and understood by the uninitiated, nor about how disability is represented and negotiated in the wider culture. Shifting the lens away from individuals with disabilities back to the non-disabled hegemony may appear counterintuitive in defining a new frontier of

⁷⁷ If my Partridge Family tattoo, and my grade 6 class photo which identifies me as ‘Haley (Jan Brady) Gienow’ are evidence of said profundity.

⁷⁸ There are many fine examples of such an approach. For Disability History generally, see for example Henri Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), Eds. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky’s *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), and Eds. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis’ *Disability Histories*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014); For sensory disabilities see Douglas Baynton’s *Forbidden Culture: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Susan Burch’s *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to WWII*, (New York: New York University Press, 2002), Therese Adele Husson’s *Reflections: The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary France*, with translations and commentary by Catherine J. Kudlick and Zina Weygand, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), and Kim Nielsen’s *The Radical Lives of Hellen Keller*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004); For intellectual disabilities see James Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); For histories of disability civil rights see Fred Pelka’s *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), and Lennard Davis’s *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

disability studies, however it is a necessary exercise in reconstructing the world in which an individual with a disability lives, and in developing a holistic historiography of disability. American Disability Studies scholar Alison Kafer's work has boasts significant contributions on this front, particularly her work on the political/social model of disability.⁷⁹ Like it or not, the restaurant owner who denies a person with a service dog entry to their establishment, the employer who discriminates against a candidate with a disability for a job, and the movie theatre owner who decides closed captioning devices are not a worthwhile investment, are all informative actors in the disability experience. If, as the social model of disability holds, disability is defined as the everyday social experiences of an impaired individual as shaped by the attitudes and approaches of the dominant culture, then it behooves historians to investigate the processes by which the attitudes of the dominant culture are shaped.

Television was and continues to be one of the key cultural forces at work in America.⁸⁰ The year *The Waltons* premiered, American households spent an average of 6 hours and 15 minutes watching TV daily, and continued to watch between 6 and 7 hours of television per day throughout the 1970s.⁸¹ Presently, "Television is America's number one leisure activity. The most current American Time Use Survey (ATUS) conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that on average everyone over the age of 15 spends 2.8 hours a day watching television."⁸² It should be noted that Nielsen data is both self-reported, as well as recorded

⁷⁹ See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014).

⁸⁰ Speaking of its present form, 'television' is broadly defined as filmed commercial content which is produced by a team and backed by a production company or companies, and which is typically broadcast in serial format. Since much of television is now streamed over the internet using a variety of devices such as computers, tablets, and phones, 'television' is not necessarily that which is broadcast through a traditional TV set. However, my definition excludes content such as video blogs or YouTube videos. Though some may generate revenue, these videos tend to be in the vein of hobbies, or freelance work, and do not satisfy the criteria laid out above.

⁸¹ The Nielsen Company, "Historical Daily Viewing Activity Among Households and Persons 2+," *Nielsen.com*, <https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/newswire/uploads/2009/11/historicalviewing.pdf>

⁸²Bureau of Labor Statistics, "American Time Use Survey: Sports and Leisure Activities, 2016," *United States Department of Labor* <https://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/leisure.htm>, as referenced in Danny Woodburn, and Kristina

electronically through the television, and surveys entire households. The ATUS is self-reported only, and chronicles the habits of an individual. The data are not perfect comparisons, but suffice to say that then, as now, television-viewing represents a significant portion of the average American day. Dismayingly, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that

Socializing and communicating comes in second [to TV viewing] with 0.72 hours on average. Given this sheer volume of time, it becomes clear that television is not merely entertainment, but also a lens through which we view the world. We spend more leisure time with the people we see on our small screens than we do with the real people in our lives.⁸³

Among the people that Americans see on screen ought to be authentically and holistically portrayed people with disabilities. Too often mediamakers fall short in this aim. By relying on *The Waltons* as a rich and representative case study, this work reveals some of the forces which conspired to create a specific set of disability images at a specific time in American history. Ideally the revelations contained herein will serve as a bridge between disability interests and rights, and media interests and commercial art, and will establish common-ground on which to forge a new frontier of popular entertainment which demands full and representative inclusion of people with disabilities.

I reiterate that, though *The Waltons* contributed its fair share of problematic disability storylines to the television canon, when one moves beyond the images themselves, and explores the context and production history behind those images, a nuanced history of disability on screen begins to emerge. Chapter one of this study offers a brief history of television as a medium, and

Kopic, "The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television," *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 3. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

⁸³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "American Time Use Survey: Sports and Leisure Activities, 2016," *United States Department of Labor* <https://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/leisure.htm>, as referenced in Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, "The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television," *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 3. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

discusses frameworks for the study of such a medium. This chapter lays the groundwork for chapter two, which explores how some of the problems endemic to disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* were products of the nature of the television industry itself. Television is an art-form, to be sure, but it is also a business, and a highly collaborative one at that. While series' creators, writers, and actors strive to do their best work and create quality content, the reality is that that content must be as commercially viable as it is artful. What audiences see on television has been filtered through the various constraints always acting on television production—time, money, competing visions and interests, availability of resources, be it equipment or personnel, etc.—and therefore the final product is a mediated version of an artistic vision. For audiences, television is entertainment, but for its creators, it is a job.

Chapter three considers how some disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* were products of the time-period in which the series was set. That is, the messages about disability contained therein were not necessarily a reflection of the production team's feelings about disability in the 1970s; rather, they were meant to convey an authentic and historical disability experience in the 1930s or 1940s. By this I mean, the series paid close attention to essential ideas, features, signifiers, and events of the historical period in question to produce a believable representation of a set of historical experiences. Some encounters with disability on *The Waltons*, such as those resulting from historically-situated diseases, were signifiers of the historicity of the series. Thus, 'authenticity' in this case does not represent reality, nor strict historical accuracy. Rather, the authenticity of *The Waltons* lies in its self-conscious reproduction of a specific time and place, and in its quest to depict this time and place in ways that rang both familiar and true to its audience. The term 'authenticity' is used throughout this project as a shorthand for these aesthetic qualities on *The Waltons*. Taking stock of these aesthetic qualities of the series is

significant because the barriers, attitudes, and assumptions against which an individual experiences disability are not trans-historical. They are contingent on time and circumstances. Thus, the historian must be attuned to the nuances of the status of disability in a specific society at specific junctures. This chapter takes this into account, and considers the influence of time and setting on *The Waltons*' depictions of disability.

The idea of 'relevance programming' was new and hot in the early 1970s, and though in many respects *The Waltons* defied the tenets of relevance programming by being an historically-situated family drama, it was not without its forays into relevant social issues. Where chapter three explores disability as a function of historical 'authenticity' on *The Waltons*, Chapter four examines the flip side. *The Waltons* was meant to convey the experiences of a family living through the Great Depression, but its production team and audience existed in the 1970s. No production team could entirely escape its presentist bias, and few audiences would stay tuned for long to a programme which bore no correspondence or relevance to their real-life. The issues of civil rights and social justice which germinated in the 1950s, and flowered in the 1960s, bloomed further in the 1970s. The 1970s saw an expansion in the definition of those whose civil rights ought to be protected, and among them were the disabled. People with disabilities, like racialized and gendered minorities in the same era, advocated for fair access to housing, employment, and use of public spaces. These goals were partially fulfilled by the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which "prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment and in the employment practices of federal contractors."⁸⁴ Throughout the decade, disability rights activists fought to entrench aspects of the Act, as the full implementation and enforcement of

⁸⁴ Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, "The Rehabilitation Act of 1973," *Laws and Regulations*, <http://www.askearn.org/topics/laws-regulations/rehabilitation-act/>.

said Act was a thing of resistance and debate. Children with disabilities and their allies were also influential in drawing attention to the disability rights agenda, as they sought more inclusive education for students with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act enacted by Congress in 1975 required all schools receiving federal funding to provide equal access to education for students with disabilities as their nondisabled counterparts. Implicit in these Acts was the belief that people with disabilities should be integrated into their communities, and that accessibility, autonomy, and dignity were cornerstones of disability rights. In keeping with this set of beliefs, disabled people—especially those with intellectual disabilities—and their allies advocated that people with disabilities should live, work, and function autonomously in their respective communities. This meant eradicating the long-standing tradition of institutionalizing some people with disabilities, a practice which segregated them from their families and their communities of which they desired to be a part. Throughout the 1970s community living movements for previously institutionalized populations gained momentum, with increasing numbers of people with disabilities finding purpose and place outside of institutional settings. Disability was further made relevant in the 1970s due to a significant population of Vietnam veterans returning from service with acquired disabilities throughout the decade. It is this aspect of disability history that most heavily factored into *The Waltons*' engagement with disability history and disability rights as it related to the 1970s. How disability figured into *Waltons*' story-lines as a proxy for relevance is explored throughout this chapter.

It is easy to forget that the characters who populate our television screens are portrayed by flesh-and-blood actors with lives and experiences as real as our own. Their bodies, like ours, are subject to the whims of disability. With a series-run as long as *The Waltons*'—nine years—

and an ensemble cast as large as *The Waltons*'—eleven principle characters at the outset of the series—it is no surprise that disability affected the cast at different times during the show's run. Chapter five focuses on the embodied experience of disability on *The Waltons*. By various turns disability touched cast members on *The Waltons* in real life, and this chapter details those experiences, and examines how they affected the cast members and the series alike. The centrepiece of this chapter is the story of actress Ellen Corby who portrayed Grandma Esther Walton, and the stroke she experienced while filming year five of the series. She acquired permanent speech and mobility disabilities as a result of the stroke, and the reintegration of Grandma Walton as a disabled character in the season six episode “Grandma Comes Home” (30 March, 1978) was a landmark event, both in television and disability history.

Television is many things. It is an artform. It is a business. It is a product. It is a reflection on society. It is a vehicle for social control. It is an opportunity for social change. But at its most basic level, it is entertainment, and the aforementioned chapters all consider how *The Waltons* invoked disability for the purposes of drama, in conjunction with the other factors which drove the series. This commentary most closely resembles earlier critiques of disability on screen, as it focuses on the content of story-lines on the *The Waltons* where disability's function was partly melodrama. These observations most closely align with the critiques of Paul Longmore, et al. that disability on television is seldom more than a series of recycled, maudlin, reductive, and stigmatizing tropes. This study considers the ways in which *The Waltons* was guilty of these charges. It also considers whether these charges were specific to disability, or whether the genre of episodic storytelling unique to television had a similar influence on other story-lines.

CHAPTER ONE

Television: From Medium to Message

Before proceeding with a micro-analysis of *The Waltons* and disability, it behooves readers to understand something of the history of television generally, and of television culture in the 1970s specifically. This chapter offers a brief history of television as a technological device, as a commercial industry, and as an artistic medium. Throughout its history, television has had its share of pejorative monikers. ‘A vast wasteland’, ‘the boob tube’, ‘the idiot box’, television has become an object of criticism and social concern.⁸⁵ Previously derided as a medium with very little to say, the reverse might be argued presently. Among the hottest debates over television today is the extent to which television can and should be employed as a political vehicle. That is, does television have *too much* to say these days? This predicament is part and parcel of another debate waging in the television industry of the 2010s, and that is the question of whether television is a populist medium, whose content is and should be dictated by its viewers. Viewership translates into profitable advertising revenue for television networks, as the greater the number of people tuned to a program and its commercial content, the greater the amount of money an advertiser is willing to pay to hock their wares during said program. Thus, networks depend on their viewers to maintain profitability, and in this way, viewers influence the industry itself.⁸⁶ That being said, viewers are only influential in terms of the demographics they represent. As American television journalist Les Brown explains, “The game of television is basically

⁸⁵ Newton N. Minow, “Television and the Public Interest”, address to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1961.

⁸⁶ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971), 15.

between the network and the advertiser, and the Nielsen digits determine what the latter will pay for the circulation of his commercial. The public is involved only as the definition of the number: so many persons 18-49, so many others, all neatly processed by television.”⁸⁷ Individually, viewers are powerless, but as a collective their influence is much greater.

And yet, given the increasing consolidation of diverse networks into subsidiaries of major broadcasting corporations—The Walt Disney Company, Comcast, and 21st Century Fox being chief among them—is it more accurate to conceive of television as an elite medium, whose content is controlled by the whims—and sometimes political designs—of its wealthy owners? The top media corporations boast wealth in the tens of billions, and they are responsible for significant portions of television’s content.⁸⁸ In this way, the television industry is returning to its oligarchist roots. When television gained momentum in American households in the mid-1940s, its content was in the hands of three main broadcasters—the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), The Columbia Broadcasting Corporation (CBS), and the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The former two were holdovers from the heydays of radio broadcasting beginning in the 1920s. ABC emerged later in the game, entering the radio broadcast market in the early 1940s, and throwing its hat into the television broadcasting ring in the late 1940s.⁸⁹ For the first three decades post-war, these networks undisputedly reigned in television broadcasting.⁹⁰ Though cable technology as a commercial business existed in the United States as early as 1950, it was not widely adopted, nor was it a highly varied market until decades later.⁹¹ The late 1970s saw increasing variety in the cable television market, and throughout the

⁸⁷ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 15.

⁸⁸ Mary O’Reilly, “The 30 Biggest Media Companies in the World”, *Business Insider*, May 31, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-30-biggest-media-owners-in-the-world-2016-5>.

⁸⁹ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971), 13-14.

⁹⁰ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971), 4-5.

⁹¹ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 491-544.

1980s and 1990s that diversity continued to expand, as did the number of television consumers paying for cable television subscriptions.⁹² Reflecting on the television industry as the 1970s drew to a close, television journalist Tony Shales wondered, “Beyond the usual mercurial trends in programming, the '70s may represent a much larger cycle nearing its end -- the era of network domination of television.” He noted that, “Technological break-throughs involving cable TV, pay TV, and national cable networks linked by satellite became so clearly a threat to the networks that ABC started advertising its prime-time movies with the legend, ‘Another Outstanding Movie on Free Television.’”⁹³ Shales’ characterization of the influence of cable television in the 1970s was a tad hyperbolic, but his predictions as a whole were correct.⁹⁴ For a couple of decades at least, some of television’s power was wrested from the hands of its chieftains.

When *The Waltons* premiered on CBS in 1972, however, it was still very much ensconced in the world of ‘the big three’ networks, which meant its potential audience share was large.⁹⁵ With most viewers preferring to tune in to ‘the big three’ networks over the handful of local and public television stations during this era, it was relatively easy for CBS, NBC, and ABC to captivate a sizable portion of the television-viewing public.⁹⁶ With videocassette recording (VCR) technology being cost-prohibitive, technologically-limited, and non-user-

⁹² Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 545-548.

⁹³ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

⁹⁴ According to Shales, “In 1970, there were only 2,490 cable TV systems in the United States, serving 4.5 million subscribers. By the end of the decade, the number of systems had risen to 4,150 and the number of subscribers to 15.5 million. There could be 30 million by 1984 and in addition to the viewers siphoned off by cable, network audiences will be offered such other diversions as the video disc, video cassette recorders, home computer terminals and over-the-air pay TV.”⁹⁴ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979,

⁹⁵ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971), 3.

⁹⁶ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971), 3-4.

friendly due to compatibility issues across formats throughout the 1970s, network television reigned as the preferred medium of home-entertainment.⁹⁷ During *The Waltons*' run on television, CBS was often the number-one network in terms of ratings—ratings, in this case, referring to the number of households tuned in to a television network. In other words, ratings were a measure of volume of viewers, not necessarily quality of content. Occasionally bested by NBC in ratings during this era, all things considered CBS' status and influence on broadcast television was considerable.⁹⁸ Correspondingly, *The Waltons*' capacity to make an impression on the American public was likewise considerable.

Given its ubiquity in our lives, and, given the fact that most people in the United States today have never lived in a world without television, it is difficult to conceive of television in neutral terms. Because it is present in the most intimate of spaces—our homes—television cannot help being entwined with our emotions. In personal terms, it has been a source of entertainment, of education, of information, of supervision for children, of reward for a dinner well-eaten, of consolation for a date gone awry, of distraction from illness on a sick-day, of debate among family members over which program to watch, and of comfort in times of national crisis. The influence of television in American lives has been demonstrated repeatedly since television became an academic interest.⁹⁹ Its sentimental qualities apparent, those with a more probing interest in television have determined television is by varying turns an artistic lens, a commercial product, a mirror of values, a determinant of culture, a political agent, a thoroughly

⁹⁷ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), "Prime" 149-340.

⁹⁸ See Robert Metz, *CBS: Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* (New York: Signet Press, 1975).

⁹⁹ See George Gerbner's dissertation *A General Theory of Communication* (1958), and his 1968 *Cultural Research Indicators Project*; Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964); Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), and Halls' *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1973); Erik Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); and George Comstock's *Television in America* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

manipulated medium, and a projection of the best and worst of human instincts.

Indeed, television is a complex entity. Consider this: The word ‘television’, or its shorthand ‘TV’, can refer to the physical set itself, to a program, or to the actual process of transmitting moving images and sound. It does well to remember that it is the latter incarnation that launched television history. At its most literal and basic level, television is a machine which broadcasts moving images and sound into homes. In its earliest forms, television was neither an emotional outlet, nor a commercial vehicle, nor a thing which much of a defined agenda. It was a piece of technology which combined the capacities of the relatively recent and much-heralded inventions of photography, electricity, phonography, radio, and telephone.¹⁰⁰ Television was first and foremost a technological achievement when it emerged on scene, which bore no apparent agenda other than to extend technology’s potential. Television technology existed in more-or-less its familiar form—albeit limited—starting in the 1920s, though iterations of television technology existed several decades prior. In his history of television, American television historian Erik Barnouw explains how as early as 1884 German inventor Paul Nipkow fabricated something called the ‘Nipkow Disk’, which was

a rotating disk with perforations arranged in a spiral pattern. A beam of light shining through these perforations, as the disk revolved, cause pinpoints of light to perform a rapid ‘scanning movement’, like the movement of eyes back and forth across a printed page. The devise was at once seen as a way of transmitting pictures by wire, in the form of a series of dots of varying intensity.¹⁰¹

Evolving from experiments such as the Nipkow Disk, television as we more or less understand it today, a “combination of radio and pictures,” broke through in the 1920s, but it was not until the

¹⁰⁰ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 5-6. Say what you will about the socio-political dynamics which resulted in white males being the leaders in television technology, or the politics of patenting the latest technology, or even the potential of television technology as a military tool, first-and-foremost television was a technological achievement when it emerged on scene.

¹⁰¹ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 5.

1939 World's Fair that it really made a splash.¹⁰² Following World War Two—when both the availability of technology to produce quality sets, and the means to afford purchasing them were in greater supply—television began assuming its prominent role in American households.

By the 1950s, television was found to be the greatest source of influence on public opinion and consciousness.¹⁰³ A font of entertainment, news, and advertising, television told people how to feel, what to think, and what to buy. Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan warned that “one of the effects of television is to remove people’s private identity. They become a corporate peer group people just by watching. They lose interest in being private individuals. And so this is one of the hidden and perhaps insidious effects of television.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, in an era sometimes characterized by its commitment to the illusion of consensus in American culture, the extent to which this troubled private citizens was limited, according to some media scholars.¹⁰⁵ Entertainment was not meant to be salacious. It was intended for fun. News ought not be politicized. It was supposed to be informative. And advertising was not blatantly manipulative. It was instructive. Or so viewers were made to think. Television told Americans how to live the best version of the American dream. Reflecting on television in the 1950s, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman stated, “television’s earliest programs featured very little on-screen discussion of ideas and values. This was television’s era of the status quo...this gave early TV a conformist profile in its first decade as a national entertainment medium.”¹⁰⁶ Unsure of its potential, and perhaps secure in a false sense of its limits, by and large television-viewers regarded television as a

¹⁰²S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁰³ Barbara Diggs-Brown, *Strategic Public Relations: Audience-Focused Practice* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special Collection: What Television Does Best*, 1976.

<http://www.marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/interview/1976-what-television-does-best/>

¹⁰⁵ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See chapter on “Objectivity Reconstructed”.

¹⁰⁶ S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 5.

consumer good that represented the promise of American technological prowess, and the goodness of the nuclear American homestead.¹⁰⁷ Consider the fact that the domestic-centered comedy *I Love Lucy* achieved a massive 68.8 audience share when the titular character Lucy Ricardo gave birth to her son during an episode of the series that fortuitously coincided with the real-life birth of series' star Lucille Ball's own son. Barnouw marvels that the event made headline news, with public interest in the episode and its star rivaling President Eisenhower's inauguration.¹⁰⁸ McLuhan explained this tendency toward comity with regards to television when he said:

[W]hen any new form comes into the foreground of things, we naturally look at it through the old stereotypes. We can't help that. This is normal, and we're still trying to see how our previous forms of political and educational patterns will persist under television. We're just trying to fit the old things into the new form, instead of asking what the new form is going to do to all the assumptions we had before.¹⁰⁹

In other words, the fact that television was still a relatively new presence in American homes in the 1950s meant that consumers of television had yet to develop a sophisticated and distinctive appraisal of the medium.

When the 1960s dawned and television entered its third decade as a staple fixture in American homes, some—including no less than the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)—became more critical of the medium which had surreptitiously taken over households. In an address before the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961, then FCC chair Newton Minow opined:

When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers — nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit

¹⁰⁷ S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives*, (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁰⁸ Erik Barnouw, *The Image of Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. 3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special Collection: The Communications Revolution, 1976*, <http://www.marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/panel/1960-the-communications-revolution/>.

down in front of your own television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.¹¹⁰

The landscape of this wasteland may have been occasionally entertaining, but all in all, it was of little value, according to Minow. He explained:

You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly commercials — many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom. True, you'll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try [tuning in for an entire day].¹¹¹

Others in the industry tended to agree with Minow. Geoffrey Cowan, communications and journalism specialist in the U.S., recalled that his award-winning television producer mother “was convinced that [television] broadcasting, as a commercial mass-market medium, would never achieve true excellence.”¹¹² Despite her successes in the television industry, Polly Spiegel Cowan struggled to reconcile her feelings about the medium, as did others in the industry.¹¹³

Considered purely for its content, it is easy to understand why early critics of television struggled to take the medium seriously. Let us not forget that one of the most successful television programs in TV’s earliest years starred a freckle-faced, plaid-shirted puppet with the unlikely name of ‘Howdy-Doody’.¹¹⁴ A children’s program, *Howdy Doody* offered a new method for occupying children, and was an ideal vehicle to peddle relevant products to the children and their

¹¹⁰ Newton N. Minow, “Television and the Public Interest”, address to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1961.

¹¹¹ Newton N. Minow, “Television and the Public Interest”, address to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1961.

¹¹² Geoffrey Cowan, *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle over Sex and Violence in Television* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 9.

¹¹³ Geoffrey Cowan, *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle over Sex and Violence in Television* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 9.

¹¹⁴ Stephen, Davis, *Say Kids! What Time is It? Notes from the Peanut Gallery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

parents alike.

Three years on, McLuhan moved beyond merely appraising television's content when he declared "the medium is the message". McLuhan introduced his now famous treatise on the influence of various media in 1964, in which he considered television in more theoretical and abstract terms. Distilled into a simple aphorism, "the medium is the message" meant that "the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."¹¹⁵ In framing various media as extensions of humanity, and in arguing that the nature and status of said media conveys some kind of message independent of its content, McLuhan opened up the field of cultural studies to new forms of analysis. Mass communications specialists—chief among them figures such as George Gerbner, Stuart Hall, and later George Comstock—particularly benefited from McLuhan's analysis.¹¹⁶ They now had a framework for studying television as its own medium, related to but distinct from other forms of telecommunications.

As the 1960s progressed, and delusions of consensus and harmony in American culture eroded, it only made sense that television, like so many of America's cultural ideals and

¹¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 1.

¹¹⁶ See Gerbner's dissertation *A General Theory of Communication* (1958), then contrast it with his 1968 *Cultural Research Indicators Project*, and you will see Marshall's influence. See Hall's *The Popular Arts* (1964), noted as one of the earliest rigorous studies of film, and consult *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973) for his take on the cultural significance of television. Particularly relevant to this study is that which underpins most of Hall's work, his view that individuals are both producers and consumers of culture. As Hall sees it, culture is a dynamic relationship between its producers and consumers, albeit one that is fraught with hegemonic overtones. Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley explained this phenomenon in writing that such television studies are "concerned...with the entire organization of the television industry and with the substructures of television content as they reflect a particular set of political assumptions. From this perspective television is the most powerful and the most pervasive replication of capitalism yet developed in American society. As a result, in its form and content it guards the values underlying its own success, reflects those assumptions that make 'the system' a natural, taken-for-granted thing, rather than the construction of individuals whose interests it protects." In *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also Comstock's *Television in America* (1980) for an empirically-driven theoretical study of the influence of television on the American-viewing public.

institutions, came under greater scrutiny.¹¹⁷ McLuhan affirmed this when he referred to ideas popularized by economist Harold Innis. As McLuhan explained “[Innis’] notion is that any change in handling information [or] communication is bound to cause a great readjustment of all the social patterns, the educational patterns, the sources and conditions of political power, [and] public opinion patterns.”¹¹⁸ McLuhan argued that media content was a red herring for the deeper and more meaningful consequences of the [television] medium itself on human affairs. He stated that “Indeed, it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”¹¹⁹ In McLuhan’s work, critics and scholars interested in the medium were freed from the constraints of its content, and able to conceive of television more broadly. The contents of a medium are typically signifiers of the larger cultural forces which gave rise to the medium in the first place. Television content is also, as this study attests, an amalgamated product of the many minds and hands that conceive of and create a television series. Thus, McLuhan’s work made possible studies such as this one, which eschew a purely textual reading of television content, for a more holistic approach to television study, which takes account of television’s unique form, its content, and its production.

As this study demonstrates, applying this analytical approach to *The Waltons* and its disability content reveals new and surprising things about the television industry and its historical relationship to disability. Television’s relationship to disability is a significant cultural issue and bears extensive analysis.

Television: Seventies Style

¹¹⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See chapter on “Objectivity in Crisis”.

¹¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan on Harold Innis, *Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special Collection: The Communications Revolution*, 1976, <http://www.marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/panel/1960-the-communications-revolution/>.

¹¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan on Harold Innis, *Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special Collection: The Communications Revolution*, 1976, <http://www.marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/panel/1960-the-communications-revolution/>.

When they embarked on their study of television production, U.S. mass communications scholars Robert Alley and Horace Newcomb chose

to focus on the mid-seventies because research and observation support the conclusion that the zenith of creative production power was reached at about that time. While another cycle of equal importance may develop at any time, it will inevitably be within the context of new technologies, and will be measured against that earlier time. It will be measured against the brightest glow of the network era.¹²⁰

Published in 1983, and having just emerged from said zenith, Alley and Newcomb's words may have been a tad short-sighted and self-serving, but they were not without merit. Television historians and critics have observed that the 1970s marked a period during which television came in to its own on multiple fronts, as a business, as an art form, and as a medium capable of both reflecting and defining the culture.¹²¹ American historian Bruce Schulman devoted an entire chapter to popular culture in his work *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, in which he was clear on the point that popular culture in the 1970s was an influential and defining characteristic of the decade. He acknowledged the “rebels” of the decade, that is, those artists who challenged authority, and who confronted the darker and more discontented aspects of seventies life. According to Schulman, artists across media and industries in seventies America, including those in the television industry, “reshaped the cultural landscape” and “forged a new sensibility.”¹²² U.S. Historian Edward Berkowitz concurred, and pointed to television series such as *Waltons'* CBS contemporaries *All in The Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore*—both considered highly topical and au courant in their day—as among the most

¹²⁰ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “Introduction” in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, 3-4).

¹²¹ See David Frum *How We Got Here. The 70s: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)*; S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About Our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991); and Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971).

¹²² Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Cultural Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 146.

innovative and culturally significant series of the 1970s. Both series were set in their present day, and both tackled all manner of socially relevant issues, such as gender politics, race relations, economic strife, political upheaval, and the generation gap.

By contrast, one U.S. media historian noted that *The Waltons* “was not a radically innovative show of the kind that changes the way that television is made or how it is perceived by its audiences or opinion leaders. It was a simple, rather unremarkable show presenting the mundane lives of a fictional American family through a very conventional television format.”¹²³ By this very nature *The Waltons* was able to produce powerful and relevant content with little interference from CBS, and with practically no backlash from viewing audiences.¹²⁴ Since the series was perceived as conventional, its heavier content was mostly accepted without question because it was packaged in a familiar and acceptable format. This is in stark contrast to the content of *All in the Family*, which fostered much contention and debate between its producer Norman Lear, and CBS.¹²⁵ Because *The Waltons* was an historical family drama, and thus unassuming in its novelty, it was supported by its network and embraced by audiences. Some historians argue that nostalgia television, like *The Waltons*, serves a meaningful purpose at specific moments in culture. Of nostalgia television in the 70s, Berkowitz concluded that “In times of rampant inflation and high unemployment, perhaps audiences liked to be reminded of an era when the economy seemed to function better and life seemed more innocent.”¹²⁶ Indeed, of *The Homecoming*, the telefilm that served as the prologue for the *Waltons* series, director Ralph Senensky recalled,

¹²³ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 9.

¹²⁴ Richard Thomas (series lead), in conversation with the author, New York, New York, January 2017.

¹²⁵ Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 232.

¹²⁶ Edward Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 210.

The thing that I was hearing was they [CBS] turned it into a series...because there was so much opposition at the time, and talk about ‘television has gotten too violent. There's too much crime.’ There was. I did more detective shows than you can imagine...CBS kind of did turn *The Waltons* into a series figuring, ‘well we'll throw them [conservative critics] this bone and it will be a failure’... Then it turns out that that was exactly what the public wanted.¹²⁸

Although *The Waltons* was set during the turbulent times of Great Depression and World War II, and therefore cannot be described as a retreat to a time of greater economic prosperity and/or stability per Berkowitz’s commentary, nonetheless, in its day it was recognized as a retreat to the past, and a salve against the harsh realities of 1970s America.¹²⁹ Thus, *The Waltons* filled a longed-for niche in 1970s television, and proffered its own breed of significance. The ways in which the series invoked disability as a proxy for relevance will be explained in detail in chapter four. The larger point here is that 1970s culture helped elevate the television medium, and this meant that producers “experienced growing respect from their colleagues in film.” Compared to the television landscape of the 1960s, in the 1970s it seemed, “[Producers] were doing something to fill the ‘vast wasteland’ with respectable popular art.”¹³⁰

From the Blue Ridge, to the Big Screen, to the Box

Prior to 1972, Hamner had no designs of developing a television series inspired by his experiences growing up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He long had ambitions of being a writer, and he disclosed this to family members early on in his life.¹³¹ In 1940, Hamner began his first foray into the literary world when he began studying English and literature at the University of

¹²⁸ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

¹²⁹ See Philip Wander’s “‘The Waltons’: How Sweet it Was,” *Journal of Communication*, 26: 4 (December 1976): 148-154.; Stephen Brie’s “The Land of Lost Content: Living in the Past with *The Waltons*,” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture 1900 to Present* 7:2 (Fall 2008): http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2008/brie.htm (accessed January 17, 2015).

¹³⁰ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “The Television Producer: An Introduction” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.

¹³¹ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 22.

Richmond.¹³² Like many patriotic Americans, Hamner chose to serve his country by enlisting in the service during WWII, despite his misgivings about the violence inherent in the fray. As fate would have it, Hamner served not on the front lines, but behind a typewriter working as a war correspondent—a fitting way to serve his country for a man devoted to the written word from a young age. Following the war, Hamner found work writing for radio. Such work ultimately evolved to television writing, and throughout the 1960s Hamner found steady work as a freelance writer for all manner of television series.¹³³

It was during this time that the seeds of what would become *The Waltons* were sown. When he was not writing for television, Hamner took pleasure in writing stories closer to his heart, stories which reflected his upbringing as a member of a close-knit Virginian family. In 1961, Dial Press published Hamner's novel *Spencer's Mountain*, loosely based on Hamner's relationship with own father, and the conflicts which arose when the father and son's dreams for themselves diverged.¹³⁴ *Spencer's Mountain* explored the strained relationship between Spencer family patriarch Clay and his son Clay-Boy, as they considered different prospects for their respective futures. A man accustomed to working at the local soapstone factory and living off the land, Clay Sr. imagined building a grand mountain homestead for his large and growing family, and continuing his tradition of living by brawn. The financial realities of providing for a large family, combined with the financial challenge presented by Clay-Boy's desire to attend college, was a strain on Clay Sr. He wrestled with how best to invest in his family, as he struggled to relate to his eldest son. Ultimately, father and son recognized their mutual responsibilities to their

¹³²Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 25.

¹³³ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 37.

¹³⁴ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 35.

family, and learned to respect and admire each other's perspectives. In coming to this mutual understanding, Clay Sr. had to decide if the best investment for his family was holding on to the parcel of land on which he dreamed of building a grand home one day, or investing in Clay-Boy's education. Ultimately, Clay Sr. decided to sell his land to pay for Clay-Boy's college, with the understanding that Clay-Boy would make the most of education, and would remain loyal to his family and his responsibilities to them.

The novel was an instant success, so much so that Hamner began work on a sequel that year. *The Homecoming*, a novella which told the story of the eponymous family of Spencer's Mountain and a crisis they experienced one Christmas, was published by Random House that same year.¹³⁵ Set in 1933, in the novella Clay Sr. was forced to seek work out of town as a result of the financial hardships of the Depression. When he failed to return home from work at the expected hour on Christmas Eve, the senior members of the Spencer family spent the evening trying to solve the puzzle of Clay Sr.'s whereabouts. Matriarch Olivia, along with son Clay-Boy and her parents-in-law, grappled with what might have happened to Clay Sr., and with what life and the family might be like without him. They lamented the toll the Depression took on their family, and dreamed of better days ahead for themselves. Meanwhile, Clay-Boy struggled to reconcile his desire to become a writer with the financial realities his family faced. Should something happen to Clay Sr., Clay-Boy recognized his responsibility to the family as the eldest son. Ultimately, Clay Sr. returned home late Christmas Eve, explaining that a bus accident en route home held him up. Upon his return, the family recognized that their wealth was never in the form of currency, but in the richness and blessings of their family. Because of this, Clay-Boy grew confident in his dream of writing, knowing his family would support him, come what may.

¹³⁵Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 40.

In 1963 Warner Brothers adapted *Spencer's Mountain* into a film of the same name. Notably, the *Spencer's Mountain* film featured a significant disability plot-point, wherein the patriarch of the Spencer family acquired a mobility disability after being crushed by a tree. But I digress. As Hamner put it, the release of the film “marked the beginning of my family’s journey to Hollywood, where the Hamners became the Spencers and were eventually to become the Waltons.”¹³⁶

The follow-up novella to *Spencer's Mountain* became a television film rather than a major motion picture, when the relatively new production company Lorimar, headed by Lee Rich and Merv Adelson, got a hold of the novella and sent it to CBS. Rich was a former advertising executive, and Adelson a businessman and investor—proving once again how closely aligned television is with business, and how easily television as an art can be compromised.¹³⁷ When then executive story editor at CBS Joanne Brough read *The Homecoming*, she reported to her network “I believe it [a televised version of the novella] could potentially become a classic. It is filled with rich characterization and the warm family relationship is beautifully portrayed. It has something of the feel of *A Christmas Memory*, but this would be a more important film.”¹³⁸ The powers-that-be at CBS were unanimous in their support of *The Homecoming* becoming a Christmas telefilm. Phil Capice, then vice-president of specials and movies commissioned the novella to a film with the support of then vice-president in charge of programming Fred Silverman. It was during production of the telefilm version of *The Homecoming* that the fictional Spencer family was renamed and became the fictional Walton family. Brough’s instincts about

¹³⁶ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 39.

¹³⁷ Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 44.

¹³⁸ Joanne Brough, as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 45.

The Homecoming were spot-on, and it became an instant Christmas classic. When *The Homecoming* premiered on CBS on December 19 of 1971, critics and audiences alike were charmed. The telefilm earned a 39 audience share in the ratings, meaning that nearly 40% of all homes tuned in to television that Christmas season were tuned in to *The Homecoming*.¹³⁹

When William Paley—then CEO of CBS—heard about the telefilm’s success, he decided to see for himself what all the fuss was about. After screening *The Homecoming*, Paley sent word to CBS that he wanted the telefilm to form the basis for a television series. So struck was he by the quality of the story, and the earnestness of the characters, he declared “We’ve been taking from the barrel for too long. It’s time we put something back.”¹⁴⁰ By this Paley meant that he was eager to produce something of substance, rather than chase easy ratings predicated on the cheap laughs or violent thrills that CBS historically had pursued. Recent additions to the CBS lineup such as *All in the Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore*—which addressed such socially relevant issues such as tensions between classes, genders, and ethnicities—signaled the direction in which CBS was heading as a network. While they were chock full of relevance and more substantive than forebears such the *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres*, they lacked the heart and earnestness portrayed by the Walton family. Its virtues notwithstanding, *The Homecoming*’s 39 share of the ratings was probably as influential to Paley’s decision as was his belief in the telefilm as a thing of substance. It is this business-minded aspect of television production that is the heart of the next chapter.

For all of Paley and the rest of CBS’s noble intentions, the reality is that throughout the

¹³⁹, Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 55.

¹⁴⁰ William Paley as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values that Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 45.

1970s when *The Waltons* populated the airwaves, the television industry was driven by two principle forces: audience size, and sponsorship in the form of advertisers. Good intentions were nothing without audiences and advertisers to support them. As Newcomb and Alley explained in the early 1980s, just after *The Waltons* concluded its run, “In the more than thirty-five years of commercial television history in America, the wedding of creativity and ledger has been a major determining factor in the measure of programming quality available to the public.”¹⁴¹ Luckily for Hamner, the stories he desired to tell attracted large audiences, and this in turn attracted advertisers to the network. Therefore, in the case of *The Waltons*, the wedding of creativity and ledger merged favourably. However, the case of *The Waltons* was more an exception than the rule, and perhaps gives the false impression that creativity and integrity in storytelling were sufficient vehicles to carry a series. For every *Waltons* success story, there are countless other stories of beautiful television series which do not survive. Hamner’s own *Apple’s Way*, in many ways a modern-day mid-west version of *The Waltons*, lasted only a single television season on CBS from 1974-1975. Meanwhile, ABC’s absurd and sexy cruise-ship comedy *The Love Boat* endured throughout the late 70s, and well into the 80s, proving there is no accounting for taste in television production, at least not in the 1970s.

¹⁴¹ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “The Television Producer: An Introduction” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 8.

CHAPTER TWO

Disability and Commercial Art

Television's Human Agents

As Newcomb and Alley explain in their study of television production:

Most of us still discuss television as a generalized force let loose in the home and in society. It is unpredictable and worrisome because of its large effects on our lives, yet is paradoxically familiar and comfortable within individual experience. And, above all, television is anonymous. When we want to assign responsibility for error or evils, we speak of 'the networks.' We speak of 'broadcasting' as if it were unmanned, undirected, an airy, invisible layer of technology and business, remote, beyond our inspection. We attribute motive, and assign decision-making ability, but fail to identify human agents.¹⁴²

American mass communications theorist Comstock wrote in a similar vein in *Television in America*, stating, "television has become an unavoidable and unremitting factor in shaping what we are and what we will become...yet it is intricately entwined in the braid of life, so much so that it is easy to mistake it for an entirely passive servant."¹⁴³ Far from a rudderless, passive servant, television and its industry are stocked with countless human agents, and this chapter is devoted to the human agents who worked on *The Waltons*, and who called television their profession.

British cultural theorist Stuart Hall asserted that the "assembly role of television is one of its unique properties. The degree of technical coordination required...is enormous. So too are the social, communicative. —indeed managerial—skills."¹⁴⁴ Following in this thread, this chapter describes the limitations confronting television producers and their crews throughout the 1970s.

¹⁴² Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, "Introduction" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), xi.

¹⁴³ George Comstock, *Television in America*, (Beverly Hills: Sage Books, 1980), 123.

¹⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, *Television as a Medium and Its Relation to Culture*, (Birmingham, England: Department of Cultural Studies, 1975), 13.

It explains how the status of disability on *The Waltons* was influenced by the forces at work in the television industry and television production during that time. As Hall explained

The predominance of the assembly process as a characteristic of television communication has, of course, crucial consequences... Television can almost never be the means by which the viewer gains access to the 'raw materials' of culture, free of the mediation of the cultural-social inherent in the presentation elements of the programme.¹⁴⁵

Using the example of *The Waltons*, this chapter makes clear that the ability to tell thoughtful and representative stories about disability requires more than sheer will. It requires the collaboration of numerous human agents whose job it is to deliver a media product in a timely and profitable way. The ways in which disabilities on *The Waltons* were variously invoked, bolstered, appropriated, celebrated, scapegoated, and explored, both in conjunction and contention with the forces at work in television production, forms the basis for this chapter. Hall summed it up nicely when he said, "In short –whether to good ends or bad—television is technically and socially a thoroughly manipulated medium." As a result, "The utopia of straight transmission, or the 'naturalistic fallacy' in television, is not only an illusion, it is a dangerous deception."¹⁴⁶ This chapter dispels this 'naturalistic fallacy'.

Profitable Stories

Writing about his father Louis Cowan—one-time president of CBS (1958-1959)—Geoffrey Cowan lamented, "I learned that a man of exceptional taste, integrity, and creativity, with a lifetime of experience in the industry and wonderful skills in diplomacy and persuasion, could not, even as president of a network, change the course of television." He admitted grudgingly,

¹⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, *Television as a Medium and Its Relation to Culture*, (Birmingham, England: Department of Cultural Studies, 1975), 14.

¹⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, *Television as a Medium and Its Relation to Culture*, (Birmingham, England: Department of Cultural Studies, 1975), 14.

“Like it or not, profits are at the core of the industry.”¹⁴⁷ Corroborating this assertion, in the early 1970s journalist Les Brown observed while surveying the landscape of Sixth Avenue in midtown Manhattan,

The three rocks [the buildings housing networks NBC, CBS, and ABC] are substantial members of the business landscape on Sixth... That is considered fortunate. NBC, CBS, and ABC would rather associate with big business than with any other kind, least of all show business. Sensible, Stable, and Prosperous is what the buildings say. The message is for the investment community.¹⁴⁸

Looking back on such beloved series as *The Waltons*, it is easy to obscure the fact that television was first a business, second entertainment and, perhaps lastly, an art. What is believed to be profitable makes it to air, and what is believed to be a liability does not. As the following demonstrates, for myriad reasons throughout the 1970s, authentic, enduring, and affirmative portrayals of disability were largely thought of as liabilities, if they were thought of at all.

Bearing in mind that television production is foremost a business venture, the following chart outlines the essential constituents of that business, and describes the roles and responsibilities of each of these vital cogs in television production:

Constituent	Responsibilities
Federal Communications Commission (FCC)	A federal regulatory body in the United States which oversees the commercial distribution, production, and content of radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable transmissions.
Television Network	A telecommunications network which oversees the distribution of television program content. Save for public broadcasting stations, typically television networks are for-profit corporate entities.
Producer(s)	An increasingly nebulous term, the producer mainly assumes legal and financial responsibility for the production of a television series, and strives to maintain order and comity in production processes.

¹⁴⁷ Geoffrey Cowan, *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle Over Sex and Violence in Television*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 12.

¹⁴⁸ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 3.

Advertisers (Once referred to as ‘sponsors’)	Individuals or companies who pay for time on broadcast television to promote themselves, or their goods and services. Advertisers account for the most substantial portion of television industry revenue.
Creator(s)	Individual(s) responsible for conceiving of a television program, and for ‘pitching’ or selling it to a television network for commercial distribution.
Writer(s)	Staff employed on a television series to write episodic content which relates to the main concepts and themes of the show.
Director(s)	Staff employed to take the scripts produced by the writers, and develop them into filmable, watchable, and captivating moving picture content.
Cast	The body of actors hired to portray the characters that are the subject of a series.
Crew Members	The body of people who execute the numerous production processes (e.g. lighting, sound, hair and make up, camera operation, set-building) necessary to produce filmable, watchable, and captivating moving picture content.
Viewing Audience	The body of people who tune in to television content.

This chart represents only the most critical and influential elements of the television industry, and depicts roughly the hierarchy of the industry’s foremost constituents, their relative power and influence subject to circumstance. ‘Crew members’ is a catch-all term for a mass of professionals present on a television set, including but not limited to editors, prop-masters, camera operators, hair and make-up and wardrobes experts, sound and score designers, on-set teachers, set-builders, etc. Having outlined above only the barebones version of the chain of command it takes to get a show like *The Waltons* to air, one can appreciate just how many people are required to create a television series. Numerous people are personally and financially invested in a show’s success before a single episode even makes it to air. Series lead Richard Thomas, who portrayed eldest son John-Boy Walton, muses, “[Y]ou can’t reduce karmic activity to one cause-and-effect. And this is precisely what you’re saying in terms of what are the causes and conditions that allow us, all cultural artifacts to be limited by things no matter how forward-looking they may try to be...[T]he business that I’m in, is so collaborative, it’s so

collaborative.”¹⁴⁹

So, what does this all have to do with disability? Quite a lot, in fact. A television series’ ability to tell thoughtful and authentic stories about disability, or any other topic for that matter, is hamstrung by the difficulty in coordinating the mass of people which produce it. Even in the unlikely event that the leviathan that is television production could be unified in a goal of creating the best quality disability representation possible, this would be in vain, because this noble goal would be subsumed by the less-than-noble goal that truly unifies the television industry: profit. Before anything else, a production company and its network consider whether the stories they are trying to tell are profitable. Profitable stories tend to be those that are palatable to the largest number of viewers. I say ‘palatable’ and not ‘appealing’ because networks care less whether their audiences are enjoying or value their programming, and more about whether audiences remain tuned in to their programming.

Game-changing outlets such as HBO, Netflix, and Amazon now deliver content with slightly different objects in mind. Undeniably these television service-providers’ first goal is profit, but one could argue plausibly that innovative and high-quality content come a close second. Competing in an era where choice of content and delivery services are higher than ever, novelty and “bingeability” are key factors to a service-provider’s success in the industry. That is, television these days must bring something new to the table, and it must be of a caliber that, when given a multitude of alternatives, viewers still choose to tune in, and in some cases do so for long, continuous periods of time. During the 1970s when *The Waltons* aired, choices were limited, and viewership more easily won. The question was not whether viewers would turn on their cable box, log in to their Netflix account on their computers, or stream from Amazon on

¹⁴⁹ Richard Thomas (series lead), interview with the author, New York, New York, January 2017.

their smartphones, but which station viewers would dial in to on their TV set. In other words, engaging in television content today can be overwhelming because of the diffuse avenues through which it can be had. If one chose to watch television in the 1970s, it was exclusively through one's TV set. Once a person turned on their set, the question was whether they would adjust their dial and tune in to another program and station, or leave it be. Networks hoped that when viewers tuned in to their station, they would leave their dial be, and maintain viewership. In this way, networks had less to do to capture a viewer's imagination, and more so had to avoid offending the viewer into changing the station. Thus, topics like disability, which were regarded as sensitive and potentially divisive topics depending on the stance taken, were approached with caution. According to a *Time Magazine* article written the month that *The Waltons* premiered on television, prior to the 1970s, "That was the way it was on network entertainment shows...By and large, any subjects were fair game except those that bore on the reality of viewers' lives. The result was prime-time programming that was at once obvious and incomplete, like connect-the-dots pictures without the lines drawn in."¹⁵⁰ In other words, television programs should bear *some* correspondence to the lives of viewers. The scenarios and characters should feel familiar, but not too realistic, lest the veneer of fantasy and escapism be sullied. According to that same article, in the 1970s

TV has embarked on a new era of candor, with all the lines emphatically drawn in. During the season that began last week, programmers will actually be competing with each other to trace the largest number of touchy--and heretofore forbidden--ethnic, sexual, and psychological themes. Religious quirks, wife swapping, child abuse, lesbianism, venereal disease--all the old taboos will be toppling.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ "The Team behind Archie Bunker and Co.," *Time*, 25 September 1972, 48.

¹⁵¹ "The Team behind Archie Bunker and Co.," *Time*, 25 September 1972, 48. Notably, disability is absent from this list of 'touchy' topics.

From the vantage point of 1972, it is understandable that such a perspective was adopted. This article was written specifically in reference to the influence that *All in the Family* had on the television landscape.

Undeniably, *All in the Family* and its several spin-offs ushered in a new approach to television comedy. But the perspective that the series and its creator radicalized television overnight, and that all the old taboos toppled as a result is misleading. This statement fails to address what a difficult time creator Norman Lear had in getting *All in the Family* to air. Lear spent years shopping the series around, before CBS finally conceded to take the risk. It also leaves out the many battles fought by Lear with network executives and advertisers to get these kinds of topics to air. In many cases, these stories were not permitted to air exactly as originally written, and certainly not without a fight. Further, even when such topics were eventually permitted to air, they were met with criticism from viewers who were offended by the content. Most series of this era preferred a middle-of-the-road approach to topicality, for example the sitcom series *Julia* (1968-1971), starring Diahann Carroll, which displayed black single motherhood, but which never per se addressed the context and issues associated with black single motherhood. That a single black mother was featured in the professional role of nurse on television was novel, but the constructions of the stories on the series, and its tone were largely familiar. Likewise, this applied to the comedy-drama *Room 222* (1969-1974), which centered around a black male history teacher, and the lessons he and his colleagues imparted to their students. While the show broached topics such as race relations, homophobia, and the Vietnam war, it did so with a light hand and gentle, often comedic tone. The series posited that education breeds understanding, which in turns breeds tolerance and harmony. While the *Time* journalist was correct that the kinds of stories which were told on television in the 1970s expanded, the

extent to which these stories could be told freely, uncensored, and in new ways was limited. Networks simply were not willing to alienate their advertisers and audience, nor risk profits by pushing the envelope too aggressively.

The same year that *The Waltons* premiered on CBS, so too did another familial series, *Maude*. A spin-off of creator/producer Norman Lear's runaway hit *All in the Family*, *Maude* followed the midlife trials and tribulations of the series' titular character. In "Maude's Dilemma" (14 November, 1972/21 November, 1972), a now legendary two-part episode that aired late in the Fall of 1972, then 47-year-old Maude opted to have an abortion when she was surprised to learn she was pregnant.¹⁵² This, just one year before *Roe v. Wade* (1973) made freedom of reproductive choice the law of the land. While CBS conceded to air the controversial episode, they did so with the caveat that Lear give air time to the pro-life stance as well. According to a retrospective article run by the *Chicago Tribune*, "Despite the compromise, the network developed cold feet at the last minute: CBS refused to pay to tape the episodes...Lear told network executives that if the shows were not taped and aired, they would have to find another program to fill 'Maude's' timeslot."¹⁵³ Lear's threat carried considerable weight. *Maude* and *All in the Family* were consistently among the top-ratings earners for CBS. So, air the episode CBS did, but not without consequences. The *Chicago Tribune* further reported that:

The first showing of 'Maude's Dilemma' was carried by all but two of CBS' nearly 200 affiliates, and attracted nearly 7,000 letters of protest. By the time the shows were repeated, in August 1973, a campaign against them had been organized by the United States Catholic Conference. The reruns [of 'Maude's Dilemma'] were broadcast, but nearly 40 affiliates

¹⁵² *Maude*, "Maude's Dilemma I, II," aired November 14, 1972 and November 21, 1972 (Minnetonka: Mill Creek Entertainment, 2015), DVD.

¹⁵³ Lewis Beale, "Maude's Abortion Fades into History," *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1992, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-11-13-9204130017-story.html>.

chose not to air them, not one corporate sponsor bought commercial time, and CBS received more than 17,000 letters of protest.¹⁵⁴

Thus, CBS learned their lesson to tread carefully where such controversial topics were concerned. Provocative and topical were one thing, but overtly political and flying in the face of the beliefs of a great many Americans were another. A Gallup poll from the mid 1970s found that nearly a quarter of all Americans believed abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.¹⁵⁵ The socio-political inclinations of television viewers were a frequent battle against which networks fought. In his decade-end review of 70s television, television journalist Tony Shales observed that the 70s were a “decade in which TV became more of a political issue than ever. TV was a battered football for assorted coalitions of newly emerging media activists armed to the teeth with cleats.”¹⁵⁶ He cited Action for Children’s Television (ACT), a coalition seeking to regulate both television and advertising content for children, as one of the most productive of these groups. Although, he noted that efforts from the FCC to appease such groups were often stymied due to a powerful broadcasting lobby which held considerable sway over Congress.¹⁵⁷ Though citizen-activist groups were not always successful in advancing their agenda to its fullest extent, nonetheless, the debate over television content and its influence waged throughout the decade. Some were quick to blame TV for a litany of societies ills, and television producers had to consider carefully where their programs might fall in the crosshairs of battle over television

¹⁵⁴ Lewis Beale, “Maude’s Abortion Fades into History,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1992, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-11-13-9204130017-story.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Gallup, “Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances or illegal in all circumstances?” *In Depth: Topics A to Z*, April 4-7, 1975, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>.

¹⁵⁶ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7->

¹⁵⁷ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7->

content. Of these tensions between television viewers on the one hand, and television producers and broadcast lobbyists on the other hand,

Near the decade's end, TV was also labeled a key factor in sharply declining scores registered by high school students on standardized Scholastic Aptitude Tests. In 1972, a report by the U.S. Surgeon General established for the first time a "causal link" between violence on television and violent behavior in children. Concern over TV violence became so pronounced that in 1975 FCC Chairman Richard E. Wiley and network executives unveiled the allegedly voluntary family viewing plan. It restricted televised rapes and murders until after 9 p.m. Eastern time. The plan was a fiasco from the start -- as network censors bowdlerized scripts into vanilla pudding for fear of public reaction -- and a judge later ruled the scheme unconstitutional.¹⁵⁸

Contrary to what *Time Magazine* said about the dawn of a new television age at the beginning of the 1970s, by the decade's end, the *Washington Post* reported, "Fear of controversy haunted the TV decade," and only "occasionally networks showed true grit."¹⁵⁹

To clarify, the presence of disability on-screen was not itself controversial. Longmore, Klobas, and others have documented historical examples of disability on screen, and have found the presence of disability pervasive throughout television history, if not representative of the total population of disabled Americans. The lack of controversy surrounding depictions of disability in 1970s television, at least in part, stems from the fact that the formulaic and reductive ways in which disability was depicted in this era was something on which most liberal and conservative viewers could agree. The humanity and welfare of disabled people were foregrounded in television just enough that liberal interests in social welfare and civil rights were addressed, but were oblique enough that these depictions did not smack of a liberal agenda. Conversely, most

¹⁵⁸ Tony Shales, "TV in '70s,," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

¹⁵⁹ Tony Shales, "TV in '70s,," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

depictions of disability on screen in the 1970s also spoke to a Christian sense of beneficence, and to an ethos of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, characteristics which appealed to conservative viewers. It also bears noting that all of the disabled characters who appeared on *The Waltons* were white. Indeed, the majority of disabled characters on 70s television were white, and this 'white-washing' further reduced disability to something bland, and inoffensive. Because of the circumscribed manner in which disability on television tended to be approached, compared to other hot-button topics of the day disability, it seems, was consensus-building rather than divisive.

Longmore reported that disability on-screen nearly always fell into one of nine categories of representation, perpetuating such clichés as the maladjusted disabled person, the 'supercrip', and the inspirational and educational disabled figure, among others.¹⁶⁰ This study corroborates that in the case of *The Waltons*, these clichés held true. As previously noted, "The Job" told the story of Ruth, a young woman embittered by becoming blind as a young adult. "The Obstacle" revolved around disabled service-person Mike Paxton. At first maladjusted to his disability, Paxton later became a 'supercrip' figure after coming to terms with his disability.¹⁶¹ And "The Carnival" (September 21, 1972) featured Tommy Trindle, a dwarf man whose life experiences as a traveling circus performer provided for John-Boy an emotional education. The surprisingly deft and admirable way "The Carnival" deployed this cliché is discussed in chapter 5¹⁶². Indeed, disability was frequently a part of *Waltons* storytelling, but the ways in which those stories were told were limited by broader cultural ideas about aesthetics, and that which was considered

¹⁶⁰ Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 131-146.

¹⁶¹ *The Waltons*, "The Obstacle", January 11, 1979 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

¹⁶² *The Waltons*, "The Carnival", September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

normal and normative in 1970s mass culture. The composition of all stories on television were further limited by the dual fear of alienating and/or boring the audience. Brown explained of 1970s television production:

In the theater or at a movie the audience is captive, more or less; its choice is the show or the exit. With television there are multiple choices on the dial and any number of other possible diversions about the house. Television producers are always mindful of a viewer's options. Haunted by a sense of unfaithfulness across the screen, of an audience that is always on the verge of deserting, television people have developed a fear of boring the beholder to an extent that over the years has become phobic. This accounts for many of the sins of the medium and many of the clichés of production.¹⁶³

So, while emotionally-satisfying and easy to comprehend stories of disability abounded because of their dramatic potential, thornier topics such as institutionalization, eugenics, and access to health insurance were never discussed on *The Waltons*, despite being relevant to both the 1930s and the 1970s. The bottom line is networks want to develop series that attract the largest number of viewers, for the longest time possible, in order to attract as many advertisers as possible to their network—advertisers who are willing to pay tidy sums for 30 second parcels of airspace. The formula to achieve this in the 1970s was to strike a balance and proffer dramatic yet non-threatening content.

Since people do not like to take risks with their money, the way that networks accomplish this becomes formulaic. Writing in the early 1970s, Brown published a list of axioms for developing new programming in his book *Television: The Business Behind the Box*.¹⁶⁴ The following axioms, combined with the unwieldy number of people involved in television production, help to explain why, historically, it has been difficult to move the needle on disability representation in Hollywood. It is not that the television industry has an

¹⁶³ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 30.

¹⁶⁴ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 135.

ax to grind with disabled people, necessarily. It is that the television industry is most responsive to profit, and after those in the industry have fulfilled their checklist of requirements to develop a profitable show, there is little room left for innovation and social responsibility.

Rules of Thumb in Television Development According to Les Brown	
1.	The series concept must be in the nature of a formula, so that an endless stream of new episodes suggest themselves, facilitating rapid production of scripts.
2.	It must have continuing elements which appeal to viewers week after week and with which they identify.
3.	It must be fashioned to win 30 per cent or more of the audience, ideally the young adult audience.
4.	It must win its audience early, since a show passed over the first week or two may never catch on, and therefore should have names in the cast or special exploitation values to ensure tune-in the first week.
5.	It should be easy to like, with heroes and villains readily indicated and no complex exposition, so that the viewer will not be driven away to simpler entertainment.
6.	Whatever else, it must have a suggestion of newness without being so new that its pattern will be alien to what the viewer has liked in the past, making him feel less insecure.
Additional Rules as Suggested by the Author of this Study	
7.	It must be inoffensive to the sensibilities of networks, their advertisers, and audiences. Viewers must feel comfortable tuning in week to week.
8.	It must be feasible to produce in a cost-effective and timely manner.

If there is criticism to be made about the television industry and its relationship to disability, it is not that television producers dislike disability, rather it is that they worship the all-mighty dollar. For a variety of reasons that this chapter makes clear authentic, affirmative, and sustained portrayals of disability, simply put, were not seen as profitable in the 1970s television economy. It would be a mistake to think of television in primarily artistic terms, and to assume that its erasure of certain aspects of disability have been predicated on a desire to say something harmful about disability. Industry insider Cowan believes that the gamut of what we seen on TV, even the best and most meaningful representations of important social issues, is predicated on a commitment to dollars and cents, and not social justice. Cowan reports,

By close contact with the industry, I learned that when a company acts most sanctimonious, is it likely to be most deceptive. I learned that outside forces—citizens’ groups, journalists, award committees, public-interest lawyers—have roles to play in keeping the industry honest and purposeful, but that the industry is so fragile and timid that pressures intended to be constructive can ultimately be self-defeating.¹⁶⁵

While more so ignorance than malfeasance, this ignorance of social responsibility has, nonetheless, resulted in poor renderings of the disability experience in television programming, and a relative erasure of disabled people on the whole.

Undeniably, this erasure causes harm to disabled people and short-changes the culture at large, but there is little evidence to suggest that this is the motive of the television producer. Of the many roles in television production, the producer walks the finest line, and bears the most responsibility. Newcomb and Alley explain, “[T]he producer is often assigned legal and financial responsibility for the final television product... The producer, involved with the project from beginning to end, sees to it that continuity is maintained, that peace is kept among other members of the team, and, most importantly, that the series concept remains secure.”¹⁶⁶ Bearing this in mind, there is ample evidence to suggest that the stories that get told on television are mostly contrivances designed to attract large pools of viewers for long periods of time, in the most easily producible format.

The number of households tuned in to a particular program are measured by the Nielsen Company, a data measurement firm which tracks and reports to the television networks viewer numbers and demographics. In 1950, the Nielsen Company began outfitting a representative sampling of television homes with electronic boxes which tracked their television consumption. This was done with the viewer’s consent, and was sometimes accompanied by a request that

¹⁶⁵ Geoffrey Cowan, *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle Over Sex and Violence in Television*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 12.

¹⁶⁶ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “Introduction” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), xii.

viewers keep a log book with information about their viewing habits. Extrapolating from the households with these electronic tracking boxes, the Nielsen company devised a formula to gauge the number of households and the percentage of television viewers tuned in to a particular program at a given time. Nielsen further analysed this data to determine demographic information about the viewing public, including the age, sex, race, and regional and socioeconomic backgrounds of viewers. Sheer volume was the best indicator of ratings success, but demographic information was valuable too. Advertisers were particularly keen to advertise to white, affluent viewers ages 18-49, believing these viewers had the most disposable income, and the highest trend-setting value. These individuals were thought to be the spenders and the tastemakers.¹⁶⁷ The value of all this data was immediately apparent to network programming executives, and by the 1970s the Nielsen Company produced the most valuable and comprehensive data about television viewing habits in the country. The Nielsen influence in the industry was so well-known that most lay consumers of television were familiar with the concept of the 'Nielsen ratings' by this time.¹⁶⁸

Brown asserts

The Nielsen Company, which produces television ratings that influence nearly every program decision made by the networks, is not only the scorekeeper of network television but the score itself...the national Niensens are considered to be official by the advertising industry...By extension, the Nielsen numbers are the real product of American television.¹⁶⁹

Brown states unequivocally, "They [Nielsen ratings] are what networks sell to advertisers and what the programs are designed for...This is what the advertiser buys, the numbers and the

¹⁶⁷ Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura*, 43, 15:1, 2000, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 32-33.

¹⁶⁹ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 15.

breakdown; conceivably, he may never learn the name of the show.”¹⁷⁰ By this token, the inclusion, exclusion, celebration, or bastardization of disability on television is not personal. Its deployment is merely part of an artless, corporate machination. This is not to say that television has never produced a great work of art, nor to suggest that there are not television producers who hold disabled people in contempt. I am merely saying that in the 1970s, the impetus for creating television was predominantly economic, and not as much artistically or politically-motivated. Further, if disability graced television sets throughout the 1970s, there is a good chance that its purpose and execution were economically-motivated. Taking stock of the circumstances under which *The Waltons* approached disability, this becomes evident.

Waltons series regular Eric Scott was blunt about Lorimar Productions’ frugality: “[I]t was very cost-conscious. They were cheap. Lorimar was the cheapest with us.”¹⁷¹ John Dayton, a production assistant on *The Waltons* revealed, “I don’t know whether anybody else has told you this, but Lorimar was cheap.”¹⁷² Such frugality, at times, impacted production. Dayton remembers that one time:

I was filling out a production report and ordering equipment...[actor] Will Geer had a very early call. I think it was 6:30 or 7 at the pond, at Druscilla's pond. And it was chilly. I mean, early in the morning out at that pond it was cold actually...So, I ordered a heater for him, one of these little propane heaters. Well, I got chewed out by [associate producer] Claylene [Jones] because I didn't get her permission...because it was an extra piece of equipment. I remember I was very brave. I said to her ‘It's 25 bucks. If you want, I'll be glad to pay the \$25 out of my own pocket to keep Will warm.’¹⁷³

Series creator Hamner also recalled having to be cost-conscious as one of the show’s executive producers. He explained, “Naturally, if I find we are going way over budget, then I get in and examine the script, see if we can, without hurting the show, trim scenes, if we can simplify

¹⁷⁰ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 15.

¹⁷¹ Eric Scott (series regular), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

¹⁷² John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

¹⁷³ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

scenes, or if we can find an alternate way of filming a scene.”¹⁷⁴ When asked about specific budgets for *The Waltons*, producer Claylene Jones says the figure \$650,000 rings a bell in terms of budget per episode. When she reached out to a friend in the industry to confirm this amount, her friend stated that budgets for hour-long dramas in *The Waltons* era ranged from \$650,000 to \$950,000, corroborating both Jones’ memory, and Scott and Dayton’s assertions regarding the series being on the low-end in terms of production budgets.¹⁷⁵

During the 1970s, television dramas were expected to yield 24-26 original episodes. In this era, most series took a ‘hiatus’ from production during the late Spring and early Summer months, which meant that during active production, television series were expected to churn out nearly an episode per week for a substantial portion of the year. Of her job on *The Waltons* regular cast member Kami Cotler explains, “[F]or us every hour [of programming] is really 5 1/2 to 7 days of work... You're thinking about it more in terms of, like, a team making something. And wanting to not let a team down.”¹⁷⁶ Because of this, production companies depended on economy in storytelling and production to meet their deadlines. This meant that the way stories were told were often limited by the realities of television production.

Series writer and actor Michael McGreevey acknowledges that this was a problem on many shows, including *The Waltons*, citing the example of when the series’ casting department hired a hearing actor to portray a deaf character in the episode “The Foundling”. Based on his many years in the television industry—as both a child star and the son of a prolific television writer—McGreevey assumes choices like these were made for mostly practical reasons. He explains, “There's... a practical aspect to that... I know in series television you're doing 48

¹⁷⁴ Earl Hamner, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 162.

¹⁷⁵ Claylene Jones (producer), email correspondence with the author, February 13, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

minutes of film every seven days, and I'm sure there was a concern or a fear of things slowing down if you used a real deaf girl, that there might be problems."¹⁷⁷ McGreevey's supposition speaks to concerns which evidently pervaded the television industry in the 1970s, and indeed the wider culture then and now, and that is the assumption that disabled bodies do not perform as effectively as nondisabled bodies. This belief excluded, and continues to exclude, people with disabilities from all manner of industries. As this chapter makes clear, television is a large industry with its own complex workforce. The belief that disabled bodies operate in ways that are somehow antithetical to television's goal of efficiency and economic productivity has resulted in underrepresentation of actual disabled people on television, and behind the scenes.

In recent years, there have been exceptions to these unspoken rules. A number of television series have dispelled the fallacy of the unproductive/unprofitable disabled performer, notably NBC's *The Facts of Life* (1979-1988), which featured a recurring character with Cerebral Palsy, and aired concurrent with the last few years of *The Waltons*. Other examples include ABC's *Life Goes On* (1989-1993), which starred an actor with Down Syndrome, and ABC Family's *Switched at Birth* (2011-2017), which featured a cast of many deaf actors, as well as a variety of actors with other disabilities.¹⁷⁸

Television creator and producer Lizzy Weiss shared with me the experience she had advocating for and hiring an authentically deaf and disabled cast and crew for many of the roles in her aforementioned series *Switched at Birth*, which was, among other things, explicitly about

¹⁷⁷ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

¹⁷⁸ Born with cerebral palsy, Geri Jewell, who portrayed Geri Warner on *The Facts of Life*, has been cited as the first person with a visible disability to have a recurring role on a prime-time series. She first appeared on the series in 1980. One could argue that this distinction belongs to Ellen Corby of *The Waltons*, who resumed her role as Grandma Esther Walton in 1978 following a stroke. Corby appeared with mobility and speech disabilities for the remainder of the series. However, Corby was first hired to the series as a performer without a disability, and this may be the distinction which resulted in Jewell claiming the honour. Jewell has also been cited as the first performer with CP to appear on television. *Life Goes On* is noted as the first television series to feature a major and recurring character with Down Syndrome. The character Corky was portrayed by Chris Burke, an actor with Down Syndrome.

deaf experiences. Weiss recalls approaching the issue of staffing the production with trepidation, knowing the history of disability exclusion which pervaded the television industry. Much to her delight, ABC Family (now Freeform) recognized the value in staffing the series with deaf and disabled people and gave their blessing to do so.¹⁷⁹ On June 6, 2011, *Switched at Birth* premiered on ABC Family, and earned the highest ratings for the network to date.¹⁸⁰ During its five seasons on air, the series was recognized for its commitment to authentic and positive inclusion of people with disabilities on and off screen—as well as other marginalized groups—in the form of Peabody, Television’s Critics Association, Gracie, Imagen, and Media Access awards. Evidently, staffing a television series with deaf and disabled employees did not hamper its production. In fact, it seems the reverse was true, as audiences and critics alike responded favorably to this inclusive series.

While a handful of television productions have positively and authentically honoured the disability experience, of television production in the 1970s generally McGreevey regrets, “[T]hat was the time. There was enlightenment but not complete enlightenment at that point.”¹⁸¹ As the case of *The Waltons* demonstrates, production teams could be simultaneously enlightened enough to embrace an affirmative representation of disability in their storytelling—as in this case where the aforementioned deaf character was acknowledged to be intelligent, self-possessed, and deserving of access to sign language—and still ignorant to the idea that a deaf person ought to be hired to tell that story.

There are other examples on *The Waltons* where production concerns trumped what today would be considered best practices in disability representation on screen. Cast member Cotler

¹⁷⁹ Lizzy Weiss (showrunner), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

¹⁸⁰ Barney, Chuck, "Chuck Barney: 'Switched at Birth' Another Winner for ABC Family," *San Jose Mercury News*, June 29, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

recalls an episode entitled “The Ordeal” (16 February, 1978) in which her character, Elizabeth Walton, deals with a mobility disability after being crushed by a pile of falling logs. Elizabeth was first hospitalized with casts on her legs, and then sent home with leg braces to encourage her to regain mobility.¹⁸² When pressed why her character recovered and regained mobility within a single story arc, Cotler remembers,

That episode was hard to film because of the apparatuses...[W]hen they shot [scenes with me in] the cast, once you get in those casts, and they are cut up the back so you can get back out of them again...it's a pain so you might as well stay in them. So, I sort of spent the entire day just lying in the hospital bed in casts. So, there was that. And then once I had the braces on it hurt. Like, it physically hurt. It was a hard kind of leathery thing, and then the metal, and you use weird muscles.¹⁸³

In other words, had the character Elizabeth continued to live with a disability on the series, it would have been onerous for the actor portraying her, and impractical to produce. Cotler recalls the inaccessibility of *The Waltons* set. The set was designed to resemble the real-life property on which it was based, and included a World War One-era homestead, mill, and subsistence farm with out-buildings. Like its real-life counterpart, *The Waltons* set was not designed with accessibility in mind. In considering what it would take to sustain a character with a disability on *The Waltons*, Cotler says regretfully, “It's also impossible to have a disability on that set. In terms of being an actor, when they put me in those braces, there was nowhere I could go, right? Like, for me to get into the house I had to crutch up like five steps and it took forever, right? Getting upstairs was impossible.”¹⁸⁴

Cotler does not endorse the reduction of disability to a single story arc, nor excuse the fact that *The Waltons* set was inaccessible. Now an educator, and a parent to a child with disability, Cotler is acutely aware of the significance of these issues. She believes such issues in

¹⁸² *The Waltons*, “The Ordeal”, February 16, 1978 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

¹⁸³ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

¹⁸⁴ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

the entertainment industry ought to be addressed. However, she is careful to point out that these oversights typically are practically motivated, and not usually inspired by ill-will. She says,

I think that's important to remember because there's enormous momentum on the set to finish it on time and under budget. So, so many things that may look like meaningful choices around issues of identity or value are more about, 'how long will it take?', and not even thought about past that.¹⁸⁵

In response to why another episode of *The Waltons* saw matriarch Olivia Walton 'healed' of her disability within a single story arc, Cotler muses, "[W]hy does Olivia no longer have polio? Because it's just a pain in the ass."¹⁸⁶

Television production was not *Waltons* creator Hamner's first vocation, nor his first love. Telling stories, both as a novelist and screenwriter, was what came most naturally to Hamner. For Hamner, television was merely a vehicle for communicating stories, not an industry which he was looking to conquer. When it came to creating and writing for television, Hamner explained "I try not to get bogged down by considerations like: Will a sponsor like this particular idea? or, Is this offensive to an audience?"¹⁸⁷ As a result, *The Waltons* won audience attention and respect with a distinct brand of storytelling, one which used deceptively simple plots to tell humanistic stories with universal and timeless themes. These sensibilities notwithstanding, *The Waltons* was still a show backed by producers, funded by advertisers, and broadcast by a corporate entity intent on generating the highest revenue possible. Realistically, these considerations did impact Hamner's storytelling.

Despite Hamner's best intentions, *The Waltons* was not immune to the pressures of the television industry. The series often subscribed to tactics which produced the greatest ratings

¹⁸⁵ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 156,

impact. Deploying disability as a narrative device was among those tactics. When production began on *The Waltons* in the Spring of 1972, the first episode produced and filmed was an episode entitled “The Hunt” (5 October, 1972). “The Hunt” chronicled eldest son and main character John-Boy’s reluctance to participate in a ritual hunt with his father John and grandfather Zebulon. Torn between his sense of morality and his desire to be accepted by his father, John-Boy puzzled over what it meant to be a son versus what it meant to be a man of his own making.¹⁸⁸ While the episode addressed a recurring theme of the series, that is, John-Boy’s relationship to his family and his community, producers and network executives agreed that it was not how they wanted to package the series to viewers. They chose instead to air “The Foundling”, originally intended to air later in the season, as the premiere introduction to the Walton family in serial form. It bears noting that this decision was a particularly bold one, considering this hunting scenario was a key feature in both Hamner’s novel *Spencer’s Mountain*, and in the subsequent film of the same name. Relegating this story to a later position in the television season was significant. “The Foundling”, in which a deaf character took centre stage, is regarded as both a strong storyline and a thematically congruous narrative in terms of the overall *Waltons* oeuvre. Cotler reflects,

The Foundling was stronger. I think it is stronger. The Hunt is kind of weirdly dark and there's lots of people dressed as bears. It's kind of a muddy episode, and I think if you look at The Foundling, if you look at that structure of that episode, it's much more like other Waltons episodes. It shoots well. There's that similar structure, storyline-wise to other Walton episodes. I think that's why they went with The Foundling.¹⁸⁹

Waltons International Fan Club president Carolyn Grinnell observed *The Waltons* tendency to adhere to themes, noting in her appraisal of “The Foundling”, “in the Walton home there was always room for ‘one’ more whether it be a stray animal or a stray person.”²³ The ‘stray’, in the

¹⁸⁸ *The Waltons*, “The Hunt”, October 5, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

¹⁸⁹ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

case of “The Foundling”, was a six-year-old deaf child named Holly who was abandoned at the Walton’s doorstep by an anxious mother overwhelmed at the prospect of raising a disabled child.¹⁹⁰

Several motifs are at play in “The Foundling”, which made it both a logical episode on which to launch the series, and which made it a significant example of disability in the 1970s television era. Firstly, the concept of ‘familialism’—that is, the tendency to value and prioritize the family above all else—was central to *The Waltons*. In this episode we see that the notion of a child without a family is especially repugnant to the Waltons. Ultimately their decision to take the abandoned child into their homestead is made as a family. Once it is discovered that Holly is, in fact, deaf, the challenges of nurturing her are taken up by the Walton family as a collective. Though they initially seek the counsel of their local country doctor to determine why Holly will not speak, beyond that the Waltons determine that Holly’s deafness is not a medical problem, or even a social problem, but a family problem.¹⁹¹ The Waltons take it upon themselves to learn sign language, and in turn to educate Holly. Notably, the Walton family’s priority through much of the episode is teaching Holly to communicate, and to draw her in the social realm of the family through accessible language. In one memorable scene, the family are situated around the radio in the living room, listening and laughing at an evening comedy program, while Holly looks on with confusion, and an apparent sense of alienation. At this, Holly retreats to a bedroom upstairs, where John-Boy soon finds her crying. Appraising the situation, John-Boy has a revelation about Holly’s sense of exclusion and alienation from his family and the world around her, and he redoubles his efforts to teach Holly sign language. Capitalizing on the emotional

¹⁹⁰ *The Waltons*, “The Foundling”, September 14, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

¹⁹¹ See John Schuchman’s *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) for an in-depth examination of how deafness, historically has been depicted on screen, and what this means to and for deaf people.

moment, John-Boy seizes the opportunity to teach Holly how to communicate her feelings through sign language, mimicking her facial expressions, and fingerspelling the corresponding feelings. It is during this scene that Holly first signs back to a member of the Walton family, and this feat is met with jubilation from the rest of the Walton clan when John-Boy announces his triumph. At this the Walton family become even more invested in Holly's communication and socialization. Poignantly, locating Holly's parents becomes a secondary concern.¹⁹²

In terms of this episode's handling of disability, several things are noteworthy. Firstly, that the first disabled character on *The Waltons* is a deaf one makes sense in a lot of ways. Deafness specifically, and hearing loss more broadly, are disabilities that are easy to understand, and which are relatively common. The Waltons are not put off when they learn about Holly's deafness, and Olivia professes to have seen deaf people using sign language in the past, noting how beautiful the language is. Deafness, therefore, is established as a familiar and accessible disability topic.

When the Walton's Mountain doctor suggests using sign language to communicate with Holly, the Waltons agree that this is the best option to support the child. Deafness, thus, is presented as a temporary challenge, but not a particularly fraught one. "The Foundling" suggests that with a resource such a sign language, a supportive family, and love and understanding, the barriers associated with deafness are easily mitigated. Disability as a construct is entirely depoliticized in this episode, and Holly's deafness is a challenge that is consigned to her and her substitute family. This is significant because this establishes a motif on the Walton's when it comes to disability, and speaks to a trope common to much of television in this era, and that is the trope of 'able-bodied saviour'. Not only is Holly's disability reduced to little more than a

¹⁹² *The Waltons*, "The Foundling", September 14, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

communication barrier, but her redemption is found through the hearing Walton family, who apparently master sign language more quickly than Holly herself. The ‘able-bodied saviour’ is not unique to *The Waltons*, though it is recurrent on the series. Elsewhere in this study examples are cited of the Walton family proscripting for disabled characters the paths they should follow in life to be social and well-adjusted members of their communities.

This tendency towards proscription, and to feeling emotionally and morally equipped to handle whatever challenges beset their family, is one of the things which set *The Waltons* apart from its rural, southern television forebears. The Waltons may have been poor, they may have been geographically isolated, and they may have been relatively uneducated, but they were wise and upstanding folk. Their familialism, moral fortitude, and highly developed senses of self were the Walton family’s strengths and, one could argue, their armour against a mysterious and increasingly urbane world in which they did not belong. Although the series often acknowledged that the Waltons were exceptional, their exceptionalism was portrayed in celebratory terms. They and their way of life were never positioned as some punchline levied by the urban, liberal elite who dominated the television industry, as had been the case with earlier examples of white southernhood on television. Introducing characters who were otherwise exceptional to the series, including those with disabilities, arguably was a way to ‘normalize’ the Waltons, and to establish their poor, religious, white, rural southernhood as some kind of ideal, when contrasted with the challenges faced by the many outsiders who came to call.

Series lead Thomas recalled, “‘The Foundling’ was really a show that featured the whole family. It was more of an ensemble piece and so it was a good way to introduce everybody because everybody had good stuff to do.”²⁵ He elaborated, “[I]n retrospect I thought it was a good show to begin with because... [o]ne of the recurring strains in the series was the family in

relation to someone from the outside. Whether it was a different culture, a different religion, a different economic class, a different race, all that stuff we did a lot of.”²⁶ Thomas’ observation is important, because it clarifies a criticism that television series rely on disability for melodrama, and that this is somehow an appropriation that is specific to disability. In other words, that this is a microaggression *about* disability. Psychologist and academic Derald Wing Sue describes microaggressions as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.”¹⁹³ In the case of *The Waltons*, its use of disability for dramatic purposes sometimes inadvertently resulted in displays of microaggressions towards disabled group members because of the facile ways it dealt with very personal and complex issues relevant to that group. Yet, this tendency was not unique to disability on the series, and Thomas’s recollections of *The Waltons* series bear this out. Yes, disability was co-opted for dramatic purposes. And yes, its renderings were often overwrought and reductive. And yes, this was problematic. However, as Thomas points out, this was not unique to disability. Among the recurring themes on *The Waltons* was the notion of self in relation to family, family in relation to community, and community in relation to the outside world. These concepts were fleshed out and problematized using a variety of ‘others’, including other races, religions, economic classes, and cultures. Disability was among a trove of circumstances writers and networks trotted out to establish this ‘othering’ phenomenon and create drama.

There is a case to be made that this just means that the network and series were equal

¹⁹³ Derald Wing Sue, “Microaggressions: More than Just Race. Can Microaggressions be Directed at Women or Gay People?” *Psychology Today*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>

opportunity offenders. That is, their exploitation of disability was no less egregious because they featured other marginalized groups for dramatic purposes in their storytelling. There is also a case to be made that the human experience is itself dramatic, and that telling stories about the spectrum of the human experience just makes sense. It is also significant to note that the show also portrayed the Waltons, as a poor, rural, southern family, as being ‘othered’ on occasion. Frequently, people with greater means (“The Prophecy”, 2 October, 1975), more education (“The Literary Man”, 30 November, 1972), or more worldly experiences (“The Substitute”, 22 November, 1973) ended up on Walton’s mountain. Through their encounters with the Walton family, these characters demonstrated that though the Waltons held the moral high-ground, the reality was that they were a poor, rural, southern family. Such characters often cite how the Waltons are quaint, naïve, and disadvantaged. The family was always depicted as respectable, honourable, and open-hearted, but they were also depicted as oppressed by their economic circumstances, and sometimes as naïve and culturally out of synch with the wider world. The Walton family were always held up as the moral ideal, but not necessarily as the physical, economic, or cultural ideal of the United States in the 1970s. Compared to other popular series of the era, they were not as fashionable as the young detectives of *The Mod Squad*, they were not as affluent as the Brady family of *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974), and they were not as witty as the WJM news team of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. In introducing ‘others’ to Walton’s Mountain, the series essentially explored the way the Walton family and their values measured up against the rest of the world. And the Waltons were not always the winners in these clashes of values. Thomas recalls “We weren’t perfect, and Earl never wanted us to be. What he wanted, I think,

was truthfulness, and he gave all of us characters with which we could accomplish that.”¹⁹⁴

If disability was apparently hard to film and produce, why did *The Waltons* include disability in its storylines so often? One of the answers to this question is: Because it worked. As American journalist and disability advocate Charles A. Riley II explains in his book on disability and the media, “By jamming...[people with disabilities]...into prefabricated stories—the supercrip, the medical miracle, the object of pity—writers and producers have outfitted them with the narrative equivalent of an ill-fitting set of prostheses.” In other words, these stories serve producers well, because they offer a set of familiar archetypes on which to anchor drama. However, such stories are a disservice to disabled people themselves. Riley goes on to explain, “Each of these archetypal narratives has its way of reaching mass audiences, selling products..., and financially rewarding...the media outlet.”¹⁹⁵ In terms of *The Waltons*, its earliest forays into disability accomplished what all episodic television sets out to do, and that is to garner industry buzz, and to attract the largest numbers of viewers possible per episode.

Though a little slow in achieving ratings success, the industry buzz for *The Waltons* was immediate. Of its premiere episode, one television reviewer chided “[We] have not only glorious pauperism, but ecstatic deafness, and endearing child abandonment.”¹⁹⁶ Another reviewer was so impacted by the show’s premiere, they admitted, “My hankie was used at the close of Thursdays’ debut. I am not ashamed to admit that John McGreevey’s script was very touching.”¹⁹⁷ Yet

¹⁹⁴ Richard Thomas, as quoted *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, by Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), x.

¹⁹⁵ Charles A. Riley, *Disability and the Media: Prescriptions for Change*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), x.

¹⁹⁶ Judy Bachrach, “CBS’s ‘The Waltons’ Leaves Viewers Panting for Poverty,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 15, 1972, B4.

¹⁹⁷ Steve Hoffman, “‘Waltons’ Beauty Deserves to Stay,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 15, 1972, 40.

another reviewer of the series commended the show for launching on a surprising note, titling his review “‘The Waltons’ Begin Life on Brave Television Note.” He remarked,

The bucolic delegates from mythical Jefferson County, VA. would have an uphill fight even if they didn’t live in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Their opening show had no shooting, fighting, or other natural disasters, no song numbers, funny monologues, or Geraldine...Despite all this, ‘The Waltons’ might prosper in the weekly ratings...[T]he direction [was] uncommonly sensitive.¹⁹⁸

The same reviewer criticized the plot as hackneyed, noting that the ‘deaf girl left on the doorstep’ plot was merely a permutation of the tired ‘baby left on the doorstep’ trope. Another reviewer concurred and opined, “Its ‘Miracle Worker’-like plot, with all the Waltons becoming virtually instant teachers of finger-lingo after having a deaf and dumb little girl deposited on their doorstep, strained credibility.”¹⁹⁹ But hackneyed stories are often precisely what writers rely on. And *The Waltons* did hackneyed better than most. As one praising viewer noted, “Last night’s premiere story was no big thing. In fact, as plots go, it was rather standard TV stuff, but it was handled with such conviction, that it played true.”²⁰⁰ When producers and writers find a formula that achieves industry buzz and ratings results, they tend to recycle variations on that formula in order to duplicate their past success. This is not only reliable, it is economical. Relying on storytelling tropes not only means reliable audience engagement, it also means efficient writing and producing. Though he sometimes lamented the need for such economy, Hamner himself eventually came around to the realities of the television business. “I have learned,” he said, “although it doesn’t come naturally, to make decision’s involving people’s jobs and consequently their lives. Now I can say, ‘Yes, let’s hire that person’ or ‘let’s let go of that person’ or ‘let’s do this so we can cut down on the budget. We can combine these two characters

¹⁹⁸ Jay Sharbutt, “The Waltons Begin Life on Brave Television Note,” *Portsmouth Herald*, September 15, 1972, 20.

¹⁹⁹ Harry Harris, “Maybe You’ll Like the Waltons, But Maybe You’ll Have to Hurry,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 15, 1972, 25.

²⁰⁰ Richard K. Shull, “Is There Room on TV for a Gentle Story?” *Indianapolis News*, September 15, 1972, 17.

and save money.’ I have learned to produce.”²⁰¹

Producing a different version of the same thing is far more economical than pioneering new approaches to storytelling. Writing in 1971, U.S. television and film writer Tom Gries explained:

Turn on any dramatic show tonight in any series—and I promise you that from the first three minutes’ viewing you’ll know all the character relationships, all the plot convolutions to come, and about half the lines of dialogue. And whatever the conflicts, there is no catharsis, no dramatic release, because network fears and government pressures have smeared the tube with chicken fat.²⁰²

The Waltons, a poetic distillation of small-town family life, was hardly ‘chicken fat’. During my many hours of conversation with them, it became apparent how proud its cast and crew are of the work they did, and of the integrity of the series. And during my many hours of viewing the series, I learned how substantive the series could be. A reviewer of *The Waltons*’ earliest episodes gushed, “If the quality holds up, we will not see a better series on video this season, and it will rank with television’s finest entertainment achievements.”²⁰³ Notwithstanding, *The Waltons*, like many other series of its era, did veer toward predictability and repetition at times.

In true ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ fashion, *The Waltons* had another disability-themed episode already in the can by the time “The Foundling” aired. “The Hunt” was bumped in the line-up once again, and for its second shot at capturing an audience, CBS chose to air “The Carnival”, an episode which featured the legendary dwarf performer Billy Barty in a central role. “The Carnival” is a prime example of the Walton viewpoint being tested and coming up short, as Olivia Walton confronts her own prejudices about people who are different from her. A traveling

²⁰¹ Earl Hamner, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 162.

²⁰² Tom Gries speaking to the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1970, as quoted in Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 127.

²⁰³ Rick DuBrow, “‘The Waltons’ is a Must for Family Viewing,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 15, 1972, 45.

carnival troupe ends up stranded on Walton's Mountain, and its merry band of misfits, including dwarf character Tommy Trindle, show the Waltons how narrow their worldview is.²⁰⁴ Before the writers and the network even had feedback on their first episode, they had already written and produced a second episode revolving around disability—a signal that disability was thought to be good dramatic fodder. That the network chose for a second time to bump the episode they had originally intended to air first in favour of one involving disability speaks volumes about the perceived ratings cache of disability.

Barnouw explains,

The network as underwriter of a series, generally had the right to review each episode at several stages: synopsis, teleplay, revised pages, and screenings of roughly edited workprint and final print. Advertising agency representatives and sponsors might also see copies of the teleplay; a CBS policy statement permitted them to 'participate in the creative process'.²⁰⁵

In other words, what appeared on CBS, and when it appeared were collaborative and calculated decisions—the calculus being how to create the most profitable circumstances for the network. If an episode involving deafness and disability drew critical praise for *The Waltons* during its first week, it was simply good business sense to repeat this formula, hence “The Carnival”. Also, shows like NBC's popular *Ironside*, a crime series about a paraplegic police detective, and ABC's *Marcus Welby*, a medical drama which often featured patients with disabilities, already had a track record of ratings success with disability and drama.²⁰⁶ Why not recycle the formula and apply it to a new set of circumstances on *The Waltons*? The safe bet was often the preferred

²⁰⁴ *The Waltons*, “The Carnival”, September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

²⁰⁵ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 405.

²⁰⁶ Jack Gould, “‘Welby, M.D.’ Tops Nielsen Ratings”, *New York Times*, September 28, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/28/archives/welby-md-tops-nielsen-ratings-films-made-for-tv-in-top-10-but-new.html>

route in 1970s television production. Brown revealed, “A vice-president of one of the networks confided to me, ‘We don’t pick the shows we think will have the best chance of becoming popular. To be honest we’re attracted to those that seem to have the least chance of failing.’”²⁰⁷

As the 60s waned and the 70s dawned, networks mostly shied away from risk-taking and controversy. CBS famously cancelled *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1969), despite it being a hit with young audiences and an Emmy-winning musical-comedy series. According to Norman Lear, who understandably kept abreast of such developments in television production, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was “a brilliant, satirical variety show” which was ultimately cancelled “for being ‘too topical’, and, as one critic labeled it, ‘dangerously funny’.”²⁰⁸ It was around this time that ABC, the network which originally green-lit Lear’s pilot about a working-class American family divided over issues of gender, class, race, and political affiliations, declined to pick up the series that would become *All in the Family* for the second time. It is difficult to imagine a 70s television landscape which did not include *All in the Family*, but that was nearly the case. Once deemed “Funny, but impossible to air,” *All in the Family* was eventually picked up by CBS in 1971, though not without great trepidation and constant scrutiny on the part of the network.²⁰⁹ All this is to say that good dramatic fodder was one thing, but blatant controversy was another. Premises which were dramatic, but not shocking, and thought-provoking, but not controversial, were ideal vehicles to carry a television series. Among such premises, it seems, disability fit the bill, as Lauri Klobas proved in her book *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (1988), which chronicled the many iterations of disability featured on 1970s and 1980s television. Klobas’ work highlights how disability was a staple, and often predictable

²⁰⁷ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 125.

²⁰⁸ Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 225.

²⁰⁹ Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014), 231.

feature of television in the 1970s television. Indeed, her work mentions several instances on *The Waltons* where this was the case.

To say that *The Waltons* as a whole had a formulaic premise is misrepresentative. In fact, its success is often attributed to the fact that, at least when it first appeared on television in 1972, it was a markedly different show on the television landscape. Thomas opines:

It's easy to forget that *The Waltons* was a groundbreaking television series. A true ensemble drama that embraced all ages and defied the categories, being by turns funny, sad, serious, silly, and, at times, even exciting. It wasn't a show about super-lawyers, super-cops, or super-doctors. It wasn't even a show about people who always had jobs, let-alone high-paying ones. It was just about a family trying to get along.²¹⁰

And if the motifs on the series were somewhat contrived according to the received wisdom about what makes for must-see TV, the execution of the stories themselves was not. James Person Jr., Earl Hamner's biographer, explained Hamner's approach to storytelling:

[I]t all starts with the story. And the story must be told with integrity and honesty and Earl's told me many times, write what you know. And Earl wrote what he knew, and when he examined the stories written by Nigel McKeand, and John McGreevey, and the rest of the pool of writers that he was very proud of working with, he looked for that integrity in their work and he was very apt to notice the false note and to correct it.²¹¹

The interesting thing about television production is that though it is a highly collaborative and hierarchical industry, the whole process of television creation does not really begin at the top. Take *The Waltons* as an example. Seasoned television writers would conceive of a story idea, and craft a script around that inspiration. They apparently had relative freedom to do so in that, as series regular Judy Norton recalls,

I don't think that somebody went in and went, we need an episode about blah, blah. We need an episode about blah, blah. They hired John McGreevey, who was a brilliant

²¹⁰ Richard Thomas, as quoted in *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, by Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), ix.

²¹¹ James Person Jr. (biographer), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

writer...Other writers came and pitched ideas and they went yes, yes, yes, we'll do these. I think a lot of it was very much writer driven and originated.²¹²

This does not mean writers were free to write however they wanted. It means they had an element of creative control in an industry that was highly regulated. They were free to dream up whatever story they wished, so long as it could be told in 45-48 minutes (according to the then standard television format of sixty minutes for dramas, minus twelve to fifteen minutes of screen-time devoted to advertising), could be told without violating FCC regulations, and could potentially captivate a large audience.²¹³ *Waltons* guest star and series writer Michael McGreevey recalls the creative leeway given *The Waltons*, once its success was apparent to the network. He notes, “[R]eally, after the first season it won all the Emmys and it was the number one show, it was a hit. So, typically the networks leave you alone, thank God.”²¹⁴ Though leeway is a far cry from complete creative control. There was still plenty of oversight in writing and producing an episode of *The Waltons*.

Once *Waltons* writers successfully executed a script according to these dictates, they would clear it with Hamner—creator and executive producer of the series—who would give feedback on the veracity of the script, and on how the story resonated with his vision for *The Waltons*. Because the series was inspired by his family and based on his own published writing, Hamner was protective of the series. Thus, he was more hands-on than the average producer and showrunner of his day. Newcomb and Alley reported “His involvement was detailed and extensive, a daily immersion in questions of story, casting, design, and overarching concept.”²¹⁵ Of his involvement in producing *The Waltons* Hamner said, “I do enjoy being on the production

²¹² Judy Norton (series regular), interview with the author, Glendale, California, August 2016.

²¹³ S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 6.

²¹⁴ Michael McGreevey (series guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

²¹⁵ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 155.

side, approving costumes, approving location or suggesting costumes, props, etc., seeing us come in on time and budget, discovering new talent and taking chances on young, untried people...”²¹⁶

Once scripts passed muster with Hamner, from there scripts were generally cleaned up by story editors, and then passed along to production executives at Lorimar, and network executives at CBS. Lorimar was mainly concerned with the profitability of the stories and with protecting their investment as underwriters of the series. CBS was equally invested in a script’s profitability, as well as concerned with whether or not the script adhered to FCC regulations and broadcast standards. A breach in either of these things could spell hefty fines for the network, and threaten to alienate audiences used to a steady diet of inoffensive television fare. Newcomb and Alley elaborate, “Before an episode can be aired the independent producer must deal [with] the network’s office of ‘broadcast standards’ or ‘program practices’, the internal censors of each organization. Since the mid-sixties these departments have exercised near absolute control over final scripts, examining language, violence, and sex.”²¹⁷ Assuming a script checked the corresponding boxes of profitability and decency, networks were generally content to approve whatever their shows’ writers dreamed up.

Advertisers were likewise concerned, or one might say *unconcerned*, with the content of the series during which their products were represented—certainly less so than they were in television’s earlier days, at least. At one time, television serials were sponsored by one company, or even a single product. Thus, the relationship between the advertiser and the series was more apparent. By the 1970s, networks had wised to the idea that they could sell shorter parcels of

²¹⁶ Earl Hamner, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 155.

²¹⁷ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “The Television Producer: An Introduction” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.

airtime to a greater number of advertisers, and thus increase their profits. Television series therefore came to be sponsored by a whole range of advertisers. When this change occurred, advertisers became less concerned with the shows they were sponsoring, and more concerned about getting the biggest bang for their buck. Sponsors typically gravitated more towards favorable Nielsen ratings data when purchasing airtime than gravitating towards shows themselves. If a series had high Nielsen numbers, an advertiser was willing to pay more to have their commercial shown during that series, knowing their product or service would reach larger audiences. Sponsors of *The Waltons* bought air time during the series not because they were necessarily fans of the series, but because they were fans of the ratings the series generated. A wide range of sponsors supported the show throughout its many years. In addition to the raw data provided by the Nielsen Company, advertisers also took in to account demographic data supplied by Nielsen to target their products to audiences that were most likely to be receptive to their products. Television journalist Shales pointed to the emergence of *Saturday Night Live* onto the television scene in the mid-70s as the quintessential example of advertisers aligning their products with specific television audiences. He explained,

[N]etworks showed during the '70s the ability to expand their audiences to take in new, converted constituencies. NBC's "Saturday Night Live" staked out fresh territory in TV demographics, luring back to TV members of a generation that had largely abandoned it. Advertisers found their socio-economic profile irresistible, and products rarely advertised on TV previously -- stereo systems, wines, sports cars, motor oil, Perrier water, pregnancy tests -- were added to the list of TV conquests.²¹⁸

Advertisers did not gear their products towards the contents of *Saturday Night Live* itself—a move which would have been foolhardy, and all but impossible given the absurdist nature of the series—but to those watching it. In sum, for advertisers their main concern was not what was

²¹⁸Tony Shales, "TV in '70s,," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

being watched, but who was watching it.

Industry standards having long been established by the time *The Waltons* aired, little course correction was needed for *Waltons* writers, who approached their scripts from the get-go keeping the rules of the television game in mind. Thomas recalls only a few instances where CBS requested that a ‘damn’ was replaced with a ‘darn’, or a romantic interlude was framed in a more chaste manner, but does not recall any instances where the network interfered with the integrity of the story.²¹⁹ Dayton recalls similar events. “[O]ne day we got this note [from CBS]...John-Boy had a line...I think it was at Ike's store or something and the line was something like, ‘I don't give a darn’. And I remember CBS sending this note, and I saw the note saying ‘Make sure he says ‘darn’ and not ‘damn’.’”²²⁰ But for the most part, *The Waltons* towed the censorship line, and did so easily. The series was a family-based drama in which violence, foul language, and salacious content had no part. It was not that *The Waltons* pushed an agenda of piety and propriety. It is just that such content did not gel with the tone and context of the series.

The series was a meditation on family life, the events that challenge families and communities, and the rhythms in the life cycle which affect all families. Among these rhythms is sexual maturation. Hamner learned early on about the fine-lines between creating relevant and authentic scripts, keeping the network happy, and keeping the censors at bay. With regret he shared the story of an early *Waltons* episode

which involved [eldest Walton daughter] Mary Ellen’s first period. The script was written by Joanna Lee, one of our finest. It was very sensitively done and there was nothing clinical...[Then] president of CBS Robert Wood preferred they not do the episode. His reasoning was that people would tune in to *The Waltons* for one particular subject matter and that menstruation was possibly something the audience would go to a Norman Lear

²¹⁹ Richard Thomas (actor), interview with the author, January 2017.

²²⁰ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

show for. We did compromise, but not without a struggle. It was a discussion. In the end CBS, in the person of Bob Wood, did not prohibit us showing the episode. He did not say, 'You can't do it.' He said, 'We would prefer you did not, and we leave it to you own judgement.'²²¹

In the end, Hamner and his production team elected not to proceed with the episode. The fear of audience alienation and network ramifications proved too great. Sexuality was likewise a touchy subject when it came to disability. In "The Obstacle", disabled veteran Mike Paxton lamented his inability to have romantic relationships owing to his paraplegia. Though it is intimated that he is impotent due to his war injury, the topic is couched in oblique terms. Sex and impotence are not mentioned by name, and the extent to which Mike and other disabled servicemen were impacted by physical and psychological impotence is glossed over. During a heart-to-heart, matriarch Olivia asks Mike if there's a girl in his life. Mike shares that he was in a romantic relationship prior to the war, and replies, "There was. She doesn't know where I am." Olivia points out the agony her daughter Mary-Ellen faced waiting for news about Curt Willard, her late husband, presumed dead in the fray of Pearl Harbor, and encourages Mike to reach out to his estranged love.²²²

Ironically, later in the series in an episode entitled "The Tempest" (5 February, 1981), we learn that Curt did not perish at Pearl Harbor, but sustained injuries which likewise made him impotent, and which likewise made him reluctant to return to Mary-Ellen. Curt also endured psychological challenges from his traumatic experiences in service, which further impacted his confidence in being a partner to Mary-Ellen. He opted instead for exile and estrangement in Florida. The specifics of this episode will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4, which addresses the topic of disability and relevance television. Suffice to say that sex is referred to as

²²¹ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 165.

²²² *The Waltons*, "The Obstacle", January 11, 1979 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

“tenderness” in this episode, and no real meaningful discussion about disability and sexuality is had.²²³

The blunting of sexuality in relation to disabled male characters on the series is particularly illuminating, given sexuality’s connection to notions of masculinity, and given how central masculinity is as a theme on the series. Recall that both the novel and film *Spencer’s Mountain*, and the novella and telefilm *The Homecoming*, which laid the groundwork for *The Waltons*, revolved around crises of masculinity for main character John-Boy. Although by no means a sexy or tawdry series, the male members of the Walton family are nonetheless depicted as sexual beings. Grandpa Walton and John Sr., in particular, are established as romantic figures in the series. As the only two married men of the Walton household at the outset of the series, Grandpa Zeb and John are the only two males for whom it is socially and morally permissible to engage in sexual relations. Zeb often directs flirtatious banter towards his wife Esther, hinting at the sizzle of their love life during their younger days, while John is highly demonstrative of his physical affection for his wife, often whisking her into passionate kisses and embraces. As the Walton sons mature on the series, and even marry in the cases of Jason and Ben, they are similarly established as romantic and sexual beings. In something of a daring turn for *The Waltons*, during the final season of the series youngest son Jim-Bob is rumoured to have impregnated a girl outside of wedlock (“The Pursuit”, 1 January, 1981). Although the supposedly pregnant young woman turns out to be lying about the pregnancy, Jim-Bob’s concerns that it might be true confirm that he has indeed engaged in premarital sex.²²⁴ Suffice to say that for non-disabled male characters on *The Waltons*, sexuality was depicted as an essential, highly desirable part of their lives.

²²³ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2011), DVD.

²²⁴ *The Waltons*, “The Pursuit”, January 1, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2011), DVD.

That sexuality was treated as incidental and not that important in the lives of two disabled male characters on the series, is problematic when measured against the overall representation of male sexuality on *The Waltons*, and when considered in the context of real concerns surrounding disabled male sexuality following WWII. As Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli explain, “Prior to World War II, few soldiers with spinal cord injuries survived longer than a handful of days or weeks, frequently felled by infections of the urinary tract, respiratory system, and pressure sores; mortality rates during World War I hovered around 80 percent.” With the proliferation of medical technology in the interwar years, “By the end of World War II, however, blood transfusions, the mass production of penicillin and sulfa drugs, new techniques of catheterization, and innovations in hospital procedure had decreased mortality rates to around 10 percent.”²²⁵ While better survival outcomes for servicemen with spinal cord injuries was undoubtedly a good thing, that did not mean that their survival was without complications, not the least of which concerned their new sexual status. Linker and Laemmli note, “the survival of this new patient group...raised potentially troubling questions. What did it really mean to be paralyzed below the waist? Would these men be able to experience sexual pleasure, satisfy their partners, reproduce?”²²⁶

Returning to “The Obstacle”, Olivia urges Mike to contact his girlfriend. He declines, declaring, “No. The man she loves doesn’t exist anymore. He went down with his ship.” Olivia suggests that his girlfriend should decide for herself what she thinks of Mike’s new circumstances, but Mike implores, “What can I offer her? What’s my life going to be like from now on?” Olivia says matter-of-factly, “What you make of it.” Mike reveals with embarrassment

²²⁵ Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli, “Half a Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Impotence in World War II America,” *Osiris* 30 (2015), 230.

²²⁶ Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli, “Half a Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Impotence in World War II America,” *Osiris* 30 (2015), 230.

and regret, “I can’t give her a child.” Olivia points out he can give his romantic partner himself, and that might just be enough. Mike considers this proposition, and agrees to consider writing his girlfriend.²²⁷ The issue of Mike’s impotence, and altered status as a sexual being is given short shrift in this scene. Linker and Laemmli point out that “As a man’s sexuality became increasingly ‘entangled with his sense of self-worth [following the Second World War],’ any inability to perform—reproductively or romantically—became a serious threat to his masculinity.” They emphasize that “For disabled veterans, such anxieties were often particularly severe, threatening not only their manhood, but also their marriages, and thus the larger project of national rehabilitation.”²²⁸ Therefore, it is unlikely that a man in Mike’s position would be so easily mollified. Service-induced impotence was regarded as more than a dysfunction of a sexual organ. According to Linker and Laemmli, it constituted a complete reorientation of self and notions of manhood.

Though Mike capitulates and suggests he might reach out to his girlfriend, the audience never learns Mike’s fate with her. The remainder of the episode focuses on Mike learning to navigate the world as a wheelchair-user, and emphasizes his quest for productivity, especially economic productivity. The value of his body as a productivity entity is the foremost issue of the episode. After wrestling with discrimination and inaccessibility at a local ammunition factory, Mike ultimately lands an important job there, and this is depicted as a satisfying conclusion to

²²⁷ *The Waltons*, “The Obstacle”, January 11, 1979 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

²²⁸ Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli, “Half a Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Impotence in World War II America,” *Osiris* 30 (2015), 230. See also John M. Kinder, *Paying with their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2015; Ana Carden-Coyne, “Ungrateful Bodies: Rehabilitation, Resistance, and Disabled American Veterans of the First World War,” *European Review of History* 14:4 (December 2007): 543-565; Suzannah Biernoff, “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain,” *Social History of Medicine* 24:3 (December 2011): 666-685.

Mike's story. At the conclusion of the episode, the audience hears a voiceover of an older John-Boy reflecting on the war-time years. He says, "Mike Paxton and thousands of other handicapped Americans proved their skill and reliability in defense industries throughout the nation during those war years. For my family, the reunion with Mike was an inspiration at a time of doubt and fear."²²⁹ Despite his earlier misgivings, the audience never learns anything of Mike's journey as a sexual being with a disability. This issue is sidestepped, even though it was an issue of great relevance in the post-Vietnam era.

The Academy Award-winning film *Coming Home* (1978) addressed these issues head-on, depicting the intricacies of the romantic relationship between Sally, portrayed by Jane Fonda, and paraplegic Vietnam veteran Luke, played by Jon Voight. Significantly, the film was produced by Fonda, herself an anti-war activist, and advocate for people with disabilities. Inspired by her acquaintance with Ron Kovic—himself a disabled veteran, and the person wrote the 1976 memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* on which the subsequent 1989 film was based—Fonda wanted to make a film about the toll of the war on both bodies and psyches.²³⁰ As a further symbolic gesture of solidarity with disability communities, when Fonda was awarded an Oscar for her performance in *Coming Home*, she delivered her acceptance speech in simultaneously communication (SIMCOM) using English and pidgin sign language.²³¹

The fact that the economic success of films in the 1970s were driven by box office sales, and not advertising revenues, accounts for some of the latitude in the film industry compared to the television industry. Furthermore, the film industry was not as heavily regulated, given that

²²⁹ *The Waltons*, "The Obstacle", January 11, 1979 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

²³⁰ Biography.com Editors, "Ron Kovic: Anti-War Activist", *Biography*, April 2, 2014, <https://www.biography.com/people/ron-kovic-21058843>

²³¹ Mahita Gajanan, "From 'Hanoi Jane' to the Workout: A Brief History of Jane Fonda's Activism," *Time*, September 24, 2018, <http://time.com/5400822/jane-fonda-hbo-documentary-activist/>
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL_73XeE8fo for Jane Fonda's signed Oscar's acceptance speech.

films were physical entities beamed at screens in private theatres, as compared to television whose images were broadcast from a central location simultaneously using public air space. The best illustration of this fact is perhaps the adaptation of Richard Hooker's novel MASH first to film, and then to television. A tongue-in-cheek black comedy about an American surgical unit serving in the army during the Korean War, MASH was widely understood as a critique and allegory of the Vietnam War. The novel, film, and television series all debuted while the Vietnam War was still being waged, though the series ended years after the war concluded. Though the subject matter, tone, and humour were consistent across genres, MASH the film is decidedly racier than its TV counterpart, featuring stronger language and more sexually suggestive images. Interestingly, the filmic version of Hamner's work, *Spencer's Mountain*, is also noticeably racier than the televised incarnation of Hamner's work. *Spencer's Mountain's* use of profane language is stronger, and its depictions of sexuality and alcoholism more overt than they are on *The Waltons*.

Brown explains why television writers and producers like Hamner often eschewed their freedom of expression, and chose to self-edit their creative content: "Since television is a highly conspicuous business, and always under the watch of politicians, it does not benefit a broadcast company to look for controversy." He went on to say "Companies that at any moment may be caught in a swirl of public fury leading to government sanctions lose their attractiveness on Wall Street. In matters of programming, therefore, blandness is prescribed."²³² According to actor/screenwriter/director and television icon Alan Alda,

On the whole I would say that most of what appears to be values on television is the result of not wanting to offend the people who are watching and not wanting to offend the

²³² Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 125.

advertisers. The censorship department at the network probably has more effect on promoting what seem to be a set of values than anybody's conscious design.²³³

Such rules are limiting, to be sure. They inhibit an artist's creative expression. Christopher Knopf, a veteran television script writer in the States, did not mince words when he said in the early 1980s, "In documentaries and in news, certain truths can be told, but you can't tell them in commercial drama. You can't take up real problems seriously...In TV, the whole committee approach has done more to injure the individual writer than anything else, because he has come to accept it as a way of life." He concluded, "We're feeding middle America all the pap we know as lies and nonsense; we are feeding things we personally resent, which have no resemblance to real life."²³⁴ The spoken and unspoken rules of television production shoehorn storytelling into a particular structure. They encourage repetition rather than novelty. And for the most part these rules are not devised for the public good, but rather as business incentives. In some instances, however, these rules are indispensable to the public good. Tight regulations within the television industry might mean we see very little that is novel and exciting on screens, but it also means that there are limits to the amount of content which is egregiously offensive. Such limits are neither defined nor enumerated, but are the result of a combination of a healthy fear of the FCC, and a kind of social contract with viewing audiences about what is acceptable.²³⁵ FCC

²³³ Alan Alda as quoted in Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, "The Television Producer: An Introduction" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.

²³⁴ Christopher Knopf, *Daily Variety*, January 20, 1970, as quoted in Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 126.

²³⁵ Even today in a television culture where seemingly anything goes, there are apparent social contracts to which audiences expect networks to adhere. In April 2018, CBS reported on the conclusion of the investigation into musician Prince Rogers Nelson's death. In their reporting, they broadcast graphic images of the late singer's dead body. While technically not in violation of any FCC standards, audiences took to social media to express their dismay that such images were broadcast. @GoddardCaroline tweeted, "There is absolutely no journalistic purpose in showing images of @Prince's dead body. None. That's tabloid nonsense," April 19, 2018, [@ryan_cryan](https://twitter.com/GoddardCaroline/status/987138730094817280?fbclid=IwAR31-Nj3e77bBgR5i4d8tOprqgBCoRt-vIUhPUW6nzPZW1-DTARaItVX1_k) tweeted, "@CBSNews Can't believe you showed footage of Prince's dead body on your evening broadcast. Classless. @prince," April 19, 2018, [@vesperview](https://twitter.com/ryan_cryan/status/987100037032415232?fbclid=IwAR04tvGDKRgJvQvjO-R7sMxpawVpcDw3q_GFvhr3RC_YbLLX5TO19J12pvU) stated emphatically, "@CNN and

regulations concerning language and graphic content mean that our screens are not overrun with extreme offenses such as hate speech, sexual violence, and child abuse.

During my investigation of the subject, I found the historical rules governing what we see on television, and why, less problematic than the historical precedents of who makes those rules. In the 1970s, television was an almost exclusively white, able male-dominated industry. Thanks to changemakers like Shonda Rimes, a woman of colour and showrunner, Lizzy Weiss, a woman actively engaged in authentic casting and disability representation, Shoshannah Stern, a deaf woman and showrunner, and Maysoon Zayid, a Muslim female series' lead with Cerebral Palsy, the television industry is becoming more diverse and representative. When *The Waltons* was on the air in the 1970s, a television industry with this composition was inconceivable. Series regular Judy Norton reflects that, compared to how utterly homogenous her upbringing could have been had she not grown up on the set of *The Waltons*, she was raised in an environment of relative diversity. She says,

I feel like if I had gone to school that would've been more of a bubble because I would've been in a suburb in Orange County, going to some suburban school with a bunch of kids just like me. And because I was on the set, it isn't just the actors, it's all the crew. Which meant I was meeting people from different parts of the country, different ethnicities, different political views, different socioeconomic status. It was actually a pretty diverse space where I had freedom to go anywhere.²³⁶

However, *Waltons* producer Claylene Jones sees things a little differently. Among television's earliest female producers, Jones was promoted to the role of producer on *The Waltons* during its later seasons. Although *The Waltons* was mostly a welcoming workplace for Jones—save for

@CBSNews are absolutely DISGUSTING for showing Prince's dead body uncensored!" April 19, 2018. https://twitter.com/vesperview/status/987107444630441985?fbclid=IwAR3l-Nj3e77bBgR5i4d8tOprqgBCoRt-vIUhPUW6nzPZW1-DTARaItVX1_k. In journalism, typically decedents are only shown concealed by white sheets, caskets, or the like, and so the explicit images of Prince's body violated a kind of social contract of how audiences expect decedents to be portrayed in journalistic media.

²³⁶ Kami Cotler (series regular), in conversation with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

some initial scepticism from male co-workers—this was not her experience elsewhere. She recalls of working on *The Waltons*,

[I]t was a wonderful experience because after that I worked on a couple of other shows for other studios. It was like night and day. It really was it was like going from, I would describe it to someone as like going from a nice family home with a fire in the fireplace, and everyone getting along, to going and walking into a lion's den. It was just, it wasn't like that everywhere. You went into other things and people were back-stabbing each other, you know.²³⁷

Opportunities within the industry were reserved for a select few, and women, people of colour, disabled people, and openly LGBTQ2 individuals were persona non grata.

Writing on the television industry in the early 1970s, Brown observed, “The networks draw from a small pool of program sources—a half-dozen major studios in Hollywood and perhaps a score of independents—continually relying on the same creative and production talent. An inbred group, they succeed each other in the same jobs.”²³⁸ Such inbreeding generated a coterie of white able males whose tastes, ideals, and rules have been broadcast into living rooms for three-quarters of a century. In her work on the Hollywood TV producer, Muriel Cantor quoted one producer describing how he knew his children’s program also attracted an adult audience: “I like to think of myself as a rather sophisticated person. I do sophisticated things. I drink booze and go out with girls. I play golf at a very posh club, and I have a friend there; the man is a very sophisticated guy. Drinks more booze than I do. I know he watches my show and did long before he met me.”²³⁹ As Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman see it, “These musings illustrate rather starkly how self-conceptions can be projected onto the mass audience as rationales or

²³⁷ Claylene Jones (producer), telephone interview with the author, Fall 2016.

²³⁸ Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971), 136.

²³⁹ Anonymous producer quoted in Muriel Cantor’s *The Hollywood TV Producer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 171-172.

justifications for program content.”²⁴⁰ The issue is an old one, and so is Hollywood’s awareness of it. In their book on television production, Newcomb and Alley lamented, “There are, to our regret, no women and no minority members in this book because the structure of the television industry, like the structure of American society, has been dominated by white males. That same domination has effectively blocked, with a few notable exceptions, genuine representation of minorities on television.”²⁴¹

In a study published nearly a decade later, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman found the same to be true. They found that “television’s creative leaders come from similar backgrounds. The group is populated almost exclusively by white males. The entire sample [in our study] includes only one non-white and two women. By and large, they represent an urban and cosmopolitan sector of society.” They elaborate, “Most important, this group has had a major role in shaping the shows whose themes and stars have become staples of our popular culture.”²⁴² Thus, the reason that there were so many straight, white, non-disabled male leads on television in the 1970s is because these were largely the characteristics of the people who produced these characters. Though it is difficult to assess the relative sexism, racism, and ableism of these industry leaders, it is probably safe to assume that the over-representation of this group of people was at least partly motivated by a predilection for such characters. In all likelihood, these types of characters were perceived as being the most appealing and ‘normal’, and so clogged the airwaves. It is also a fact that people tend to recreate what they know and have experienced. And if the experiences of most of the people running the television industry in the 1970s were those

²⁴⁰ S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 12.

²⁴¹ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “Introduction” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), xvi.

²⁴² S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 13.

of straight, white, non-disabled males, it is no wonder that screens were overrun with recreations of these images. This chapter has focused most heavily on the de facto rules governing television production, and how they impacted a series' ability to present disability content. Salient to this topic are the questions, 'Who makes television's rules? And why do they make them?'

Though initially slow finding an audience, *The Waltons* was well-received by critics.²⁴³ Audiences who tuned in to CBS on September 14, 1972 to give *The Waltons* a chance, rather than sticking with ratings superstars *The Flip Wilson Show* or *The Mod Squad*²⁴⁴, were captivated by the series, as previously cited reviews attest. A grassroots campaign levied by fans and critics encouraging others to tune in to *The Waltons* steadily gained momentum. By the end of its first year on television, *The Waltons* was a ratings triumph. For its final episode of the first season, *The Waltons* relied once again on disability to do the heavy-lifting. Entitled "The Easter Story," the season one finale saw matriarch Olivia Walton contract polio and experience paralysis of her legs as a result. It is common for television series to feature their most dramatic and engaging

²⁴³ In her dissertation on television critique in America in the 1970s, Karen Petruska writes, "Viewing TV criticism as a profession, a historical source, and a site of scholarly analysis, this project offers a series of interventions, including a consideration of how critical writing may serve as a primary source for historians and how television studies has overlooked the significance of the critic as an object of analysis in his/her own right." Karen Petruska, *The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television*, Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012, Abstract.

²⁴⁴ Both *The Flip Wilson Show* and *The Mod Squad* were uniquely positioned entities in the television landscape. The former a comedy variety show, and the latter a procedural crime drama, both were branded as 'hip', and were seen as harbingers of new sensibilities in television content. Both *Flip Wilson* and *Mod Squad* featured black male leads, with the *Mod Squad* also featuring a female lead in a here-to-fore non-traditional female role. Distinctly different in tone and cast composition from their exclusively white rural comedies forebears, such as *Petticoat Junction*, *Gomer Pyle USMC*, *Green Acres*, and *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Flip Wilson* and *Mod Squad* nonetheless adhered to some tried and true formulas. Variety series had long been staples in American television, ranging from *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1972), *The Red Skelton Show* (1951-1971), *The Andy Williams Show* (1962-1971), *The Carol Burnett Show* (1967-1978), *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (1968-1973), and *The Glen Campbell Good Time Hour* (1969-1972). In terms of racial representation and comedic stylings, *Flip Wilson* brought something new to the table. In terms of genre and construction, it harkened back to a tradition of variety in American television almost as old as the medium itself. Likewise, the *Mod Squad* was one among a bevy of law and order procedurals populating American airwaves, including *Dragnet* (1951-1959), *The Defenders* (1961-1965), *Ironside* (1967-1975), and *Adam-12* (1968-1975), albeit with a younger and more diverse cast of lead detectives. These series, then, were needle-moving rather than ground-breaking.

story-lines during the season's finale. The idea is to make an impression on viewers that will leave them wanting more and encourage them to tune in when the next television season begins.¹¹ Stretched into a two-hour special, "The Easter Story" was such a case, and the deployment of illness and disability for ratings was a success, as this episode was number one in the ratings that week.¹² The plot of "The Easter Story" was conceived to end the season with maximum dramatic effect. But the story behind how the narrative was ultimately shaped is an interesting one, and will be explored in detail in the next chapter, "Disability as Historical Authenticity."

That disability was included in storytelling on *The Waltons* is not surprising. During the era in which *The Waltons* originally aired, many television serials approached the topic of disability. Ranging from law and order dramas, to medical dramas, to comedies, to family series, disability was everywhere in 1970s and early 1980s television.²⁴⁵ Sometimes disability was written in to television for dramatic effect. *The Hardy Boys* (1977-1979) conjured up television drama when it featured a deaf character who was unwittingly involved in a high stakes criminal scheme. In the episode, a deaf woman is forced to confront the machinations of a criminal, who plans to blow up a nearby hotel, when she inadvertently reads his lips and uncovers his plan while he is talking at a pay phone booth ("The Mystery of the Silent Scream", 27 November, 1977).²⁴⁶ Other times, disability was employed to infuse comedy into a situation. *Happy Days*

²⁴⁵ Examples include *The Rockford Files*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Police Story*, *Baretta*, *ChiPs*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Magnum P.I.*, *Medical Story*, *Medical Center*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Trapper John, M.D.*, *Nurse*, *Good Times*, *Happy Days*, *The Love Boat*, *Three's Company*, *Mork and Mindy*, *Fantasy Island*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Family*, *James at 15*, *The Hardy Boys*, *Sesame Street*, *Barnaby Jones*, *Harry-O*, *Barney Miller*, *M*A*S*H*, *Hart to Hart*, *Vega\$*, *The Paper Chase*, *The White Shadow*, and *One Day at A Time*. List compiled with some support from Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988).

²⁴⁶ *The Hardy Boys*, "The Mystery of the Silent Scream", (Universal City, California: Universal Television, 1977) Television Broadcast.

(1974-1984), for example, used disability to comedic effect when the starring character Fonzie meets and attempts to woo a deaf woman named Allison, who works for his friends the Cunninghams' electric company ("Allison", 12 February, 1980). Having attempted to learn sign language to court Allison, the supposed comedy of the episode is derived from the fact that Fonzie is considered a 'ladies man', and is not accustomed to working so hard to win the affections of a young woman.²⁴⁷ Where other television series produced during the 1970s and early 1980s were more likely to feature a "special" episode about disability or a handful of episodes featuring disability, the topic of disability commanded sustained attention throughout the series' run of *The Waltons*.²⁴⁸

Though *The Waltons* contributed its fair share of problematic disability scenarios to the television canon, when one moves beyond the images themselves, and explores the context and production history behind those images, a nuanced history of disability on screen begins to emerge. This chapter explored how some of the problems endemic to disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* were products of the nature of the television industry itself. Television is an art-form, to be sure, but it is also a business, and a highly collaborative one at that. While series' creators, writers, and actors strive to do their best work and create quality content, the reality is that that content must be as commercially viable as it is artful. As Kami Cotler explains, "[M]y perception of the show was very workman[like], it was something that had to be done on time. It wasn't something meaningful or significant or artistic, it was something that had to be completed."²⁴⁹ For audiences, television is entertainment, but for its creators, it is a job.

²⁴⁷ *Happy Days*, "Allison", (Hollywood, California: Paramount Studios, 1980) Television Broadcast.

²⁴⁸ Unless, of course, the series was based around characters with disabilities, like Robert Ironside, the detective with paraplegia in *Ironside*, or Tattoo, a character with dwarfism in *Fantasy Island*, to name just two examples.

²⁴⁹ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

CHAPTER THREE

Disability as Historical Authenticity

To appreciate the context of this chapter, and the historical milieu producers tried to recreate on *The Waltons*, it is important to first take stock of some significant developments in disability history during the 1930s and 1940s. At the 1920s drew to a close, the Supreme Court made it the law of the land that “unfit” Americans could be forcibly sterilized when they ruled on the case of *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. What precisely constituted an “unfit” American was open to interpretation, but people with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, were among the most common targets of this abhorrent and ableist practice.²⁵⁰ Thus, the Supreme Court set the terms for disabled Americans for the coming decade. According to the highest court in the land, they were inferior citizens, and when deemed necessary, their ability to procreate should be medically terminated. Though most commonly associated with its disabled victims, the tragedy of *Buck v. Bell* extends far beyond the disability community. As historian Molly-Ladd Taylor asserts,

“the history of eugenic sterilization in America is not just a matter of bad ideas and the surgeon’s knife. It is also a sadly familiar story of poverty and prejudice, punitive welfare policies and troubled families, and a cultural wariness about disability, dependency, sexuality, and gender.”²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 131.

²⁵¹ Molly Ladd-Taylor, “The Tragedy of Eugenic Sterilization with Molly Ladd-Taylor,” *Johns Hopkins University Press*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.press.jhu.edu/news/blog/tragedy-eugenic-sterilization-molly-ladd-taylor>. See also Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor: The Tragedy of Eugenic Sterilization*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

The cultural terms which *Buck v. Bell* helped to define and entrench have created a devastating legacy for people with disabilities, as well as for women, racialized minorities, and the economically disenfranchised. While the effects of *Buck v. Bell* and the practice of forced sterilization reverberated well into the twentieth century, fate conspired to mitigate the collateral damage of this historic legal precedent on disabled Americans.

In an ironic twist of history, two of the greatest tragedies ever to befall the United States actually afforded some people with disabilities opportunities to reframe their presence in American society. As discussed earlier in this chapter, historically-specific illness epidemics such a polio and tuberculosis impacted countless Americans, and made many of them disabled. The poverty wrought by the Great Depression of the 1930s exacerbated conditions which could lead to illness and disability, such as issues of sanitation, nutrition, and access the healthcare. However, concurrent to these struggles was also an historic expansion of federal aid to mitigate the challenges associated with the Depression, and this was fortuitous for Americans with disabilities. American disability historian Kim Nielsen observes,

Beginning with a 1929 stock market crash and continuing through the development of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and World War II, the majority of Americans struggled with economic devastation. Despite the economic wreckage and the personal and familial destruction it wrought, the activism of people with disabilities and the federal policy changes generated in response to the Great Depression created new opportunities for people with disabilities.²⁵²

The creation of the 1935 Social Security Act (SSA) not only created a welfare safety net for people with disabilities as it provided for them economic and medical support, it also established the idea of a more general welfare system in the United States. As a result, Americans with disabilities were not unique in their need for the support, but were among a contingent of

²⁵² Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 131.

Americans entitled to federal aid. Though the (SSA) has been criticized both for its conservatism, and for its stigmatization of single mothers, the aged, racialized minorities, and people with disabilities, it inspired in disabled Americans a positive sense of entitlement to citizenship rights and protections that they previously struggled to embrace and articulate. They began to imagine for themselves and advocate for other kinds of policy and legislation which would acknowledge their rights and needs as American citizens.²⁵³ For more on the disability experience and the Great Depression, and to understand the important work done by early disability activists who formed the League of the Physically Handicapped in response to discrimination against people with disabilities committed by the Works Progress Administration, see Paul Longmore and David Goldberger's "The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History." (2000).²⁵⁴ Longmore and Goldberger's work highlights an important aspect of disability history, which is the collaborative and sustained effort by disabled people to assert their right to productive employment as a cornerstone of disability rights.

The following decade ushered in greater prosperity, and with it greater prospects for a 'healthy' America. The dawn of WWII restructured several western economies as the military-industrial complex necessary to support the war effort took hold. For the first few years of the war, the United States enjoyed the economic dividends of the global conflict, but in 1941 these dividends came with a price. Following the Japanese attacks on the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, the United States was drawn into the global fray when it declared war on Japan, and when Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. in kind. This had a significant impact on

²⁵³ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 132-133.

²⁵⁴ Paul Longmore, and David Goldberger, "The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History," *The Journal of American History* 87:3 (December 2000): 888-922.

Americans with disabilities. As American disability historian Fred Pelka notes, “The US entry into World War II and the induction into the military of millions of working men and women had created a ‘manpower’ shortage that led to the employment of thousands of previously ‘unemployable’ Americans with disabilities.”²⁵⁵ Though many of these employment gains were short-lived for Americans with disabilities as their nondisabled counterparts returned from service, it provided short-term economic gain, and long-term gains in perceptions of the employability of disabled people. Further, not every American serviceperson returned from war with the same abilities as when they enlisted. Thousands of Americans sustained injuries during service, and thus a new coterie of Americans with disabilities emerged. Becoming disabled presented physical and emotional challenges for this population of Americans, but their service and sacrifice for their country was of tremendous value to the advancement of disability rights in the United States. Having previously been deemed fit for work, and all manner of involvement in American life, these newly disabled service-persons helped reframe what it meant to be disabled because they refused to be limited by their disabilities. They had an expectation of community integration, and so returned to civilian life expecting their needs to be met. Pelka elaborates,

thousands of men (and some women) permanently disabled during the conflict expected assistance and acceptance from the nation they had served... Taking advantage of the newly passed GI Bill of Rights, many disabled veterans hoped to attend college, obtain their degrees, and seek employment side by side with their non-disabled peers.²⁵⁶

This sense of confidence and expectation among newly disabled Americans influenced some previously disabled Americans in thinking about their own rights and needs. It also prepared nondisabled Americans for a world in which community integration of people with disabilities

²⁵⁵ Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 21.

²⁵⁶ Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 21.

would become a fact of life. All this being said, the 1930s and 1940s arguably were a period of ambiguity with regard to disability history. That institutionalization and forced sterilization were in play based on the racist, sexist, and ableist agenda of eugenics was devastating to disability communities. That being said, the creation of social welfare programs which assisted disabled people via the New Deal programs, and the establishment of pro-disability social movements like the League for the Physically Handicapped, are evidence that U.S. disability history in this 30s and 40s is defined by both the adversities which confronted disabled Americans, as well as their resistance to such adversities. The seeds of disability civil rights that were sown in the 1930s and 1940s flowered in the 1970s. This maturation of the disability rights movement is described in the next chapter on Disability as Relevance. Here the focus is in Disability as Historical Authenticity.

The day after the first ever episode of *The Waltons* aired, one television reviewer marveled, “In ‘The Waltons’ we have people who look real and sound real. If you want to realize just how phony most video characters look and sound, tune in to ‘The Waltons’ for a comparison.”²⁵⁷ Writing in 2012, Petruska remarked in retrospect just how receptive critics were to *The Waltons’* authenticity and supposed truth-based integrity. She noted,

[C]ritics fully acknowledged the role Hamner played in controlling the program’s emotional content—critics were moved by *The Waltons*, but they did not feel exploited because Hamner did not resort to cheap plotting, instead pulling from a truth based in human compassion. Calling the program ‘authentic,’ critics employed the term to reference an emotional integrity rather than an accurate historical rendering of 1930s Depression-era U.S.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Rick DuBrow, “‘The Waltons’ is a Must for Family Viewing,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 15, 1972, 45.

²⁵⁸ Karen Petruska, *The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television*, Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012, 54-55.

This no doubt pleased series creator Earl Hamner Jr., who prized authenticity over artifice. Hamner was born and raised in Schuyler, Virginia, a hamlet supported by the local soapstone industry, just southwest of Charlottesville. His sensibilities developed far from the glitz of Hollywood, Hamner favoured stories and characters that resembled real life, especially his own. The caveat was, Hamner's version of 'real-life' was of a very specific tenor, that is rural and southern. Compared to its rural forebears such as *Petticoat Junction* and *Hee Haw*, *The Waltons* treated small-town southern life with great dignity and care. The rural south was not a target for easy comedy, but a location for thoughtful contemplation on the American family, and the supposed universality of experience which touches all families. Some critics wondered how this approach to 'real-life' would fare with audiences. Petruska writes, "Before *The Waltons* premiered as a weekly series, critics had already determined that it would not survive the season." In response to this, she shares "An oft-mentioned anecdote depicted one cynical critic at a press tour in Los Angeles asking Earl Hamner Jr., the show's creator, how he would feel when Nielsen canceled his life—a humorous yet biting reference to the fact that the show was based on Hamner's own childhood."²⁵⁹ However, Hamner was not deterred by critics. He had faith in the stories he wanted to tell, and as the years went by on *The Waltons*, he maintained faith in the integrity of his work. Of the television business, he observed. "You constantly get input from the networks simply because they are in the business of trying to get ratings. Their considerations are not artistic, but mechanical, mechanical ways to grab the audience." As for his personal philosophy about reaching an audience and achieving ratings success? Hamner said, "I'm not opposed to that because I want to grab the audience too, but I want to do it in an arresting,

²⁵⁹ Karen Petruska, *The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television*, Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012, 55.

dramatically accurate way, a way that's indigenous to the material."²⁶⁰

Series guest star and writer Michael McGreevey recalls Earl Hamner saying, "I had a definite plan and belief that the history of my family—and the oral history that came down from [my] grandparents—and the whole idea of family growing up in Virginia, that it had a universal appeal." Hamner knew "that those stories were worth telling and they would be accepted and liked by an audience."²⁶¹ Speaking to Virginia native and *Waltons* fan Woody Greenberg for *Nelson County Life* in 2012, Hamner recalled, "When the show was on, people asked, 'Why would anyone want to watch a poor family in Virginia during the Depression?... We were involved in a landmark TV series telling credible stories about credible people. The stories were about enduring values.'"²⁶² The truer to life stories were, Hamner reasoned, the more likely they were to resonate with audiences.

Early in the series' run, producer and Lorimar Pictures executive Lee Rich explained, "Story lines are not a great problem. You must remember it's Earl Hamner's own life... I think that 'The Waltons' is first a look at the past. Second, I think many people imagine their family like the Waltons... 'The Waltons' is universal."²⁶³ It is something of an overstatement to say that *The Waltons* itself is universal. It is hard to imagine a wealthy Jewish family on the Upper East Side, or a poor black family in an urban center at this time seeing much of themselves in the Walton family. It is more accurate to say that a great many people evidently found elements of

²⁶⁰ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 164.

²⁶¹ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

²⁶² Earl Hamner Jr., as quoted in Woody Greenberg, "Family Reunion," *Nelson County Life*, No. 92, November 2012.

²⁶³ Lee Rich as quoted in Frederic A. Birmingham, "Meet the Waltons: A Visit on Location with the TV Family which Has Won the Hearts of the Nation," *Saturday Evening Post*, November/December 1973.

The Waltons appealing and relatable, if not a true reflection of their family. Series lead Richard Thomas remembers:

The idea was very present on the set that we were playing people living in a certain time at a certain place. I used to say that I felt the show, and I meant this always as a compliment to Earl, the episodes were like sort of really fine examples of American regional short story writing...The idea of the beauty of America and...the idea that a region and a time and a place is evoked with a lot of accuracy, and out of those specifics a kind of universal thing happens.²⁶⁴

Though Thomas grew up a theatre kid in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s, he was raised by parents, and nurtured by grandparents, whose experiences were very similar to those of Hamner's family, and to those of the fictional Waltons. Thus, he had an affinity for his character John-Boy, and the world he occupied. Thomas explains,

I didn't live through that era, but I'm the generation whose parents lived through that. My father was born and raised...in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, in that part of Appalachia, near the tri-state area in coal country, near Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky...[M]y grandparents had a farm there from the time I was a boy, so I spent every summer of my childhood...living on that farm with my cousins. And the Depression was very present there in those old people that I knew. My grandparents' generation, they were all around us, they were the adults. So, the echoes of the Depression, conversations about it, practices that were still in place because it was rural.

The traditions were ingrained in Thomas' family culture.²⁶⁶ Thomas is inclined to state his admiration for the caliber of Hamner's work, because of his personal connection to the material, and because of his appreciation for its genuineness. He is also proud of how well the series has aged as a result. Rather than becoming a dated artifact of 1970s culture, the series has stood the test of time, and plays more like a family scrapbook of white, rural, southern life in the 1930s and 1940s.

Crew and cast alike were highly cognizant of the fact that the work they were doing on the

²⁶⁴ Richard Thomas (series lead), interview with the author, New York, New York, January 2017.

²⁶⁶ Richard Thomas (series lead), interview with the author, New York, New York, January 2017.

series was a representation of a lived historical past. They felt a responsibility to convey material that was genuine, and to do so in ways that resonated with audiences. And resonate the material did. Series regular Joe Conley once revealed to Michael McGreevey that the cast “had gotten fan mail from Bangladesh. And people saying, ‘Oh, I identify so much with the show.’ It was like, Bangladesh? Talk about a cultural difference, but Earl’s stories and his writings had that universal appeal.”²⁶⁷ The trick was finding universality within the specificity of the world Hamner created. As it happened, disability was one means through which to convey stories that were both historically-specific, and transcendent.

There are few things more resonant than disability, given it knows no bounds. Era, age, race, gender, class, and geography are no match for disability. The way disability is perceived and understood is subject to change based on these factors, but its mere presence is not. This is not to say that the etiology and presentation of disability is transhistorical or universal. There are, in fact, historically-specific disability experiences, as this chapter bears out. But the existence of disability in some form or other is transhistorical. And that disability is a fact of human nature is universal. As such, disability was an ideal vehicle through which to deliver stories that were both historically authentic, yet nonetheless relatable for contemporary audiences. How *The Waltons* achieved heightened relevance through disability in a television era where ‘relevance’ was the fashion is explored in chapter 4. This chapter describes how disability storylines on *The Waltons* were sometimes used to legitimize the series’ connection to people and events past.

Take for example the final episode of *The Waltons* first season. Entitled “The Easter Story” (19 April, 1973), this episode saw matriarch Olivia Walton contract polio and experience paralysis of her legs as a result. Following the development and eventual widespread

²⁶⁷ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

administering of Jonas Salk's polio vaccine in 1955, incidents of polio in the United States decreased dramatically within mere years. By the time *The Waltons* made it to air in the early 1970s, the fight against polio was considered a battle won in the United States.²⁶⁸ Thus, "The Easter Story" was an episode in which history was foregrounded. Polio and its disabling effects were signifiers of the historical past in which the *Waltons* took place. Compared to some episodes where the past was more-so window-dressing for the story being told, episodes like "The Easter Story" were conscious reminders of the people and the past upon which *The Waltons* was based. The same was true of episodes such as "The Parting" (18 January, 1979) and "The Move" (15 January, 1981), which dealt with Olivia Walton's bout with tuberculosis. Like polio, tuberculosis was another infectious disease whose effects were little felt in the United States in the latter half of the century. The widespread adoption of public health measures to combat diseases like tuberculosis, such as vaccination and heightened sanitation efforts, meant that these illnesses were mostly confined to memory of those who were old enough to witness their respective crises, or those who contracted these illnesses and continued to live with their disabling effects after the diseases were eradicated. Polio survivors excepted, by the 1970s the general public regarded tuberculosis and polio as diseases of the past, historic examples of modern medicine's supposed triumph over the body.²⁶⁹ Producing storylines in which historically-specific experiences with illness and disability were present lent a sense of authenticity to *The Waltons*. At the same time, it is all but inevitable in a family's life cycle that a serious illness will manifest in a member of that family, and it is probable that family will

²⁶⁸ See Naomi Rogers' *Polio Wars: Sister Kenny and the Golden Age of American Medicine*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) for a narrative arc of both the rise and fall of polio as an illness in the United States, as well as the rise and fall in prominence of the medical pioneers and therapies associated with the disease.

²⁶⁹ See Daniel J. Wilson's *Living with Polio: The Epidemic and Its Survivors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) for more on the polio epidemic, and its survivors. See also Kathryn Black, *In the Shadow of Polio: A Personal and Social History*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub.), 1996.

grapple with some disabling effects of that illness. Thomas' recollection of filming scenes for "The Easter Story" are as testament to the veracity and relatability of such storylines. Speaking to *New York Times* journalist Maynard Jones mere months after "The Easter Story" originally aired, Thomas explained, "When I play a scene with Ralph Waite [John Walton Sr.] on 'The Waltons,' there are no games. We didn't really rehearse that episode where Olivia—the mother—gets polio, all we had to do was go into that kitchen and tell the kids that Mama was sick, and their reactions were genuine." By this Thomas means that the child actors were drawing on more than their skills as actors. They were tapping in to their emotional connection to Michael Learned, with whom they had formed an affectionate bond over a year of working together. Because the cast had worked together on *The Waltons* for nearly a year at the time of filming, and even longer than that when one considers their time spent making *The Homecoming*²⁷⁰, they had developed relationships which shared some of the hallmarks of family. Thomas explained, "Of course, we had all those past episodes behind us, the way one-shot play or movie actors never do, and maybe that's why they have to invent these histories and backgrounds for their characters. That's the great thing about television acting—the continuity."²⁷¹ For Thomas and his castmates, there were two histories on which to draw to portray these stories, firstly Hamner's own family history, and secondly the pseudo-family history which they had formed as a cast working together for a year or more. Thus, viewers could identify with the familiar rhythms of growing up, growing older, and growing ill that are common to most families, despite the historical specificity of some of the illnesses and disabilities presented on *The Waltons*, because

²⁷⁰ The majority of the cast featured in *The Homecoming* returned as part of *The Waltons* television series. All seven of the Walton children, as well Grandma Esther Walton in the person of Ellen Corby, were cast in both the telefilm and the subsequent series. John Walton Sr. was originally played by Andrew Duggan, but was re-cast with Ralph Waite for the series. Olivia Walton was originally portrayed by Patricia Neal, but was personified by Michael Learned for the series. The role of Grandpa Zebulon Walton was played by Edgar Bergen in the film, but played by Will Geer in the series.

²⁷¹ Maynard, Joyce, "John-Boy Comes Home—to Manhattan," *New York Times*, July 22 1973, 99.

of the universal appeal of the family.²⁷²

It is standard practice for television series to feature their most dramatic and engaging story-lines during the season's finale. The idea is to make an impression on viewers that will leave them wanting more and encourage them to tune in when the next television season begins.²⁷³ The aforementioned "The Easter Story" was such a case. Stretched into a two-hour special, this episode was presented as a television event, and a special way to conclude what turned out to be a highly successful premiere season for *The Waltons*. Writing about the series in 1973, American journalist Penny P. Anderson noted with anticipation,

[T]he fans - and the ratings - have increased and persisted - so much so that CBS is presenting a special two-hour Easter installment. It will demonstrate vividly what Hamner means when he talks of the series' precarious emotional balance. In it Olivia Walton (Michael Learned) gets polio and is partially paralyzed. With the help and support of her family she is able to find the strength to relearn to walk.²⁷⁴

The deployment of illness and disability for ratings was a success, as this episode was number one in the ratings that week.²⁷⁵ *The Waltons* launched its premiere season using disability to strong critical response, but on shaky ratings footing. It ultimately concluded its premiere season, once again using disability as a plot device, this time to both critical and ratings success. It seems disability supplied all manner of things to *The Waltons* universe, not the least of which was reliable storytelling success. It is true that polio and paralysis made for good dramatic fodder but

²⁷² See "Television Families", chapter 3 of Mike Chopra-Gant's *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) for more on the enduring legacy of television families, and *The Waltons*' place within it.

²⁷³ In the 1970s, most season finales aired in May, which was a key month in a television industry invention known as 'sweeps'. Historian Sally Bedell explains that 'sweeps' are "Heightened ratings contests during the months of February, May, and November, when ratings services measure audiences in more than 200 cities to allow local stations to set advertising rates. Networks try to inflate sweeps viewing by larding specials"—and by extension, 'special episodes' featuring high drama—"and blockbuster movies." Sally Bedell, *Up The Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 313.

²⁷⁴ Penny P. Anderson, "The Waltons Makes Mountain into Mecca", 1973 (original print source unknown), *All About the Waltons*, <http://www.allaboutthewaltons.com/articles/mag0.php>

²⁷⁵ John McGreevey, as quoted in *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, by Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 86.

importantly, the experience of disability as a result of polio was a legitimate historical experience for many Americans in the 1930s. As series regular Kami Cotler put it:

I...liked Michael's [Learned] storyline...because it does put it in the historical context, right? Like, people got polio. And I remember my mom telling me stories from her childhood about kids with polio and iron lungs. So, there was something that resonated with me as a little kid in terms of this mysterious thing that used to happen that I don't know about. That we are acting out. So that, yeah, that worked because it was a real, historical thing.²⁷⁶

Incorporating historically-specific experiences and concerns into the narrative—such as the debilitating effects of polio—was as much about authenticating the story of an American family as it was about TV drama.

Of this episode, series writer John McGreevey recalled, “We researched polio and what treatments were available in the thirties.”²⁷⁷ Evidently, the production team were keen to recreate an accurate historical experience in which disability played a part, and did their due diligence in terms of research. This is significant not only in terms of the overall quality of program such research furnished, but also in terms of the relative accuracy of the medical information delivered therein. Presently, specific internet resources such as ‘Web MD’, and search engines such as Google more broadly (sometimes lampooned as ‘Dr. Google’) afford searchers a modicum of diagnostic power by supplying individuals with no medical qualifications a font of information about their bodies. Such access to information is empowering for individuals who want to understand and speak about their own bodies with a higher degree of sophistication and understanding. This is especially empowering for people with disabilities, and for those whose bodies are medically complex, as it better equips these individuals to speak with authority about their own bodies, and to self-advocate for their needs. However, easy access to such vast and

²⁷⁶ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

²⁷⁷ John McGreevey, as quoted in Hamner and Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy*, 85.

complex information presents its own set of challenges, not the least of which is the misunderstanding and/or misuse of such information, which can result in negative health outcomes. Prior to the widespread adoption of the internet, however, television was one of the main sources through which swaths of Americans received information about medicine and disability. When *The Waltons* dominated the airwaves in the 1970s, this was certainly the case. As Joseph Turow explains in his book on the history of the medical profession on television, “In any society, telling stories about an institution is a way of sharing ideas about how the institution works. In the United States, commercial television is the most shared storyteller.”²⁷⁸ What television says about illness, medicine, and disability, is therefore consequential. Though Turow notes that, “Not all viewers interpret these portrayals in the same way,” nonetheless “Many may judge them as depicting things the way they actually are or the way they should be, for others if not for themselves.”²⁷⁹ That *The Waltons* took care in attempting to depict things ‘the way they actually were’ with respect to the polio experience is laudable, but is not without some drawbacks. Striving for accuracy in content as sensitive as that which deals with illness and disability is commendable, but when television verisimilitude is mistaken as strict reality by audiences, this is potentially problematic. Audiences who watched Olivia Walton’s dramatic encounter with polio were treated to a dose of legitimate history and medicine, a credit to the writers and producers of the *The Waltons*. However, because of this, viewers may have struggled to delineate the boundaries between factual information on the one hand, and storytelling on the other.

In addition to formal research, the production team had a wealth of anecdotal evidence on

²⁷⁸ Joseph Turow, *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5.

²⁷⁹ Joseph Turow, *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 6.

which to draw to recreate these historically-specific accounts of illness and disability. As stated, *The Waltons* was a fictionalized rendering of series creator Earl Hamner Jr.'s coming-of-age experiences. Hamner's own grandfather, like tens of thousands of other Americans, contracted polio and lived with its physical effects for the rest of his life.²⁸⁰ In terms of Hamner's family experience with polio, biographer Person Jr. could not recall the specifics of Hamner's grandfather's polio, or the course the illness took. He only knew that the physical effects were significant enough to bar Hamner's grandfather from paid work. The use of disability in this case, even if manipulated for maximum ratings, was nonetheless an interpretation of a family's very real historical experience. Series guest star and writer Michael McGreevey confirms the dramatic effect that polio had on Hamner Jr.'s family. "Earl Sr.'s father contracted polio and couldn't work, so the kids all had to quit school and get jobs to put food on the table. So, yeah, there was that element from Earl's life of understanding polio."²⁸¹ Hamner Jr. was raised by a man whose life course was dramatically altered by his father having polio, and this in turn influenced that world in which Hamner Jr. himself was raised.

Because *The Waltons* was conceived by Earl Hamner, and based on his family, his influence on the series was therefore extensive. *Waltons* production assistant John Dayton emphatically states, "[E]verybody will tell you this, the show reflected Earl. It was all Earl... That's where, creatively that's where the buck stopped... Earl was all over every single episode. It had to meet Earl's approval."²⁸² Though he contributed many-a story idea, and even some script re-writes for the series, Earl rarely wrote full episodes of *The Waltons*. He served as a consultant to the writers, but tended to leave the actual writing itself to other television writers.

²⁸⁰ James Person Jr. (biographer), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

²⁸¹ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

²⁸² John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

Among those writers was John McGreevey, the most prolific of contributors to *The Waltons*. He was the screenwriter for “The Easter Story”, and brought with him his own family’s memories of the polio epidemics in the United States. His son and fellow Walton alumnus, Michael, remembers:

[In the early 1950s] we lived in a small town called New Milford in Connecticut, and it was about the time when there was a major polio epidemic, and just before the vaccine....there were quite a few young people and several adults that contracted polio. And there was a woman—I've had other people say to me, that's a fairytale that Olivia [Walton] overcame polio—Well, there was a woman in our town who had a miraculous cure from her polio. It wasn't exactly the way it was depicted in *The Easter Story*, but yeah.²⁸³

It is tempting to critique *The Waltons* for its depiction of polio and its disabling effects in this way. Many Americans, including Hamner Jr.’s grandfather, did not fully recover from polio. The fact that Olivia Walton made a full recovery from her illness and disability, and did so seemingly through faith and grit, was something of a disservice to polio survivors who convalesced longer, and who lived with disabilities for the rest of their lives. This presentation and quick erasure of disability could thus be misleading. On the other hand, this was the experience of *some* polio survivors, as Michael McGreevey attests, and is therefore a legitimate presentation of a historical experience of disability, if an uncommon one. Its legitimacy notwithstanding, the tendency to depict stories of disability with the most straightforward outcomes, to the exclusion of stories where disability and its attendant complexities are dealt with on a long-term basis, establishes a false impression of what disability is. It perpetuates the idea that disability can and should be overcome. This particular example of polio is grounded in historical experience, and is significant because it hints at the plurality of the disability experience. The trouble is, the alternative and more common polio experience is obscured.

²⁸³ Michael McGreevey (guest actor and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

“The Easter Story” is not the only instance in which faith and/or alternative medicine is applied to critical illness and disability on *The Waltons*. The Walton family, save for the somewhat skeptical and stoic John Walton Sr., are depicted as Baptists and shown regularly attending church. They are portrayed as relying as much on their faith as on their commonsense and hard work to persevere through tough times. The family, and Olivia in particular, turn to their faith when John-Boy is critically injured at his father’s mill, and incurs a traumatic brain injury in “The Thanksgiving Story” (15 November, 1973)²⁸⁴. Years later, when John-Boy returns from Europe gravely injured and in a coma after serving as a war correspondent, the family once again turns to their faith to sustain them through the trial (“The Waiting”, 22 November, 1979).²⁸⁵ When youngest daughter Elizabeth has her legs crushed beneath a pile of falling logs at her father’s mill in “The Ordeal”, her doctors determine she has nerve damage and may never again walk. Dismayed by this news, Elizabeth’s best friend Aimee visits Ada Corley, a local mountain woman known for her use of alternative healing practices, for advice about how best to support Elizabeth in her healing.²⁸⁶ It was therefore commonplace for the Walton family to approach illness and disability with a hybrid of fact-based science and faith-based healing.

While the Waltons put a lot of stock in the power of faith in God and in themselves, they never eschew traditional medicine in their approaches to healing. In fact, eldest daughter Mary-ellen becomes a nurse and marries a doctor mid-way through the series, and later re-trains to become a doctor herself when she feels limited by her role as a nurse. She represents a comforting figure to her family in times of bodily crises, and they often turn to Mary-ellen for

²⁸⁴ *The Waltons*, “The Thanksgiving Story”, November 15, 1973 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

²⁸⁵ *The Waltons*, “The Waiting”, November 22, 1979 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

²⁸⁶ *The Waltons*, “The Ordeal”, February 16, 1978 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

advice and reassurance when injury and illness come to pass. Therefore, when disability touches Walton's Mountain, science-based medicine and faith-based healing nearly always work in tandem. And naturally, they nearly always solve the problem at hand.

All this being said, as mentioned in earlier chapters, rapid and neat resolutions were common to all conflicts presented on *The Waltons*. The tendency to 'resolve' disability was more indicative of a specific storytelling formula than it was a desire to eradicate disability from the series. This is evident both in the fact that the series continued to explore disability throughout its near decade on the air, suggesting its producers were not hesitant to grapple with disability. It is even more evident when one considers how the production team handled real-life disability when it appeared unexpectedly on Walton's Mountain, as in the case of Ellen Corby. The ways in which Corby's stroke was accommodated and made an integral part of her character's journey were groundbreaking in the television industry. How *The Waltons* handled embodied experiences of disability among its cast members is noteworthy, and is explored in detail in chapter 5.

Returning to "The Easter Story", the fusion of formal research and personal experience culminated in a memorable episode, one which honoured the historical origins on which the series was based. The fear and uncertainty which gripped the Walton family as the fate of their matriarch hung in the balance was palpable. Michael McGreevey remembers that sense of anxiety over polio in his own community. "I know and I can remember the fear and desperation that that small town that we lived in, New Milford, went through. I mean my mom sorta kept us in the house and you couldn't go out." He elaborates, "They put little ribbons on the fences or the door handles of houses that had polio. You know, it was sort of a terrifying thing and when you think about it."²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Michael McGreevey (guest actor and writer), telephone interview with the author, July 2016. See also Gareth Williams, *Paralysed with Fear: The Story of Polio*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2013; Nina Gildea Seavy,

Another interesting way in which *The Waltons* used disability as a conveyance for historical authenticity was through the figure of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Proof that disability does not discriminate, the President was himself a polio survivor, and this was mentioned several times in the series. In fact, Olivia Walton was reminded that her beloved President was a polio survivor as encouragement to recover from the disease.²⁸⁸ During his presidency, it was common knowledge that Roosevelt was a polio survivor, but the extent to which he was disabled from polio was unknown to the public. Though an acknowledged supporter of polio survivors with disabilities, the President was self-conscious about his limited mobility, and went to great lengths to conceal his own disablement from the public.²⁸⁹ Disability scholar Jack A. Nelson points out that this is the ultimate testament to the significance of media portrayals of disability. He writes, “President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led the nation during the wrenching depression years and World War II, provides a good example of the importance of media portrayals.” He goes on to point out that, “No other person was more idolized by the majority of Americans during those trying times... That this larger-than-life figure had been hit with poliomyelitis during his term as governor of New York was well known, but in his terms as president, he almost never was shown in his wheelchair or struggling to stand in braces.”²⁹⁰ Nelson laments that during his lifetime, the nature of FDR’s disabilities was largely unknown, and thus an opportunity was missed to educate the American public about disability through one of its most well-known and respected figures. “Indeed,” he writes,

Jane Smith, and Paul Wagner, *A Paralyzing Fear. The Triumph Over Polio in America*, (New York: TV Books, 1998).

²⁸⁸ *The Waltons*, “The Easter Story”, aired April 19, 1973 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2004), DVD.

²⁸⁹ See Hugh Gregory Gallagher’s *FDR’s Splendid Deception: The Moving Story of Roosevelt’s Massive Disability—And the Intense Efforts to Conceal it from the Public*, (Arlington: Vandamere Press, 1994).

²⁹⁰ Jack A. Nelson, “Broken Images: Portrayals of Those with Disabilities in American Media,” in *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, edited by Jack A. Nelson, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 1-2.

much of the public assumed that Roosevelt had recovered from the effects of polio...Throughout his terms, the image of a vigorous, active president was believable and accepted by the public...[I]t was felt necessary to shape the image—as if a president who used a wheelchair could not provide strong, energetic, and active leadership.²⁹¹

Interestingly, Roosevelt's disability was alluded to by the Walton family, but in ways that were ambiguous. Whether this was an attempt to mirror America's ambiguous knowledge about the President's disability during the 1930s, or whether this was a reflection of the writers' limited personal knowledge about the extent of FDR's disability, I cannot ascertain. Suffice to say that the series acknowledged that FDR was both a polio survivor, and that their President was so afflicted was significant for the Walton family. A respected and trusted figure during the gloomy years of the Depression, it is no surprise that Roosevelt was incorporated into the series in various ways which verified the setting of *The Waltons*. As he was in real-life throughout much of the Great Depression and WWII, Roosevelt was omni-present on Walton's Mountain, be it his voice on the radio during his patented 'fireside chats', his portrait hung in homes and public spaces on the mountain, or in conversation among members of the Walton's Mountain community. The final nod to the President occurred in a special two-hour episode of *The Waltons* entitled "The Outrage" (27 November, 1980). A memorable subplot of the episode dealt with the President's death while serving in office, and the grief and uncertainty his death wrought on Walton's Mountain. Roosevelt died at his private retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia, and his body was first transported by train to Washington, D.C. for official commemorations. It was eventually transported from D.C. to his birthplace, Hyde Park, New York for final interment. In this episode, the train transporting the President's body supposedly passed nearby Walton's Mountain, and it was met by members of the Walton family. As the train passed, John Walton

²⁹¹ Jack A. Nelson, "Broken Images: Portrayals of Those with Disabilities in American Media," in *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, edited by Jack A. Nelson, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 1-2.

bid the train an unprecedented “Good-night, Mr. President.” A running bit on *The Waltons* was the family calling and bidding each other ‘good-night’ throughout the house at the conclusion of every episode. That FDR received a ‘good-night’ is significant, as this is the only episode in which someone outside of the Walton family is bid ‘good-night’ at the close of the episode.²⁹²

Earl Hamner’s biographer, James Person Jr., was impressed with the extent that Hamner and his team of writers went to communicate that sense of an authentic family history. He observes that experiences big and small were treated with equal care. It did not matter if it was something as world-shattering as polio, as newsworthy as the death of a president, or as mundane as an evening coffee. The verisimilitude of the material was respected. Person describes, “the screenwriters seemed to really go the extra mile to try to make things as authentic as possible in terms of the milieu, and the dress, and the customs for people.” He recalls a mostly forgettable scene where “Grandpa Walton is sitting at the table and he has a cup of coffee in front of him, and he casually pours off a portion of his hot coffee into his saucer before drinking it. That is a little thing that I have seen happen many times. Many viewers throughout the rest of the US may have looked at that and said what’s he doing?”²⁹³ However, Person Jr. recognized it a generationally and regionally-specific custom that cemented for him that *The Waltons* amounted to more than historical fiction. After its first year on the air, *Waltons* director Jack Shea reflected on beginning work on the series: “I sensed something different and exciting here. What is different and exciting is that there is absolute honesty in the scripts. Earl Hamner wants it authentic, he goes to tremendous trouble, and this was embedded in me in the first moment I was here.”²⁹⁴

²⁹² *The Waltons*, “The Outrage”, November 27, 1980 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2011), DVD.

²⁹³ James Person Jr. (biographer), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

²⁹⁴ Jack Shea, as quoted in Frederic Birmingham’s “Meet the Waltons: A Visit on Location with the TV Family which has Won the Hearts of the Nation,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November/December 1973.

Chapter 2 argued how disability was leveraged as a tool to generate drama and ratings on *The Waltons*, and indeed countless other series throughout the 1970s. Undeniably, disability is often appropriated predominantly for this purpose. That being said, it is important to take stock of the fact that the experience of contracting polio in the 1930s *was* a dramatic turning point in the lives of many Americans. That it played out in a dramatic way on *The Waltons* mirrored the drama the disease brought to the families it affected. Though on its surface, “The Easter Story” was a dramatized and idealized depiction of disability, it also portrayed a historically and personally-informed disability experience. Predictably, as Michael McGreevey was wont to point out, Olivia Walton’s ability to walk was restored by the episode’s end. However, Michael Learned, who portrayed Olivia, revealed that the original resolution for her character was even more maudlin and unbelievable than the one that eventually aired. She revealed:

When [executive producer] Lee Rich told me that, “Olivia's paralyzed for life, and then we’re going to have you wheeled up, up in your wheelchair to the top of Walton’s Mountain as the sun is rising over the horizon, and the hallelujah chorus is singing in the background, and you will rise up out of your wheelchair and walk ...” I just looked at him and said, “You're shittin' me.”²⁹⁵

Significantly, this episode *was* titled “The Easter Story” and did air around Easter time of that year. As unbelievable as this original resolution may seem, undoubtedly McGreevey was attempting to evoke the biblical story of Jesus’ resurrection, the very inspiration for the Easter holiday itself. In this case, McGreevey’s approach to disability likely had more to do with constructing a symbolic and moving Easter tale, than with trying to minimize the experience of polio. As evidence of this, after hearing Learned’s protestations, producer Rich and writer John McGreevey ultimately agreed to revise the script to mirror the experiences of Learned’s own father, who also had polio as a child. Learned felt this afforded the story greater respect and

²⁹⁵ Michael Learned (series regular), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

weight than the original ending, which hinted at divine intervention. According to stories Learned's father shared with her, the most effective therapy for him in terms of regaining mobility after polio was having the urgent need to do so. He claimed that the first time he walked following his bout with polio was in the middle of the night when he woke up needing to use the bathroom. Only semi-conscious, and therefore not over-thinking the mechanics of walking, Learned's father got up, used the facilities, and was able to walk unassisted thereafter.²⁹⁶

When Learned shared this story with Rich and McGreevey, they devised a complementary story for Learned's character Olivia. During the early phase of her recovery, Olivia was treated according to the received medical wisdom of her local physician. When his efforts failed to produce results, eldest son John-Boy proposed a course of therapy involving hot compresses and passive exercise of the affected limbs, according to the then controversial yet popular methods of self-trained Australian bush nurse Sister Kenny.²⁹⁷ This too yielded minimal results. Olivia Walton ultimately regained her mobility much the same way the father of the actress portraying her did. She simply walked when her brain and body aligned and conspired to do so. Instead of awaking to the urgency of a full bladder, Olivia was roused to waking by the distressed cries of her youngest daughter, Elizabeth. Hastening according to her mother's

²⁹⁶ Michael Learned (series regular), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

As incredible as this story of disability and recovery seems, polio was known to affect those it struck in myriad ways. Some polio survivors lived with disabilities all their lives, as in the case of FDR. Others, like Learned's father, lived with disabilities only temporarily, and made a full recovery shortly after their illness. Some were significantly disabled when first afflicted with polio, but had lesser disabilities as time went on. For others, the opposite was true. They may have experienced little to no disabilities during their initial bouts with polio, but became disabled later in life due to a phenomenon known as post-polio syndrome. According to Post-Polio Health International, post-polio syndrome is "a new condition that affects the survivors of polio decades after the acute illness of poliomyelitis. The major symptoms are pain, fatigue and weakness. New weakness is considered the hallmark of post-polio syndrome. Less commonly, survivors may have new sleep/breathing/swallowing problems and some survivors may also experience muscle atrophy or muscle wasting." Joan L. Headley, "What is Post-Polio Syndrome?" *Post-Polio Health International*, <http://www.post-polio.org/edu/pps.html>.

²⁹⁷See Naomi Rogers' *Polio Wars: Sister Kenny and the Golden Age of American Medicine*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Miki Fairley, "Sister Kenny: Confronting the Conventional in Polio Treatment," *Edge*, November 2008, https://opedge.com/Articles/ViewArticle/2008-11_09?mf=0

instincts, Olivia bolted from the bed to tend to her troubled daughter, who was in the throes of a nightmare. The character was able to walk thereafter.²⁹⁸ This, in its own way, mirrors the story of Jesus, who sacrificed his body for his followers, and who was subsequently resurrected as an act of redemption for himself and those in his care. If Jesus was a father figure, and his disciples his children, then Olivia's act of regaining mobility in service to her child is an apt metaphor. All things considered, that Olivia Walton was treated with professional medicine, folk remedies, and physical therapy prior to regaining her mobility is a significant part of the character's journey.²⁹⁹ The show suggested that the cumulative effects of her holistic treatments, combined with her mother's instincts, were responsible for Olivia's recovery from polio.

Learned admits that there was likely some exaggeration in her father's recollections of his own experiences with polio. No doubt he too had a course of therapies with varying success following his bout with polio before walking again. Notwithstanding, the stories he told about polio were his impressions of his own disability experience, and therefore they represent a real-life response to disability. U.S. media and mass communications scholar Gary R. Edgerton explains, "According to this way of thinking, more popular uses of memory have less to do with accuracy per se than using the past as a kind of communal, mythic response to current controversies, issues, and challenges."³⁰⁰ In this way, historical accuracy and historical authenticity are closely aligned, but not identical. Something which is historically accurate is verifiable and fact-based, whereas something that is historically authentic need not adhere to strict fact, but must refer to actual experiences and impressions from the past. The way survivors of serious illness choose to frame their stories is legitimate in its own right, even if not verifiably

²⁹⁸ *The Waltons*, "The Easter Story", aired April 19, 1973 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2004) DVD.

²⁹⁹ *The Waltons*, "The Easter Story", aired April 19, 1973 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2004) DVD.

³⁰⁰ Gary R. Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 5-6.

true. The sum total of “The Easter Story” then is a sentimentalized, incredible story of disability, but one that is both historically and personally-informed. The richness of this episode is lost if one only considers the on-screen content, and not the story of its production.

This is the true nature of oral history, where the factual accuracy of the history is questionable, but the legitimacy of the experience and the memory is not. These impressionistic memories were hallmarks of Hamner’s storytelling. As this author put it when chatting with series guest star and writer Michael McGreevey, “It’s...stories passed down from generation to generation, and...these stories are more than just words and plots. They are kernels of memories, and ideas, and cultures sort of transmitted over time.”³⁰¹ *Waltons* director Ralph Senensky points out that these concepts transcend the historical discipline, and touch other artforms as well. In filmmaking, he explains, “[T]here was reality, there was realism, and [there was] naturalism.” According to Senensky, “[N]aturalism was really looking at exactly the way life happens. Realism was looking at it, but making the adjustments so that it fit. It was real, but there was still the theatrical, there was that magic that you could add to it.”³⁰² Where naturalism was more closely aligned with documentary film-making, realism was the perfect framework for a show like *The Waltons*. The show was not a documentary of Hamner’s family, but an historically-based impression of his experiences growing up in rural Virginia during the Great Depression and WWII.

Regrettably, as committed as the production team on *The Waltons* was to depicting authenticity, both of disability and other historical experiences, the team fell short in supporting authentic casting of disabilities for the most part. With the exception of Billy Barty, who was

³⁰¹ Haley Gienow-McConnell (author), telephone interview with Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), August 2016.

³⁰² Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

cast as dwarf performer Tommy Trindle in “The Carnival”, and Ellen Corby, who became disabled part-way through the series, all of the characters depicted as having disabilities on *The Waltons* were portrayed by actors without disabilities. In another instance, series lead Richard Thomas sustained an injury while filming a movie during *The Waltons* hiatus one year, which resulted in him limping and needing a cane to walk. Since Thomas could not perform without the support of his cane when he returned to filming *The Waltons*, his injury was written into the series until the injury resolved itself. Thus, there were a handful of real-life embodied experiences of disabilities on *The Waltons* portrayed by people with both permanent and temporary disabilities. These rare instances bear noting, and they will be discussed in Chapter 5.

By and large though, non-disabled actors took the lead on disabled roles on the series, and in retrospect, cast and crew members alike admit this was an unfortunate oversight in the series production, though not a sin unique to *The Waltons*. The disability rights agenda was overflowing with more pressing concerns throughout the 1970s. As significant as authentic representation was to disabled Americans, it was not as urgent as civil rights protections against discrimination on the basis of disability, nor as urgent as access to employment, education, housing, transportation, and healthcare, all cornerstones of the disability agenda in the 1970s.³⁰³ Authentic casting was lower on the list of priorities for disability rights advocates, and not on the radar at all for casting directors. American scholar of media and disability studies Jack A. Nelson recalls what little effect the larger disability rights movements in the United States had on Hollywood in the 1970s. He notes that in 1977

Citizens with disabilities sat in at the Old Federal Building in San Francisco, an action which persuaded then-secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano to sign the regulations implementing Section 504 of the 1974 [sic]

³⁰³ See chapters 4, 5, and 7 of Doris Zames Fleisher and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

Rehabilitation Act. The event received national coverage. Despite its far-reaching consequences to people with disabilities, the sit-in and its issues were reflected in only one [television] program. ‘All That Shatters,’ a 1977 episode of ‘Baretta,’ revolved around disabled protestors seeking enforcement of their civil rights...It would seem safe to say that Hollywood’s creativity personnel, as a whole, had no idea what was happening with the actual disability community, continuing to flood TV with the same old formula concepts.³⁰⁴

This is not to say that people with disabilities were not attuned to such issues of representation in Hollywood. Many were actively engaged in the performing arts during this time, and were committed to promoting their talents. Indeed, some notable gains were made for people with disabilities in the performing arts in the 1960s and 1970s. The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), for example, was founded in 1967, and matriculated an impressive list of deaf actors to the stage and screen. NTD alum Linda Bove worked steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s in a variety of television series and films. Her recurring role on the Children’s Television Workshop series *Sesame Street* as Linda the deaf librarian is considered one of the most positive and influential roles for a disabled person in television history.³⁰⁵ And in 1980, fellow NTD alum Phyllis Frelich won a Tony award for her portrayal of Sara Norman in the Mark Medoff-penned Broadway play *Children of a Lesser God*.³⁰⁶ It is just that, these accomplishments notwithstanding, achievements in the performing arts were lower on the list of priorities overall for disability activists. And the entertainment industry as a whole was not yet attuned to authentic and representative casting.

Waltons series regular Eric Scott laments, “Look, David Carradine at time was supposed

³⁰⁴“Television’s Concept of People with Disabilities...Here’s Lookin’ at You” from *The Disability Rag* (January-February 1985), as quoted in Jack A. Nelson, “Broken Images: Portrayals of Those with Disabilities in American Media,” in *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, edited by Jack A. Nelson, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 22.

³⁰⁵ “Linda”, *Muppet Wiki: Sesame Street Characters*, <http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Linda>

³⁰⁶ “Phyllis Frelich”, *Tony Awards History*, https://www.tonyawards.com/en_US/history/pastwinners/tonys_results.html?lname=Phyllis+frelich

to be Kung Fu...[T]here's a sense of disbelief that they just pull away and say, we're going to make it look TV real, but not *real* real. For whatever reasons, we didn't have that politically correct energy that they were doing back then.”³⁰⁷ Scott believes this was not a conscious slight to disabled actors, but rather a symptom of an industry which had little incentive to correct this oversight. Since the industry's inception, non-disabled actors portrayed disabled characters, often to great acclaim. Consider the legacy of actors who have been rewarded for their work portraying characters with disabilities. Reporter Michael Levin notes, “Stories about the disabled are box office gold—more than half of the Oscars for Best Actor in the last couple of decades have gone to actors playing disabled characters.”³⁰⁸ Actor Mickey Rowe, who recently won acclaim as the first authentically autistic person to portray on stage the role of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night's* autistic character, quips, “ ‘There is an old joke: What's the surest way to win an Oscar (Tony, Emmy, etc.)? Have a non-disabled person play a disabled character. Only it's not really a joke.”³⁰⁹ Rowe opines, “Ideally someone with a disability could play any role, and not have that role be about disability...But until we see that happening, the least we can do is give disabled people a voice to represent our own communities in a way that is more about honesty and less about stereotypes.”³¹⁰ While increased visibility on screen for visible minorities was already a hot-button issue as of the 1970s, the same was not yet true for authentic casting of actors with disabilities.

In terms of promoting authentic casting for visible minorities on *The Waltons*, Scott

³⁰⁷ Eric Scott (series regular), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

³⁰⁸ Michael Levin, “Blind Rage: In Hollywood, The Real Disabled Are Still Out Of Sight.” *HuffPost* http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/blind-rage-in-hollywood-the-real-disabled-are-still_us_5963e4bbe4b09be68c0054bb, July 10, 2017.

³⁰⁹ Mickey Rowe as quoted in Priscilla Frank, “Finally, An Actor with Autism Is Starring In 'Curious Incident',” *HuffPost*, May 11, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/mickey-rowe-autism_us_59130afde4b050bdca6112d7

³¹⁰ Mickey Rowe as quoted in Priscilla Frank, “Finally, An Actor with Autism Is Starring In 'Curious Incident',” *HuffPost*, May 11, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/mickey-rowe-autism_us_59130afde4b050bdca6112d7

recalls an episode called “The Warrior” (13 October, 1977), which featured a Native American character. “[T]here was an episode that we did...it was supposed to be an Indian chief...So it was cast with a great older actor [who did not have Indian heritage].” The casting directors were not perturbed by this fact, but series regulars Ralph Waite and Will Geer were sensitive to Indigenous rights, and were becoming increasingly invested in promoting autonomy and self-representation for Native Americans. Scott explains, “Ralph and Will decided to make a political statement and said, ‘We will not work with this guy. He is not Indian.’ So...with two days they recast it with an Indian man, and he was awful. He couldn't act, but they found an Indian.” Scott is keen to point out, “Now it [authentic casting] can work—there certainly could have been another actor that was Indian, if that's what they wanted to do.”³¹¹ Unfortunately, in this instance the issue of authentic casting was pursued to satisfy the political whims of two of the series’ stars, and not with the longer term goal of promoting the talents of skilled Indigenous actors.

Since the casting of the Native-American character was pursued with haste, the role was reputedly done a disservice when Jerado Decordovier was recast in the role. Ralph Senensky, the director of this episode, was troubled by this twofold. Firstly, he was disappointed with the finished product of the episode, because he had a difficult time directing a man who, up to that point, had mostly uncredited background acting experience. Production assistant John Dayton corroborates Senensky’s recollection of this experience. On casting Decordovier for the role, he states, “Oh my goodness, it was just a real wrong thing to do...[T]hat man, God bless him, he could not remember... He was so nervous he couldn't remember anything. Dialogue... He couldn't remember where to move...And poor Ralph Senensky just suffered through that.”³¹² More significantly, Senensky was troubled by the ironic effect that hiring Decordovier had.

³¹¹ Eric Scott (series regular), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

³¹² John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

Senensky argues that putting an unskilled Native-American actor front and centre actually harmed the credibility of Native actors, because this particular actor was not representative of the talents of more skilled Native actors. Additionally, Senensky recalls this episode being a beautiful celebration of Native spirituality, and a thoughtful look at Native land claims, and that these topics were overshadowed by weak acting.³¹³ He remembers,

I said that at the time. Wasn't it just as important—rather than having a genuine Indian play it—wasn't it just as important, if not more important that we do a...better than excellent show about the Indian cause, where they are treated respectfully?...I thought it was.³¹⁴

Hamner concurred with the import of the story, citing, “We’ve done shows about Indians, try [sic] to show some of the atrocities that we committed on the Indian people, again trying to present people who are usually stereotyped and often not being presented in a human way as human beings.”³¹⁵

While there is logic and even sensitivity in Scott and Senensky’s thinking that a highly-skilled actor of any identity is the best choice to portray a socially significant story, there exists a problem with this line of thinking. This premise almost never holds true for actors of colour and actors with disabilities. They are not typically hired to play roles outside of their race or disability, and therefore are not afforded the same opportunities as white and abled actors. If actors of all creeds and abilities were equally considered and cast for all roles, then this logic would hold more water. Actors could advance in the industry purely on their merit, and stories could be portrayed artfully with the full spectrum of humanity included in their telling. But this is not the reality, and this is why affirmative casting is so critically important. Though Scott and Senensky consider the issue of casting with the best of intentions, many in the industry do not.

³¹³ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

³¹⁴ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

³¹⁵ Earl Hamner, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 172.

Many supporters of inauthentic casting use the guise of ‘art’ as a defense for the persistence of casting white and abled actors in racialized and disabled roles, with apparently little intention of extending the courtesy of identity-shifting to actors of colour, and actors with disabilities. A recent op-ed in the New York Post argued:

Disability is no ‘costume’ if the acting makes it real. Should Jamie Foxx give back his Oscar for ‘Ray’? Dustin Hoffman for ‘Rain Man’? Should a movie not get made if no top actor passes the Ruderman [Family Foundation] test? Mark this moronic identity-politics demand down with the new ‘cultural appropriation’ taboo as threats to the very essentials of art — the power of empathy and the possibility of transcendence. Dumb ideology has made for plenty of bad art, but this nonsense is an attack on art itself.³¹⁶

This kind of vitriolic rhetoric illustrates how the veneer of ‘art’ is appropriated to justify racist and ableist casting. The author of the op-ed cites no examples of how this type of casting historically has benefited or could benefit members of minority communities. Nor does he acknowledge the veracity of the Ruderman Family Foundation’s concerns regarding the exclusion of people with disabilities from the entertainment industry. The author denigrates the foundation, which advocates for the inclusion and affirmation of disabled people in Hollywood, as a group of “professional complainers”, and makes no overtures that its concerns have merit.³¹⁷ That such thinking still exists in the 2010s is a signal that the entertainment industry must be very careful in the allowances it makes with respect to casting. ‘Good art’ is never more important than human rights, and ‘good art’ cannot exist absent of inclusivity and authenticity, anyway.

American disability activist Dominick Evans argues that ‘cripping up’ or ‘disabled mimicry’ is problematic, regardless of intention. Evans explains,

³¹⁶ Post Editorial Board, “The Post Stands Up for Alec Baldwin.” <http://nypost.com/2017/07/10/the-post-stands-up-for-alec-baldwin/> July 10, 2017.

³¹⁷ Post Editorial Board, “The Post Stands Up for Alec Baldwin.” <http://nypost.com/2017/07/10/the-post-stands-up-for-alec-baldwin/> July 10, 2017.

I've started using disabled mimicry³¹⁸, which I think fits simply because mimicry is often embedded in (often unintentional) mockery. Whether non-disabled actors intend to mock us is not relevant to using the term, because whether there is malice or not that is what happens. It is a mockery of disability, through the weird vocal intonation or accents we hear when portraying CP or Deaf characters, the twitching, writhing bodies portraying strokes or spasticity, the rigidity of body posture, curling and flopping of wrists, or whatever physically stereotypical things these actors take on to portray what they think it means to be disabled. Yes, disabled bodies do some of these things, but they do so naturally and organically.³¹⁹

Because of this, it is clear that the only logical, artful, and ethical approach to casting disability is to rely on actors with disabilities. The status of disabled actors, the entertainment industry, and art itself are vastly improved by authentic casting.

Though authentic casting is a must for the industry moving forward, this study is about Hollywood's relationship to disability in the past. Why disabled performers were so seldom cast in disabled roles is partly explained by the casting process on *The Waltons*, and in the television industry as a whole in the 1970s. As discussed extensively in chapter 2, the pace on television sets in the 1970s was rapid and workman-like. This remains true for the majority of network television series today, though is less applicable to television series produced by subscription services formats such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO, whose television series tend to have fewer episodes, and tend to follow a less rigid schedule in terms of when they premiere new content. The business of producing an episode was undertaken as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. While series leads and regulars were often selected with great time and care, guest actors on the series had to be hired quickly. *The Waltons* consistently employed several dozen guest actors per season of television, sometimes for a single episode, and others for several episodes over the course of the series. Finding the right fit for these roles had to be done quickly

³¹⁸ Rather than 'cripface', a play on the term 'blackface', or 'cripping up'.

³¹⁹ Dominick Evans, "Please Stop Comparing Crippling Up to Blackface," *Dominick Evans*, July 18, 2017. <http://www.dominickevans.com/2017/07/please-stop-comparing-cripping-up-to-blackface/>

in order to maintain the momentum of television production, and this job was up to the series casting director. Senensky explains, “Well there would be a casting director on each show. On *The Waltons* it was...Pam Polofroni, she was great. And she knew, the casting directors at that time, they knew their actors. They knew them, they knew their capabilities, and they liked actors.”³²⁰ Senensky went on to explain that after years of working in the industry, casting directors typically accumulated a roster of acting talent and agents on whom they could rely, and would often default to these performers because of the reliability and efficiency with which they could be auditioned and hired. Other times, when a particular hefty or desirable role came along, seasoned actors whose credibility was high would be brought in for a role without even auditioning, usually at the request of a high-up member of the production team. Senensky remembers, “In terms of the larger roles, when you knew the people, you didn't bring them in [to audition]. In other words when it came for ‘The Conflict’, I just said ‘I want Beulah Bondi,’ because I remembered her in the 30s playing a mountain woman in the *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*.”³²¹ Because the process of casting on *The Waltons* was approached in this manner, actors with disabilities were disadvantaged.

The exclusion of actors with disabilities from the entertainment industry became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because authentic casting was not a priority in Hollywood in its earliest inceptions, minority talent was not cultivated in the industry. The more nondisabled and ethnically inauthentic people were hired to portray disabled characters and characters of colour, the more their acting credibility grew to the detriment of disabled and racialized talent. And because disabled children and children of colour grew up with such poor examples of their communities on television, it never occurred to some disabled people and POC that they could

³²⁰ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

³²¹ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

have careers in the industry. After all, you cannot be what you cannot see. Thus, fewer minorities dared to pursue the craft of acting. As a result, even if producers had wanted to hire members of minority communities to represent themselves, this would have been difficult. Academy Award-winning deaf actress Marlee Matlin explains the phenomenon as she recalls her audition process for the film *Children of a Lesser God*:

They bring me to audition. They bring me to the final tryouts. And I get the film. And what happens is I'm the first [deaf] person to get an Oscar—now remember, at this time there was no social media, and it was hard to get the word out. Now, with social media, everybody knows. There's no excuse for not putting a deaf actor in a deaf role. But back then, it was completely different, trying to find the right actor. How are we going to find a deaf actor? Casting [took] two to four years.³²²

Without a back catalogue of work by disabled actors, and with few disabled actors being represented by talent agents, their talents were beyond the reach of most casting directors. Whether by design or by oversight—many people I spoke to for this project felt it was a combination of factors—disabled talent simply did not appear in most casting directories. As Matlin's anecdote demonstrates, even the most well-intentioned of casting directors experienced difficulty recruiting disabled talent. That being said, there were available and active performers with disabilities in the 1970s and 1980s, if a casting department was willing to search hard enough for them. As aforementioned, deaf actors Linda Bove and Phyllis Frelich were two among them. Additionally, Geri Jewell, an actor with cerebral palsy, became a household name when she embodied the role of Geri Tyler on NBC's *The Facts of Life* in 1980. And blind actor Tom Sullivan could be seen on TV screens throughout the late 70s and early 80s on shows like

³²² Aisha Harris, "Oscar-Winning Actress Marlee Matlin on Her Incredible Career and Advocating for Deaf and Disability Representation on Screen," *Slate: Represent Podcast*, 2017. http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/represent/2017/04/slate_represent_accessible_transcript_marlee_matlin_on_deaf_representation.html.

MASH, *Morky and Mindy*, and *WKRP in Cincinnati*.³²³

Specific to *The Waltons*, Senensky remembers,

[A]t that time they had a large book called the academy players directory where all the actors, each page had I think five or six pictures with the actor's name and some of the credits...[T]he casting director would come through with a long list and then we would just start sifting names. Many times she just landed on a name, many times...³²⁴

In her current role as a casting agent, former *Waltons* guest star Erica Hunton confirms that this kind of quick and superficial casting did occur. When asked why she thought that she, a hearing child, booked the role of a deaf child in *The Waltons* premiere episode, Hunton speculated that it was because she was a good listener, took direction well, and resembled Charlotte Stewart, the actress who had been hired to play her mother. She admits, "I think that that probably, knowing what I know as an adult theatrical agent, I would think that was probably more of a driving force than anything else."³²⁵ When asked if she remembers if any deaf children had the opportunity to audition for the role, Hunton explains, "You know, kids in the audition room typically don't speak to one another. It's sort of a very grown-up environment and so I would not have known if somebody else was hearing impaired [sic] at all."³²⁶

Others guest stars on *The Waltons* who portrayed characters with disabilities admit they do not remember visibly disabled actors present for their auditions either. Actor Elayne Heilveil recalls being intimidated by the rising talent present for her audition for the role of Ruth Thomas, a blind woman whom John-Boy befriends in "The Job" (21 November, 1974). Foremost she remembers Tyne Daly and Sissy Spacek trying out for the role, and she remembers feeling pleased that she managed to earn the role up against such formidable talent. Heilveil

³²³ For these and other examples, see Lauri Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film*, (Jefferson: McFarland, 1988).

³²⁴ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

³²⁵ Erica Hunton (guest star), telephone interview with the author, Fall 2016.

³²⁶ Erica Hunton (guest star), telephone interview with the author, Fall 2016.

cannot confirm whether or not there was any blind talent present at the audition, but she doubts that there was. She confirms that auditioning disabled actors was not common practice during the 1970s.³²⁷ Playing a blind woman was not her only disability role. She cites that as an actor, “I had brain tumors. I had a mental illness. I was locked wrongly into a mental institution. All kinds of things. I tried to kill myself, like suicide, because I was depressed.” In terms of being consistently hired to portrayed disabled characters, Heilveil observes a kind of intersection between her gender and the concept of disability. She muses, “It was a period of time I guess, the 70s, where if you are the female lead you had some kind of serious disability. Whether it was physical or mental, it was high jeopardy. And the girl, I think...they were much more sort of the victim, you know?”³²⁸

Interestingly, though Heilveil initially had no misgivings about auditioning for and landing the role of a blind woman, she reveals that ultimately she had difficulty inhabiting the role. In “The Job”, John-Boy is hired to be a companion to Ruth, a recently blinded young woman. Ruth’s mother is concerned for her social, emotional, and intellectual well-being, and reasons that if a sensitive intellectual such as John-Boy would spend some time with Ruth, her circumstances would improve. Ruth is depicted according to the ‘bitterness’ and ‘maladjusted’ tropes described by Longmore in his essay on representations of disability on screen. As a result, for most of the episode Ruth is depicted as hostile to John-Boy’s attempts at friendship, and bitter about her new lot as a blind person. She is caustic in her responses to people, frequently rejecting attempts which encourage her to embrace her blindness.³²⁹ The character as originally written was prone to impassioned outbursts about her blindness. Because of the specificity and

³²⁷ Elayne Heilveil (guest star), interview with the author, Fall 2016.

³²⁸ Elayne Heilveil (guest star), interview with the author, Fall 2016.

³²⁹ *The Waltons*, “The Job”, aired November 21, 1974, (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2011) DVD.

the pointedness the role required, Heilveil grew uncomfortable on set when it came time to perform her lines. She suddenly became self-conscious about delivering material which she felt that she, and perhaps even her character, had not earned the right to say. After all, her character had only recently been blinded, but spoke with considerable conviction about what it was like to be blind. When asked about the role, Heilveil became overwhelmed by the memory of the experience, and effused,

There was a speech, like a monologue kind of thing...I don't even remember any of the words. I remember, obviously, the general context...Most actors loved to have more lines, and it was a whole speech on what it was like to be blind...I remember reading it and feeling really uncomfortable with the speech.³³⁰

Of the speech that Ruth was to deliver to John-Boy, Heilveil elaborated,

[I]t was like, 'You don't know what it's like to be blind!' And she [Ruth] was kind of angry, and then it went on to her saying what it was like to be blind...I thought, I can't say this. It's not right...I can't even put my finger on any specific line. It was just the whole thing. And I thought, 'I don't want to say it, I don't want to say it, I can't say it – it's not right.' But since I was a guest, like when you come in as a guest star you, you're not on the series. You're not on the show every week, so you certainly don't want to look difficult and say, 'I'm sorry, I can't say these lines.' You know?... So, I didn't know what to do and I thought, what am I going to do? I can't do this.³³¹

Eventually Heilveil came to a realization. "I thought, oh my God, Richard!...Richard Thomas, he's the power here. Because usually the star is kind of the person that kind of controls a lot, you know? So, I went up to him and I said, 'You know I had this thought. What would happen if you said these lines?'" Rather than monologuing about her disability to John-Boy, what if John-Boy lectured Ruth on her disability instead? As off-putting as this sounds, Longmore notes that able-bodied characters educating and dictating to disabled characters the way they should live their lives was standard fare on 1970s and 1980s television.³³² Since John-Boy had been hired by

³³⁰ Elayne Heilveil (guest star), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

³³¹ Elayne Heilveil (guest star), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

³³² Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

Ruth's mother to better her circumstances, it stood to reason that John-Boy might have some opinions on the subject of Ruth's blindness. Of the speech in question, Heilveil pitched to Thomas, "You know. Because it says... 'It's like this, it's like that.'...I [the character] don't want to talk. I'm angry. And if you try to get me to talk by saying this, maybe it would be kind of more powerful."³³³ Simply put, rather than launching in to a speech with Ruth saying, "Let me tell you what it's like to be blind", John-Boy would instead give a speech insinuating, "I know how you must feel to be blind." Perhaps this was not the most affirmative representation for a disabled character, but it solved Heilveil's dilemma over her discomfort inhabiting a blind role.

The case of *The Waltons* proves that, while there is no shortage of discrimination against disabled actors in Hollywood, and no shortage of abled actors eager to score a prime disability role, the path to hiring abled actors for disabled roles is not always a straight nor nefarious one. It is not simply a case of directors not wanting to hire actors with disabilities, nor a case of abled actors believing they are better for roles than their disabled contemporaries. It is more a case of an industry in which the exclusions of people with disabilities is so ingrained in the system, breaking that cycle appears daunting. If disabled people do not see themselves represented on screen, they may not be inspired to pursue acting. And if they do not pursue acting careers in large numbers, talent agents will only have a small pool of disability talent to offer to casting directors. If this is the case, casting directors will have limited options of whom to hire, and may default to their large and reliable stockpile of non-disabled actors instead. And so on, and so forth. Therefore, it is not enough to insist that Hollywood increase its representation of actors with disabilities. Work must be done at the systemic level to ensure that actors with disabilities are able to penetrate the industry through accessible drama education, inclusive talent agents, and

³³³ Elayne Heilveil (guest star), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

an open and accessible casting process. Likewise, producers and directors must be able to identify and locate disabled talent in large numbers to fulfill their casting needs. Had these opportunities been available to disabled performers and production teams in the 1970s, who is to say *The Waltons* would not have gone the extra mile to embrace disabled talent as another badge of authenticity on the series? Evidence presented in Chapter 5 about how the show handled real-life disabilities on and off-screen makes a case that *The Waltons* production team was more open-minded about disability when confronted with it personally.

As this chapter demonstrates, representations of disability on screen in the 1970s were not necessarily a reflection of the production team's feelings about disability. Rather they were sometimes meant to convey a historically accurate disability experience in the 1930s or 1940s. The value in this was apparent to the young cast of *The Waltons*, for whom the series furnished a valuable historical education. Series regular Judy Norton contends,

[T]here was definitely a history lesson for me in a lot of the lessons, in a lot of what I learned about that time period, and the politics of the period, or certain cultural mores, or whatever of that period. You know I learned through a lot of these episodes—now you could say ‘Television's fiction’, which it is, but I'd say a huge portion of people get a lot of their understanding of certain things from television.³³⁴

Edgerton concurs with this assertion, stating,

My first and most basic assumption is that television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today. Television must be understood (and seldom is) as the primary way that children and adults form their understanding of the past...the medium's nonfictional and fictional portrayals have...transformed the way tens of millions of viewers think about historical figures and events.³³⁵

As previously noted, the barriers, attitudes, and assumptions against which an individual experiences disability are not trans-historical. They are contingent on time and circumstances.

³³⁴ Judy Norton (series regular), interview with the author, Glendale, California, August 2016.

³³⁵ Gary R. Edgerton, “Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether,” in *Television Histories*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 1. (chapter pgs 1-16)

Thus, the historian must be attuned to the nuances of the status of disability in a specific society at specific junctures. In the words of French historian Henri Jacques Stiker, “We illuminate a question better by following its development through time than by trying to fix it in a false eternal moment... There is no disability, no disabled, outside precise social and cultural constructions; there is no attitude toward disability outside a series of societal references and constructs.”³³⁶ Producers of *The Waltons* were at the mercy of two distinct eras when constructing stories about disability, the history in which the show was set, and the contemporary world in which the show was made. The history of disability contemporary to when *The Waltons* was produced is fleshed out in chapter 4.

Understanding the historical context and influences for specific depictions of disability on *The Waltons* is critical to this project. The above makes clear the connection between the history of disability, and the world of the Depression and WWII in which *The Waltons* was set. While this chapter has highlighted the historical correspondence of the series storylines with the era it sought to depict, as well as the ways in which disability lent historical authenticity to the series, the focus of this project is not determining the historical accuracy of *The Waltons* and its depictions of disability. The focus of this project is an attempt to understand the changing place of disability in American cultural consciousness by using popular culture as an in-road to explore this topic. Hence, in addition to this chapter which considers disability within the historical context in which *The Waltons* was set, the following chapter examines the historical interval during which the series was produced. How disability became a relevant storytelling mechanism for *The Waltons* in the 1970s is the subject of the next chapter.

³³⁶ Henri Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 13-14.

CHAPTER FOUR

Disability as Relevance Programming

In a retrospective article published just over forty years after *The Waltons* premiered, *Entertainment Weekly* had this to say about the series: “Subversive’ is not the first word (or the 10th) that springs to mind when someone mentions The Waltons...[T]he rap on the show has always been that it was 'sweet' or 'sentimental'. So what's shocking about rewatching it now...is how wrong--or, at best, reductive--that is.”³⁴² Series regular Michael Learned explains, “People think it was a sugary show, '...'But it was groundbreaking in many ways.”³⁴³ *Waltons*’ writer

³⁴² Sean Smith, “The Waltons”, *Entertainment Weekly*, October 25/Nov. 1, 2013, #1282/1283 Special Double Issue.

³⁴³ Sean Smith, “The Waltons”, *Entertainment Weekly*, October 25/Nov. 1, 2013, #1282/1283 Special Double Issue.

Claire Peterson recalls the same. She remembers, “As the show wound down, we were looking for strong issues.”³⁴⁴ By the time the series ended in 1981, *The Waltons* writers produced over two hundred episodes of original stories. The inspiration for these stories was diffuse, as this study has revealed, but one consistent source of inspiration was real life experience. Whether Hamner’s actual childhood experiences, an anecdote from one of the actors, or an authentic historical moment of events past, *The Waltons* drew heavily from lived experience. And as Peterson reveals, in later years *The Waltons* delved into strong, relevant issues. As one critic of the series put it, “Relevance? You betcha! There’s a great kinship between the 1930s and today, and the verities of those times may be what today’s youth is reaching for.”³⁴⁵ Indeed, television historian Erik Barnouw observes, “*The Waltons*...was set in the Great Depression, and pictured it as a time of warmth and close family ties. Launched at a time when unemployment statistics were again assuming alarming proportions, *The Waltons* seemed a deliberate effort to prepare Americans for harder times.”³⁴⁶

As alluded to elsewhere in this study, the concept of ‘relevance’ television was both new and hot in the early 1970s. However, the term ‘relevant’ as a socially and culturally significant concept had slightly earlier roots. Historian of media Kirsten Marthe Lentz explains, “The discourse of ‘relevance’ first emerged in the mid-1960s in the context of the worldwide student social and political upheavals. Prior to this time, in common usage the term benignly signified the meanings ‘pertinence’ or ‘social applicability.’”³⁴⁷ After the mid-60s, the term morphed and became a signifier of that which was politically and socially engaged, and that which was

³⁴⁴ Claire Peterson (writer), written correspondence with the author, September 2016.

³⁴⁵ Richard K. Shull, “Is There Room on TV for a Gentle Story?” *Indianapolis News*, September 15, 1972, 17.

³⁴⁶ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 439.

³⁴⁷ Kirsten Marthe Lentz, “Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television,” *Camera Obscura*, 43, 15:1, 2000, 59.

evocative of the most pressing concerns of the day, among them racial justice, gender equality, and anti-war sentiments. As this chapter makes clear, disability rights were also on the agenda, though not to the same publicly acknowledged degree of the aforementioned issues.

Lentz confirms, “the term took on an additional and more specific connotation as it began to circulate first among university students newly politicized by burgeoning social movements, then in the popular press, and later in the television industry.”³⁴⁸ Television executives were eager to capitalize on this culture of relevance, because they expected it would yield dividends in capturing the attention of young, desirable audiences. Educated, politically-engaged youth were a hot commodity, given that they were primed to become the affluent movers and shakers of their generation, and given they had a long future of consumer engagement ahead of them. At the same time, this particular group was the most likely to write-off television as either drivel, or as part of the systemic issues against which they were rallying. Therefore, network executives were eager to find a way to engage this market. Lentz explains, “television executives expected young audiences to respond positively to television programs that adopted the logics of and issues associated with relevance.” She elaborates on why this was of particular interest to them: “The heightened attention to demographics by ratings corporations and advertisers meant that the group of people responsible for the discourse of ‘relevance’ had become increasingly desirable

³⁴⁸Lentz explains, “In the 1960s, the term was most closely associated with student demands for changes in university curricula and for increased enrollment of minorities in institutions of higher education. Students in the US and in England criticized traditional scholarly concerns, arguing that their education ought to become more “relevant” to their extracurricular social and political convictions. Though the popular press generally mocked these demands, they would nevertheless eventually result in a variety of educational reforms. Demands for relevance sparked a major transformation in many academic disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences, and they initiated the formation of new disciplines, among them African American studies and women’s studies. As the term migrated into all sorts of political discussions, it simultaneously made its way into televisual discourses in the 1960s and 1970s. Television programmers themselves started to appeal--implicitly in the 1960s and explicitly in the 1970s--to the cultural logic in terms of which “relevance” gathered significance. If pressure was being applied to educational institutions to make curricula and syllabi “relevant” to social and political problems, television executives expected young audiences to respond positively to television programs that adopted the logics of and issues associated with relevance.” Kirsten Marthe Lentz, “Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television,” *Camera Obscura*, 43, 15:1, 2000, 59-60.

audiences, economically speaking.” Specific to CBS and its introduction of shows like *All in the Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore* to its lineup in the early 1970s, Lentz argues, “Ultimately, then, CBS launched its era of the ‘relevant’ situation comedies in order to boost ratings among the most highly valued demographic groups.”³⁴⁹

All this being said, the concept of ‘relevance programming’ was more than just corporate inventiveness; it was also something of a psychological necessity in the late 60s and early 70s. Relevance programming developed in tandem with corporate desires, and audience whims when producers and viewers of television alike became aware of the dramatic divergence between television’s fictional content, and its nightly news broadcasts. The novelty and humour of television’s wealthy hillbillies and sexy genies made little sense in this new context. Writing on behalf of the Smithsonian, Matthew Twombly dubbed 1968 “the year that shattered America”, explaining “Movements that had been building along the primary fault lines of the 1960s—the Vietnam War, the Cold War, civil rights, human rights, youth culture—exploded with force in 1968. The aftershocks registered...for decades afterward.”³⁵⁰ That year saw all manner of domestic and international conflict—from the launch of the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive, to the increasing urgency of the international space race. 1968 was the year of the assassinations of black civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and Democratic presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy. Civil rights and anti-war protests came to a head throughout the country that year, culminating in such disastrous demonstrations as those held at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which ended with National Guardsmen tear-gassing and clubbing protesters. Notably, the Special Olympics were also held for the first time in the summer of

³⁴⁹ Kirsten Marthe Lentz, “Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television,” *Camera Obscura*, 43, 15:1, 2000, 60.

³⁵⁰ Matthew Twombly and Kendrick McDonald, “A Timeline of 1968: The Year That Shattered America,” *Smithsonian*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/timeline-seismic-180967503/>.

1968, a small testament to the alignment of disability civil rights with the other larger, more publicized civil rights movements of the era.³⁵¹ Network executives which failed to account for these events would not only miss out on potential profit from politically-engaged viewers, they would also risk producing content which might be interpreted as ignorant or insensitive.

Though they are afforded considerably more attention in scholarship on television and the 1970s, *All in the Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore* were just two additions to the supposedly new-and-improved CBS line-up in the early 70s. *Mary Tyler Moore* premiered in 1970, followed by *All in the Family* in 1971. In 1972, *The Waltons* made its debut on CBS.³⁵² Considered only for its artistic output, *The Waltons* could be misconstrued as simply a discourse on life in the 1930s and 1940s. However, while the storylines themselves took place in the 1930s and 1940s and were meant to reflect the personal experiences of series creator Earl Hamner Jr., the series was not solely a commentary on the American family during the Depression and WWII. How could it have been, when it was conceived, financed, produced, and watched during the 1970s? The show, in fact, was a unique *mélange* of storylines featuring historically-rooted disability

³⁵¹ Matthew Twombly and Kendrick McDonald, "A Timeline of 1968: The Year That Shattered America," *Smithsonian*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/timeline-seismic-180967503/>.

³⁵² According to Karen Petruska in her dissertation on the role in the television critic in the 1970s, "CBS had long nurtured its reputation as the 'Tiffany network,' known for its high quality, but *The Waltons* was an anomaly that CBS needed to accommodate under its broader corporate brand. When *The Waltons* premiered in 1972, CBS had recently undertaken a dramatic shift in network strategy to maintain its position as the number one network. After NBC's Operation 100 campaign,³¹ in reaction to NBC almost defeating CBS in the yearly ratings matchup, CBS cancelled its 'hayseed' programs like *Green Acres* and *Hee Haw* and shifted instead to 'relevant' programming, like *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. *The Waltons* was more akin to the former hayseed programs than to the sitcoms set in contemporary time and featuring more daring content. As such, this ad worked to alleviate the disconnect between CBS's most prominent relevant programs in 1972, assigning to *The Waltons* the quality it required to be a product of the Tiffany network. CBS stated its support explicitly in the ad: '[The Waltons] will remain alive until the end of this season, because some people here at CBS believe there are enough of us around—even in this super-sophisticated day and age—who can still respond to some old-fashioned notions like respect, and dignity, and love.' Though the ad does not employ the term 'quality,' it nevertheless ascribes to the program a genuineness, an authenticity that marks it deeper cultural value." Karen Petruska, *The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television*, Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012, 60-61.

experiences from the 1930s and 1940s, informed by the current events and sensibilities of the 1970s. Series regular Kami Cotler states emphatically,

[T]here's no question that, that the kind of moral framework that was operating on the show was a modern, it was contemporary one. It was taken on by the conservative right as this sort of, oh yeah. But really the whole message was all left-leaning, liberalism all the way through... There was a recurring theme of accepting diversity. Whatever it was. Whether it was blindness or Judaism. Anything that's different than what we know, how do we manage it?³⁵³

That the series was embraced by conservative factions, despite being left-leaning at its core according to its creators, comes as no surprise to its creative team. *The Waltons* might never have made it to air had it not been for backlash from conservative critics about the increasing liberties being taken with television content in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Series regular Judy Norton explains of *The Waltons* debut,

I mean it started off as a way to assuage the heavy pressure coming from the moral majority [sic] saying—because of the backlash from the 60s—I think there's too much permissiveness, there's too much sex and violence going on in television and that trend is the wrong direction to go. And then the network kind of going, in a way flipping their finger at them and going, 'Okay fine. We'll put on this nice, sweet, little family show, nobody will watch it and then it will prove our point, and it will be game over.'³⁵⁴

Game over for *The Waltons* it was not. At the conclusion of its first season, the series had the distinction of being a critical darling, a ratings winner, and an award-winning work of art. Part of its charm stemmed from the fact that the series was something of the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. On its face it was a 'nice, sweet, little family show', but in content and in spirit it was more liberal and topical than some realized. *Waltons* historian Chopra-Gant warns:

It is very easy to dismiss *The Waltons*, in particular—and often the middlebrow in general—as regressive and politically conservative, appealing to the 'silent majority' conservatism, and reproducing the prevailing dominant attitudes within a society. However...such a view is a misguidedly simplistic account of the working of the

³⁵³ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

³⁵⁴ Judy Norton (series regular), interview with the author, Glendale, California, August 2016.

middlebrow, and overlooks the complicated way the mainstream middlebrow texts like *The Waltons* must continuously rebalance themselves in the ebb and flow of the currents of contemporary politics...[T]he ‘conservative text’ must outwardly assert its embrace of at least a limited form of progressivism in order to avoid undermining its ability to maintain its core beliefs by appearing to be hopelessly out of tune with the mood of the times, and thus alienating a large part of its potential audience.³⁵⁵

The Waltons capitalized on the fact that it was set in the past to covertly make statements about current affairs. The veneer of the past kept *The Waltons* from veering into overtly political and topical territory. Its relevance came from the themes the series explored, rather than explicitly modern storylines. As a result, the series relevant content was less didactic, and more allegorical.

According to Barnouw “The shockwaves from the 1968 turmoil and violence had reverberating effects on broadcasting...The 1969 cry was for ‘relevance’, and during the following years it sent many television programs into oblivion.”³⁵⁶ The evolution of television in response to such cries was swift and apparent. On a purely visual level, “Many [television series] *looked* different. Black, brown, yellow faces became common in drama, newscast, commercial, comedy, special event, [and] panel.”³⁵⁷ *Waltons* producer Claylene Jones also recalls the emergence of more female faces in the industry during this time. She remembers,

[A]t that time there was I think affirmative action going on with, I believe, the Writer’s Guild...to get more women hired, and we did use a lot of women directors and some of them repeatedly...[W]e had women writers. We had a couple of women that wrote a large amount of our scripts...We had [a female] executive producer, a producer, associate producer, story editor and a senior story editor.³⁵⁸

Although it is hard to conceive of the industry at that time in celebratory terms, given how woefully under-representative it was of marginalized groups, it is important to acknowledge that

³⁵⁵ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America*, (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2013), 6.

³⁵⁶ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 431.

³⁵⁷ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 431.

³⁵⁸ Claylene Jones (producer), telephone interview with the author, Fall 2016.

incremental change *is* change. And in just five short years, the entire television landscape had metamorphosed. Though not enough, television at this time took major strides in representation and relevance. Richard Thomas points out, “[I]f you're dealing with subject matter which is only at a certain level of awareness, you're only going to be able to do what you know. And it isn't so much a question of, they did the best they could, knowing what we know now. In twenty years knowing what we know now will not be seen as knowing enough.”³⁵⁹ This is not to excuse poor representations of marginalized groups in the past, including those with disabilities. This is merely to acknowledge the trajectory of the industry at the time, and to understand the circumstances and metrics of how the industry began to bend towards diversity. If we acknowledge the gains and the shortfalls of the past, we are in a better position to acknowledge our current shortfalls, and capitalize on current successes. In the case of television in the early 1970s, the evolution of programming was rapid, if not wholly satisfying. Barnouw reports that “The ‘top ten’ series from 1973-1974 included not a single holdover from the 1968-1969 list of leaders. The replacements were almost all new offerings.”³⁶⁰ Unquestionably, ‘Relevance television’ reigned the airwaves in the early to mid-70s. American cultural historian Malgorzata J. Rymysza-Pawlowska notes,

The most prevalent of these were Norman Lear's *All in the Family* and its multiple spinoffs, including *Good Times*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons*, which were characterized as ‘relevance’ programming because of the way that they deliberately foregrounded the realities of life in the 1970s. These shows were seen by viewers as realistic not only because they addressed contemporary problems but also because they used these issues to promote emotional affinity between the program and the audience.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ Richard Thomas (series lead), interview with the author, New York, New York, August 2017.

³⁶⁰ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 430.

³⁶¹ Malgorzata J. Rymysza-Pawlowska, “Broadcasting the Past: History Television, ‘Nostalgia Culture,’ and the Emergence of the Miniseries in the 1970s United States,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42:2 (2014): 83-84.

Because *The Waltons* was set in a lived historical past, it could not delve into relevance in the same way as its modern contemporaries. It could not speak explicitly of life in the 1970s. As such, *The Waltons* had to get creative in order to compete for its share of the audience. How disability helped the historically-situated *Waltons* establish footing in the realm of ‘relevance television’ is the subject of this chapter.

That disability was included on *The Waltons* during the 1970s is not surprising. Longmore notes that the so-called ‘problem drama’ was a staple of 1970s and 1980s television, and that disability made for good fodder for this type of programming.³⁶² According to television journalist Shales, “In the ‘70s, the Prob Drama [sic] told viewers how they should deal with intimate problems.”³⁶³ Among such problems were “impotence, homosexuality, mental retardation, autistic children, deaths in the family, infidelity, child abuse and spouse battering,” thus affirming Longmore’s argument with regards to disability being a staple among dramatic content in this era.³⁶⁴ Numerous television contemporaries used disability to infuse relevance into their storytelling. Ranging from law and order dramas, to medical dramas, to comedies, to family series, disability was everywhere in 1970s and early 1980s television.³⁶⁵ Indeed, the topic of disability commanded sustained attention throughout the series’ run of *The Waltons*.³⁶⁶

³⁶² Paul Longmore “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul K. Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 132.

³⁶³ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

³⁶⁴ Tony Shales, “TV in ‘70s,,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/?utm_term=.579fe2354af9

³⁶⁵ See Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988).

³⁶⁶ Unless, of course, the series was based around characters with disabilities, like Robert Ironside, the detective with paraplegia in *Ironside*, or Tattoo, a character with dwarfism in *Fantasy Island*, to name just two examples.

‘Relevance programming’ maintained its popularity throughout the 1970s, and though in many respects this historically-situated family drama defied the tenets of such programming, *The Waltons* was not without its forays into ‘relevant’ social issues.³⁶⁷ Its literal content was escapist fare, set in an idyllic past where the Depression was troublesome, but also character-building. Premiering in 1972, *The Waltons* aired Thursday evenings at eight o’clock and provided a welcome break between the early evening and late evening newscasts, which emphatically covered the Vietnam War, Nixon’s scandal and resignation, and political protests throughout America concerning race, gender, sexuality, the economy, and the environment. A retreat to the past is one thing, but total ignorance of the present is another. In the fraught context of the 1970s, no production team could entirely escape its presentist bias, and few audiences would have stayed tuned to a programme which bore no correspondence or relevance to their real lives. *The Waltons* does not come first to mind in discussions of ‘relevance television’, but Kami Cotler corrects this thinking, and explains how the series was uniquely relevant. “[T]he stories were all about things that were happening, they were, they were just at a distance. Maybe that's what makes it appear less relevant...because the entities representing it aren't that similar to the entities generating it.”³⁶⁸

Because the above listed events commanded the lion’s share of headlines, it is easy to overlook disability as a key feature of 1970s history. The 1970s was, in fact, a watershed for disability civil rights in the United States.³⁶⁹ Disability historian Kim Nielsen notes that “The

³⁶⁷ Sally Bedell, *Up the Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 47.

³⁶⁸ Kami Cotler (series regular), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

³⁶⁹ See Diane Driedger, *The Last Civil Rights Movement: Disabled Peoples’ International* (New York: Hurst & Co., 1989); Paul Longmore, “The Hidden History of Disabled People” and “The Disability Rights Moment: Activism in the 1970s and Beyond” both in *Why I Burned My Book, and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 2003); Susan Schweik, “Lomax's Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 31:1, 2011; Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

disability rights movement was energized by, overlapping with, and similar to other civil rights movements across the nation, as people with disabilities experienced the 1960s and 1970s as a time of excitement, organizational strength, and identity exploration.”³⁷⁰ Though the movement flourished in the 1970s, like all things, the genesis of the disability rights movement was the result of earlier incidents in the history of its people.³⁷¹

During the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth-century, large swaths of disabled Americans were institutionalized in facilities supposedly designed to support their needs. In their respective books *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (1994), and *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls* (2011), James Trent and Michael Rembis describe the historical processes by which disabilities were defined and, at times, invented to serve a variety of political, economic, race-based, and sex-based agendas. Their works demonstrate that disability is neither an easily defined nor a rigid category, and that who is considered disabled depends on historical circumstances, as well as on the whims of ‘professionals’ evaluating supposedly disabled bodies.³⁷² During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a significant population of Americans were institutionalized, some with disabilities which today would be defined as mental health, psychiatric, and intellectual disabilities. Still others were institutionalized using disability as a guise for their institutionalization, while in reality, their confinement in institutions was more likely based on perceived threats arising from “deviant” behaviours associated with their gender, race, class, or sexuality. Families and communities of these disabled Americans perceived that they were unable to support these individuals in

³⁷⁰ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 160.

³⁷¹ See Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

³⁷² See James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Michael Rembis *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 2011.

community integration, or felt unwilling to do so, and so they opted to have them institutionalized as a way of addressing these problems.³⁷³

Somewhere between a hospital and a prison, over time, it became apparent that these institutions were ineffective at catering to people with disabilities. For one thing, the definition of disability was nebulous, and so these institutions became overcrowded with inhabitants of a wide-range of abilities and backgrounds. Because ‘disability’ was not as yet a legally protected category in the United States—that is, there was no civil rights legislation spelling out what constituted a disability, nor how disability rights should be addressed and protected in civil society—communities relied on socially-determined notions of what constituted a disability when deciding who ought to be institutionalized. As a result, institutions were overcrowded with people whose needs could not have been more different, and whose status as disabled persons was questionable.³⁷⁴ It was impossible to provide relevant, quality support under these conditions, not to mention illogical and inhumane. There were few justifications for the institutionalization of people with disabilities which were not grounded in prejudice and/or the desire to eliminate the ‘nuisance’ of disability from public life. In the 1950s and 1960s, people with disabilities and their support networks began exposing the realities of institutional life, and advocated for deinstitutionalization and community integration as a socially just alternative.

According to U.S. disability scholars Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames,

The trend in the late 1950s and early 1960s toward deinstitutionalization allowed people with severe physical disabilities to begin entering the mainstream bringing a new population to the developing disability rights movement. Nearly all people with serious physical impairments had trouble coping with a physical environment so ill-adapted to

³⁷³ See James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁷⁴ Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 11-13.

their needs, and many were spurred into activism by the discrimination and lack of understanding they encountered.³⁷⁵

When increasing numbers of Americans with disabilities were gradually rewoven into the fabric of American life, the world had to be remade in their image. A world which was previously designed with the assumption that people with disabilities were out of sight and out of mind increasingly had to account for this population living and operating within their respective communities. Rather than accept the idea that they were unfit for community integration, disabled people argued that the environment was incompatible with their needs. It was the world around them that was defective, disabled people insisted, and not their bodies. Nielsen writes, “Like feminists, African Americans, and gay and lesbian activists, people with disabilities insisted that their bodies did not render them defective. Indeed, their bodies could even be sources of political, sexual, and artistic strength.”³⁷⁶ Thus, the effects of deinstitutionalization throughout the 1950s and early 1960s contributed to a variety of civil rights initiatives for people with disabilities in the late 1960s, and through the 1970s. Chief among them were movements for legislation which protected access to education, protected against discrimination in employment and housing, and promoted physical access to public spaces and transportation. Also key were “institutional transformations that better enabled the self-determination of those with disabilities.”³⁷⁷

These movements were ultimately successful in fomenting legislative change. *The Waltons* aired concurrent to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act by Congress in 1973, and the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. Where legislative change

³⁷⁵ Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 33.

³⁷⁶ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 160.

³⁷⁷ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 161. Also see Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 36-48.

failed to produce social change and compliance in the real world, disability rights protests were levied against offenders. When President Nixon vetoed important sections in early versions of what would become the Rehabilitation Act 1973, disability activists were incensed. Fleischer and Zames report, “In New York City, [disabled activist] Judith E. Heumann and eighty allies organized a sit-in on Madison Avenue in October 1972, bringing traffic to a halt.”³⁷⁸ Thanks in part to such activism, The Rehabilitation Act was ultimately passed by Congress, and included the crucial elements which Nixon had tried to eliminate, these being sections 501-504. While these provisions were ultimately included in the act, Americans with disabilities found that they were seldom enforced, and lacked legislative heft. This was especially the case with section 504 of the act, which was adapted from language used in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act 1973 became “the first federal civil rights law for people with disabilities,”³⁷⁹ but it was more lip-service than actual policy.

When it was included in the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 had no regulations to support its enforcement, and thus was effectively inert. For years disabled activists and their allies called for comprehensive guidelines to enforce Section 504, and by 1977 they had enough. Perhaps the most famous of disability protests occurred that year, and became known as the ‘504 sit-in’. The sit-in took place in Housing, Education, and Welfare (HEW) offices across the country in an attempt to persuade then Secretary of HEW Joseph Califano to sign off on regulations governing the enforcement of Section 504.³⁸⁰ After 23 days of collective protest, “On April 28, 1977, Califano signed not only the Section 504 regulations in their original form, but also the

³⁷⁸ Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 49.

³⁷⁹ Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 50.

³⁸⁰ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 165-169.

regulations for the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.”³⁸¹ This marked the crowning achievement of disability activism in the 1970s.

Indeed, the 1970s were crucial to American disability history. Disabled people made tremendous strides socially, economically, legislatively, and educationally-speaking, and they became an increasingly powerful presence in American society throughout the decade. Disability then was a ‘relevant’ issue in the 1970s. While *The Waltons* was limited in its ability to speak directly to these watershed moments because of the nature of its setting, nonetheless it touched on all of these historical themes, albeit through the context of Depression and WWII-era mountain life. For example, “The Foundling” emphasized the importance of a deaf child having an accessible education. “The Obstacle” showed the social and economic necessity of having accessible public spaces, and of supporting disabled veterans in their readjustment to civilian life. And “The Diploma” (4 October, 1979) and “The Pledge” (4 December, 1980) demonstrated the benefits of community integration for people with intellectual disabilities.

As this study has made clear, attention to disability was paid throughout the duration of *The Waltons*. Among the most relevant of forays into disability issues were those borne from the show’s treatment of WWII. The beginning of the series was set during the height of the Great Depression, but as the series aged, so too did the characters and the world they inhabited. Thus, in later years, *The Waltons* explored WWII’s toll on the Walton family and their community. The war in Vietnam and the United States’ involvement in it having ended a few years into *The Waltons*’ run, stories about WWII easily translated into allegorical plotlines relevant to the time period in which they were being produced and viewed. In several instances, disability was

³⁸¹ Doris Zames Fleischer and Freida Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 55.

invoked to bring these themes to bear. Due to a significant population of Vietnam veterans returning from service with disabilities throughout the 1970s, the rights and needs of Americans with disabilities became a national concern, just as they had been following the Civil War and World Wars.³⁸² Given the parallels between the injured WWII veterans of the on-screen *Waltons* world and the injured Vietnam veterans of the 1970s, the show inevitably evoked disability in storylines as a proxy for relevance. *Waltons* writer Michael McGreevey recalled of the series “I did have a conversation, I think, with Ernie Wallingren [fellow *Waltons* writer], about ... the fact that we were mirroring [the 70s], even though it was the 40s.”³⁸³ Wallingren was the writer of a key disability episode, “The Tempest”, which is discussed later in this chapter in detail. Wallingren’s mother Claire Peterson—also a *Waltons* writer—noted, “There were many parallels to returning Vietnam vets, and I’m sure Ernie, who was drafted very early in the war, but flunked the physical, was aware of this as he wrote [for *The Waltons*].”³⁸⁴ Notably, Wallingren later lived with and died from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and in the intervening years he used his platform as a screenwriter to bring awareness to the disease and its physical affects.³⁸⁵

In an earlier chapter, “The Obstacle” was referenced as an example of the cliché of the “supercrip” common to depictions of disability on screen. Disabled actor Alan Toy explains and simultaneously rejects the notion of the ‘supercrip’ when he says “a lot of ordinary disabled people are made to feel like failures if they haven’t done something extraordinary. They may be bankers or factory workers—proof enough of their usefulness to society. Do we have to be ‘supercrips’ in order to be valid? And if we’re not super, are we invalid?”³⁸⁶ “The Obstacle” did

³⁸² See Beth Linker, *War’s Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³⁸³ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

³⁸⁴ Claire Peterson (writer), email correspondence with the author, September 9, 2016.

³⁸⁵ Claire Peterson (writer), email correspondence with the author, September 9, 2016.

³⁸⁶ Alan Toy, as quoted in Joanmarie Kalter, “Good News: The Disabled Get More Play on TV, Bad News: There is Still Too Much Stereotyping,” *TV Guide*, May 31, 1986, 43.

perpetuate the notion that disabled people prove their worth by being extraordinarily gifted in the abilities they possess as compensation for the abilities they apparently lack. In a montage during the episode, disabled veteran Mike Paxton is shown completing various tasks around the Walton homestead with great efficiency and skill, to the delight and praise of the Walton family. Beyond this cliché, the episode also explored the fraught process of veteran adjustment to civilian life following military service. Newly paraplegic due to an injury sustained during military service, Mike despaired that he might never fulfill the coveted roles of productive worker and romantic partner. Feeling hopeless upon his release from a veterans' rehabilitation center, Mike absconded to the Walton homestead, where he remained in a self-imposed exile. The storyline, which focused on Mike's feelings about his return from service, mirrored the experiences of many Vietnam veterans in the 1970s.³⁸⁷ This episode also bore similarities to some popular and critically acclaimed films of the 1970s, such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *First Blood* (1982), all of which addressed the difficulties of readjustment to civilian life following the Vietnam War, and emphasised the challenges of physical and psychological disabilities resulting from military service.

Whereas “The Obstacle” mostly focused on physical disabilities, *The Waltons* also explored the highly relevant and pressing matter of psychological distress endured by servicepersons in times of armed conflict. In “The Conscience” (4 January, 1979), which aired just a week before “The Obstacle”, second Walton son Jason experienced emotional and psychological disruption as he grappled with the possibility of having to kill in service of his country. Michael McGreevey—writer of “The Conscience” episode—remembers:

³⁸⁷ See memoirs such as Phil Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), and Wallace Terry's *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (1984).

I had turned in my story outline...of ‘The Conscience’. I guess there had been some feedback from the network about one of the main characters being cowardly—which was a weird word for me at that point—and basically [executive producer] Rod [Peterson] and Earl [Hamner] just wanted to clarify what my approach was with Jason. And I said, basically, this is very personal to me guys. I had just gone through probably six years before that, facing the draft and Vietnam and I was very much like Jason, very conflicted about whether or not I could kill anybody. Even in a military setting. And I felt that that was, I felt displaced, I felt out of the mainstream and there were a couple of my friends who [reacted to my stance with disapproval], much like Ben reacts in that script, to his own brother.³⁸⁸

Ultimately Earl Hamner agreed it was an important story to tell. The story aligned with the recurrent themes of the series, namely the relation of self to family, and the relation of self to the hostile, outside world. McGreevey made apparent the relevance of the story based on his own personal experiences as a young man coming of age in the 1970s. And Hamner biographer James Person Jr. revealed the correspondence with Hamner’s own life, as a young man coming of age during the Second World War. As it turns out, Jason’s fictional saga was all too familiar for Hamner. Person Jr. shared:

I think Earl shared with me and with many of my own friends and cronies a belief that...war is all hell, and it exacts a terrible toll on its participants, despite the flag-waving and the chest thumping, and the drum beating, and so forth...Earl's own participation in World War II was one of the great reluctance. Of course...he wanted...to do a good showing. He did not want to be thought of as not doing his part. But at the same time, he was one of those people who is so ill-prepared, I think, for the rigours of combat and so forth...[H]e was sure that he was going to die. And that frightened him terribly. He couldn't do this, couldn't do that, couldn't drive a tank...[H]e was reassigned to a clerical unit, and was sent to do work in Paris behind a desk, which was perfect for him. The soldiering aspect, he did not like it all.³⁸⁹

For Jason, his trauma began in training and preparing for battle. For other characters, their trauma commenced post-service. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was explored in “The Tempest”, which chronicled the psychological effects that military service wreaked on

³⁸⁸ Michael McGreevey (guest actor and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

³⁸⁹ James Person Jr. (biographer), telephone interview with the author, September 2016.

Curtis Willard, husband of eldest Walton daughter Mary-Ellen. Although couched in WWII terms, the correspondence of these stories to the Vietnam War and the post-Vietnam era was undeniable. Thus, disability served as proxy for commentary in the aftermath of war. The series was, on the face of things, out of step with the times, due to its setting. Beneath the surface of the content, relevance was apparent. As television scholar Newcomb explains, “television formula requires that we use our contemporary historical concerns as subject matter... We take this concern and place it, for very specific reasons, in an earlier time [when]... issues are more clearly defined [and] certain modes of behavior [are] more permissible.”³⁹⁰

Klobas argued that the problem with most portrayals of people with disabilities on screen is that “their social problems and individual idiosyncrasies are ignored, while easy emotional stories of ‘bitterness’, ‘overcoming’, and ‘courage’ abound.”³⁹¹ Admittedly, *The Waltons* relied on certain reductive tropes to tell these stories. For instance, “The Obstacle” suggested a kind of redemption for disabled people who find the ‘courage’ to ‘overcome’ their disabilities. Though Mike Paxton despaired over his situation at the outset of “The Obstacle”, with a bit of ingenuity and a lot of faith, the Walton family encouraged Mike to ‘overcome’ his disability by finding new ways to navigate the world as a wheelchair-user, and thus to fulfill his desired masculine roles. Audiences watched as Mike became a gainfully employed member of the Walton Mountain community, and as his romantic prospects were buoyed by a flirtation with middle Walton daughter Erin.

By contrast, in “The Tempest,” Curtis Willard remained committed to his feelings of ‘bitterness’, and therefore remained permanently estranged from his wife and her family.

³⁹⁰ Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1974), 258-259.

³⁹¹ Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988), xii.

Longmore's work "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures" demonstrates how these and other repetitious tropes on television have served to create reductive and often negative images of people with disabilities.³⁹² Scholars generally agree that disabled people's stories are largely presented with non-disabled audiences in mind. They are sometimes appropriated for purely dramatic purposes and other times invoked to assuage non-disabled audiences of their fear of disability. Such narratives are designed to entertain, educate, alleviate, or even to absolve non-disabled audiences of their feelings about disability, but they rarely aim to depict authentic and affirmative disability experiences. While the above examples make clear that *The Waltons* engaged in these kinds of problematic storytelling practices, nonetheless the series' relationship to disability was surprisingly complex. Given how the show deployed disability as both an historical device and as a proxy for relevance, it is clear that episodes revolving around disability were about the larger sets of historical circumstances of which disability was an important part.

The Waltons broached mental health disabilities at various turns during its run. In "The Loss" (13 November, 1975), cousin Olivia experienced profound depression following the sudden death of her husband. "The First Edition" (23 September, 1976) and "The Great Motorcycle Race" (18 November, 1976) saw local mercantile owners Ike and Corabeth Godsey contend with the news of their infertility. And in "The Milestone" (15 December, 1977) Olivia Walton struggled with a mood disorder related to menopause. However, some of the most impactful and relevant stories about mental health emerged via the several story-lines mentioned

³⁹² According to Paul Longmore in "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul K. Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 131-146, portrayals of disability in the media almost always ascribe to one of the following tropes: the maladjusted disabled person; an emotional education by a nondisabled character; the problem of disability resting squarely on the individual with a disability; compensation in the form of 'gifts'/'talents' for coping with a disability; the 'supercrip' and overcoming; a positive growth experience; the responsibility of the individual with a disability to educate; medical and technological advances; and/or stigma and sexuality.

above, which explored the psychological and emotional ramifications of service in WWII. Of this kind of openness around sensitive topics, series regular Judy Norton mused, “I think there was just an awareness and appreciation that we were broaching subjects that needed to be talked about. What was great about the show was that the *Waltons*, they were very much in many ways ahead of their time, in what we were representing.”³⁹³ As this project suggests, *The Waltons* was more-so a product of its time, rather than ahead of its time. However, this project makes clear that the late 1960s through the early 1970s was something of a transitional period for television content generally, and that *The Waltons* arguably advanced the medium in its own way during the time. Therefore, it was both a product and agent of trends in television at the time.

The most noteworthy example of addressing mental health on *The Waltons* was “The Tempest.” The story went that Mary-Ellen married local country doctor Curtis Willard around the time that war was breaking out in Europe. A couple of years hence, Curtis was drafted into the medical corps and stationed to serve at Pearl Harbor. Following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Curtis was presumed dead in the fray, forcing Mary-Ellen and their son John-Curtis to resume a life without him. In actuality, Curt survived, though was severely injured and in a coma for some time. Audiences learned that, after convalescing in a veterans' hospital, Curt decided to remain estranged from his family. His decision was informed by his belief that they would be better off without him. The trauma endured through witnessing the attacks on Pearl Harbor, and through coping with the injuries that resulted, negatively impacted Curt's mental health and his sense of identity. In addition to the psychological trauma wrought by the events of Pearl Harbor, Curt’s mental health was further impacted by a physical trauma he endured in the fray. When he was first made aware of this story arc for the character Curtis Willard, Michael McGreevey

³⁹³ Judy Norton (series regular), interview with the author, Glendale, California, August 2016.

recalls thinking the story was far-fetched, and an odd take for *The Waltons*, that is, until he reflected on his own exposure to service-induced trauma. Upon viewing the finished episode, McGreevey had a newfound appreciation for the story and its relevance. He explains:

I saw the episode and I can remember... I had six friends go to Vietnam, four of them came home and two of the four that came home, one of them is still struggling with it...And I also had a friend at the same time who was in medical school. He had finished at UCLA and was doing his residency in psychiatry at the veteran's center, and he was one of the first psychiatrists to identify posttraumatic stress syndrome...I remember him telling me the story, he came in for his rounds one day at the veteran's hospital at UCLA and he went through the wards. There was a 95-year-old World War I veteran. There were a couple of World War II veterans. There was a Korean War vet, Vietnam War vet, and they all had the same problems. So, I can remember at the time thinking, what a stupid idea that Curt's life...Then I saw the show...and I went, this is spot on.³⁹⁴

In “The Tempest” Curt lamented to Mary-Ellen “I can never be a real husband, Mary-Ellen. I can never father another child. I’m not a whole man, and I’m never gonna be one.”³⁹⁵ In addition to its literal connotations, this scene obviously addresses fears that America, as well as individual men, lost their manhood with the defeat in Vietnam. In Curt's own words, the combination of these traumas left him feeling “empty and lifeless”.³⁹⁶ As eldest son John-Boy explained in the episode's opening narration: “A chill settled on Walton’s Mountain that first autumn after the conclusion of the Second World War...[A] storm was brewing to the south, a storm that...called [Mary-Ellen] to a distant part of the country in search of a man she believed to be dead.”³⁹⁷ The language used from the episode’s outset was telling. Rather than referring to Curt’s psychological and physical challenges in clinical terms, his struggles were referred to in descriptive, metaphorical terms. The experience of service-induced post-traumatic stress, it was

³⁹⁴ Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

³⁹⁵ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

³⁹⁶ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

³⁹⁷ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

suggested, was a disruptive albeit temporary phenomenon. It was a problem to be weathered, with the expectation that with time and the right attitude, the “storm” would pass.

The ensuing episode revolved around Mary-Allen's struggle to understand Curt's behaviors and choices as he adjusted to civilian life a changed man. Whereas before serving Mary-Allen knew Curt to be “a good husband and father and a fine doctor”—in other words, an upstanding member of his Walton's Mountain community—post-service the townsfolk of Curt's new haunt in Larksbury, Florida described him as “nothing but trouble.”³⁹⁸ Upon reuniting with Curt and learning of his challenges post-service, Mary-Allen echoed the townsfolk's disapproval and exclaimed to Curt “The Great Warrior. Killed at Pearl Harbor. Decorated for heroism. Reported in all the newspapers. Just look at you now!”³⁹⁹ Although disappointing, and in many ways un-Waltonlike, the townsfolk and Mary-Allen's sentiments generally reflected the prevailing social—if not clinical—perspective on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the time. By the late 1970s, the clinical understanding of PTSD was more sophisticated than it had been following WWII. Socially though, there remained little sympathy and support for those living with PTSD. Many observers of the phenomenon were more critical of the individual living with the psychiatric illness, than of the circumstances and politics which led to said individual being traumatized in war. Civilians often mistook veterans as agents of the unpopular Vietnam war, rather than as victims of it. They were thus less inclined to empathize with their plight. The lack of understanding and support for disabled veterans also was interwoven with prevailing notions of masculinity, and with the idealized concept of breadwinning male heads of household. Men whose injuries impacted their ability to work and earn a decent living, and/or which altered

³⁹⁸ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

³⁹⁹ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

their sexual performance, were particularly stigmatized in American culture.⁴⁰⁰ Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli describe how, since World War II, film and television have grappled with how to represent the coming-home experience of disabled veterans. They explain, “At the conclusion of the Second World War, more than 600,000 men returned to the United States with long-term disabilities, contributing to a profound destabilization of the definitions, representations, and experiences of male sexuality in America.” They argue,

Post–World War II audiences no longer naively bought into the rosy picture of frictionless reintegration, and Hollywood responded with increased realism. World War II reintegration dramas, therefore, embodied lofty hopes that veterans might be seamlessly reincorporated into civil society, while also conceding that these men’s feelings of anger, alienation, and frustration could easily undermine postwar harmony.⁴⁰¹

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, *The Waltons* continued to grapple with these representations, as evidenced by its treatment of Curt’s character in “The Tempest”.

This unforgiving perspective on Curt’s failure to adjust following service distinguished *The Waltons* among many of its celluloid contemporaries, whose messages tended toward anti-Vietnam rather than anti-veteran rhetoric. Vietnam was a hot commodity in cinema throughout the 70s, with most films empathizing with, if not valorizing, its psychological casualties. While the perspective adopted on *The Waltons* towards war and PTSD was in keeping with the sentiments of the WWII world in which the show was set, its echoes in the contemporary world of the 1970s and 1980s in which it was viewed were problematic. More has been written about the history of Vietnam and the post-traumatic stress experience in film.⁴⁰² By contrast, almost

⁴⁰⁰ See chapters 1 and 2 of Robert Self’s *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012) for more on the male breadwinner ideal in post-war America.

⁴⁰¹ Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli, “Half a Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Impotence in World War II America,” *Osiris* 30 (2015), 229-230.

⁴⁰² See Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson: McFarland Press 1988); Christian Keathley, “Trapped in the Affection-Image: Hollywood’s Post-Traumatic Cycle (1970-1976),” in eds. Christopher R. Smith and Anthony Enns *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001); Sharon Packer, “Cold War Paranoia and Postwar PTSD,” in ed. Sharon Packer *Movies and the Modern Psyche* (Westport: Praeger, 2007).

nothing has been written about Vietnam and posttraumatic stress in television. Considering the pre-eminence of television in the 1970s cultural landscape, and the power that television had and has to shape public consciousness about mental illness, such an examination is important.

By the 1970s television had morphed from the “toy with a flickering image” of its inception, to a “powerful and influential communications medium” that commanded “an important place in the lives of most Americans.”⁴⁰³ And with only three major networks competing for an audience share throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, what shows like *The Waltons* said about mental illness mattered because their reach was vast. While the literal war in Southeast Asia concluded for Americans when troops began to withdraw in 1973, for many Vietnam veterans another war, battled on a psychological front, was just beginning. Yet the mental health and overall well-being of returned Vietnam veterans were given short shrift on the national agenda.⁴⁰⁴ The war in Vietnam was a war that most Americans wanted to forget. U.S. historian Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer explained “Quite simply, the nation did not want to be reminded of its disastrous defeat in Vietnam. Thus, bitter and frustrated soldiers, many with drug dependencies, came home to a bitter America that was at best indifferent and at worse...overtly hostile.”⁴⁰⁵

If the plight of the mentally anguished Vietnam veteran was fading from social justice marches, nightly newscasts, and presidential debates as the 70s wore on, it was becoming increasingly visible on screen in fictionalized accounts. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, myriad depictions of the far-ranging consequences of the Vietnam War appeared in film. Film historian Robert Niemi observed “During the war and in the decades since, fiction and non-fiction films

⁴⁰³ Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 179.

⁴⁰⁴ Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 129.

⁴⁰⁵ Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 209.

about Vietnam have engaged in an elaborate and always emotionally charged dialogue about the war's meaning and consequences.” As compared to the typically patriotic and battle-charged films which emerged following the Second World War, Niemi explained “From rancorously partisan defenses and denouncements of American involvement, Vietnam War cinema has generally evolved into something more ideologically nuanced and elegiac.”⁴⁰⁶ For example, films such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *First Blood* (1982), *Combat Shock* (1986), and *Jacknife* (1989) all broached the topic of the psychological distress endured by returning Vietnam veterans. Though these films had distinct plots and employed unique narrative devices, the commonalities that they shared were that they were produced during the post-Vietnam era, they spoke directly of the Vietnam experience and were generally critical of the war, and they used the more epic and provocative medium of film to tell their stories.

This brings us back to the curious example of *The Waltons*. The heavy pall cast by the Vietnam War, some have argued, contributed to the popularity of the Depression and WWII setting of *The Waltons* during the 1970s. Person Jr. opined that “*The Waltons*, despite its setting and themes, was fresh and appealed to the nation’s sense of nostalgia and soul searching during the twilight years of the Vietnam-War era.”⁴⁰⁷ *Waltons* historian Mike Chopra Gant echoed Person and declared “by the time *The Waltons* first appeared on American television screens in 1972, Americans...had been discomfited by the implicit inhumanity of the USA inscribed in appalling images of the terrified, agonised faces of helpless Vietnamese children bathed in American napalm while American troops stood by, seemingly immune to their suffering.” By

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Niemi, *History in the Media: Film and Television* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 152.

⁴⁰⁷ James E. Person Jr., *Earl Hamner: From Walton’s Mountain to Tomorrow* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2005), 75.

contrast *The Waltons* was seemingly an anodyne.⁴⁰⁸ And in some respects, this was true. Episodes like “The Graduation” (February 21, 1974) where the central crisis was whether to allocate the family’s meager financial resources for a new suit for eldest son John-Boy, or for a new cow for the family, represented a salve of sorts for audiences, as they were fairly firmly rooted in the specifics of a rural family struggling through the Great Depression. However, although *The Waltons* was an historically-situated drama, it is evident from this study that American audiences did not always escape the turbulent world of the 1970s while viewing *The Waltons*. As has been made clear, *Waltons* writers used the medium of television, and the historical backdrops of the Great Depression and WWII, as inert spaces in which to hash out contemporary issues.

When eldest son John-Boy referred to Curt and Mary-Allen’s life prior to his service in World War Two as “the waning hours of a simpler era”, his remarks were pointed. Each episode of *The Waltons* began and ended with the voice of an older John-Boy reflecting on the events of his family’s past. Of this storytelling technique, television scholars Newcomb and Alley argued:

Translated into fiction, this burden of memory fell upon the Walton family as viewed from the vantage point of the adult John Boy. It was presented as personal narrative within the larger national story, and it focused on emotion, on individuals, and on small groups who felt the force of large social events in personal ways. This does not mean that social commentary and criticism were eliminated. Rather, as in so much of television, it is displaced to the personal and domestic arenas which then serve as the appropriate perspective from which to judge the meaning, power, and effectiveness of the social order.⁴⁰⁹

Story-lines like the “The Tempest” could be interpreted literally as the story of one man’s emotional hardships in the aftermath of service in WWII, but they could also be interpreted

⁴⁰⁸ Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 2.

⁴⁰⁹ Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “Earl Hamner” in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 158.

allegorically as relating to the post-Vietnam world. The tendency to produce historical fiction with contemporary resonance was not exclusive to *The Waltons*. In fact, it was a significant aspect of American television in the 1970s, according to Rymysz-Pawlowska. She explained that among the most popular television series were “programs that emphasized characterization to introduce relatable protagonists and that involved current political and social issues”. These programs were “characterized as ‘relevance’ programming because of the way that they deliberately foregrounded the realities of life in the 1970s.”⁴¹⁰

By contrast, shows like *The Waltons*, and its contemporary *Little House on the Prairie*⁴¹¹, consciously fore-grounded the past in their storytelling, while referring to contemporary issues in coded and implicit ways. Due to their historical settings, *Little House* and *The Waltons* offered a unique breed of realistic and relevance programming. Rymysz-Pawlowska elaborated:

In this programming context, *Little House* made similar avowals of realism...As one critic observed, the show ‘dishe[d] up today's hardships as 1870s hardships’. If relevance programming aimed to advance television's position by emphasizing its ability to represent and attend to social issues, shows such as *Little House* took the additional step of placing these issues within a historical milieu.⁴¹²

Thus, it behooves us to consider *The Waltons* as a legitimate and illuminating contribution to the discussion of mental health disabilities and military service on screen in the 1970s and 1980s. *The Waltons* represented a counterpoint to the Vietnam films of the era, which tended to be contemporaneous to the period they were made, and overt in their commentary on the consequences of the Vietnam War. Of historically based television dramas like *The Waltons*,

⁴¹⁰ Malgorzata J. Rymysz-Pawlowska, “Broadcasting the Past: History Television, ‘Nostalgia Culture,’ and the Emergence of the Miniseries in the 1970s United States,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42, no. 2 (2014): 83-84.

⁴¹¹ A family drama about the challenges of pioneer life in the post-bellum Midwest.

⁴¹² Malgorzata J. Rymysz-Pawlowska, “Broadcasting the Past: History Television, ‘Nostalgia Culture,’ and the Emergence of the Miniseries in the 1970s United States,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42, no. 2 (2014): 83-84.

Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman argued “Sometimes the disguise is elaborate enough to produce a genuinely covert political statement, with scripts that tackle controversial political issues symbolically or even allegorically.”⁴¹³ For example, when Mary-Ellen set out to reconnect with her estranged husband, she asked a local resident of Curt’s new hometown for directions to his home and was told to “Just look for the first junk heap you come to.”⁴¹⁴ The literal interpretation of this exchange was that Curt failed to adjust and thrive upon his return from service. The subtext was that some returning servicepersons living with mental illness, including Vietnam veterans by extension, not only struggled emotionally, they struggled socially and financially as well. And while these problems may have appeared insurmountable in the real world in which viewers lived, when filtered through the cathode-ray tube, they appeared more manageable, requiring little more than a good attitude and perseverance to overcome.

American film critic Ella Taylor described the *Waltons* as “an imaginary idealized family set in an imaginary, idealized past, equipped with the insights of applied psychology.” She observed that the Walton family “offer us a world in which traditional values of faith and kindness, persistence and initiative, respond to modern dilemmas of identity and development, and in which the aphoristic, material language of common sense mingles happily with contemporary psychological wisdom.”⁴¹⁵ This basic formula through which *The Waltons* handled ‘modern dilemmas’ such as mental illness was common in television depictions of disability in this era. According to Longmore “in the ‘social problem’ dramas seen during the 1970s and 1980s, the subjects of our worries were addressed, but without deep examination...They tell us

⁴¹³ S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1994), 9-10.

⁴¹⁴ *The Waltons*, “The Tempest”, aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

⁴¹⁵ Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 103.

that the problem is not as overwhelming as we fear, that it is manageable, or that it is not really our problem at all, but someone else's."⁴¹⁶ Indeed, in episodes of *The Waltons* where characters were affected by disabilities, if the character affected by disability was a non-recurring character, the disability could not be reversed. Its effects were permanent. In episodes where a member of the Walton family or a recurring character of the series were affected by disability, typically the disability was not permanent and medical intervention, combined with perseverance, faith, and family, mitigated the effects of the disability. In this way the Waltons, by overcoming their own disabilities and relegating permanent disabilities to non-recurring characters, suggested this message to the viewing audience: Disability is not for us. Disability is for someone else. Thus, by relegating permanent disabilities to non-recurring characters and absolving the protagonists on *The Waltons* of their disabilities, the writers of the series created a safety net between the audience and disability, just as they provided a safety net between the audience and all-manner-of-issues by exploring them through the lens of the past.

In the case of Curtis Willard, he resided in a kind of no-man's land of disability and mental illness. He was a Walton by extension by virtue of having married a Walton daughter, and so was expected to confront and overcome his PTSD. Indeed, Mary-Ellen was prescriptive in her appraisal of how best to manage Curt's PTSD, as was typical of scenarios wherein the Waltons confront disability. After her initial reunion with Curt, Mary-Ellen telephoned her younger sister Erin to give her an update. "There's something very wrong with him", she reported of Curt. "I have to stay here. I have to get to the bottom of this."⁴¹⁷ And yet the episode made clear that though Mary-Ellen had strong opinions about how Curt should confront his

⁴¹⁶ Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul K. Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 132.

⁴¹⁷ *The Waltons*, "The Tempest", aired February 5, 1981 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2002), DVD.

PTSD, she would not be present for Curt's recovery, nor would they resume their marriage. There was hope for Curt if he adhered to the Walton way and readjusted to civilian life, but his recovery was not meant for audience consumption. The onus of recovery was his individual burden to bear, and total redemption in the form of reconciliation with Mary-Ellen was not possible. Although disability was embraced as a relevant social problem in series such as *The Waltons*, its deployment was not without its risks. It had to be handled in a certain way because "Disability happens around us more than we generally recognize or care to notice, and we harbor unspoken anxieties about the possibility of disablement, to us or to someone close to us... Popular entertainment depicting disabled characters allude to these fears and prejudices, or address them obliquely or fragmentarily, seeking to reassure us about ourselves."⁴¹⁸ In addressing the topic of disability frequently, *The Waltons* conceded that disability was a relevant social issue, and did its due diligence in giving the issue airtime. Yet, in relegating permanent disabilities to non-recurring characters, *The Waltons* reassured its audience that this social problem was, as Longmore put it, "not really our problem at all, but someone else's."⁴¹⁹

The way mental illness and other disabilities are perceived and broached are informed by myriad social, political, and cultural factors, not the least of which includes popular culture. Even relatively benign examples such as *The Waltons* are influential and have consequences. This was increasingly the case in the 1970s. Writer on American television Sally Bedell argues,

[T]elevision was becoming a social arbiter. Its 'relevant' portrayals, no matter how unreal, were imparting standards of behaviour, shaping attitudes, and dispensing fragments of

⁴¹⁸ Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul K. Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 132.

⁴¹⁹ Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul K. Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 132.

advice on how to cope with such weighty matters as child abuse, mental retardation, impotence, rape, adultery, and race relations.⁴²⁰

German-born American sociologist Herbert Gans contends,

All cultural content expresses values that can become political or have political consequences. Even the simplest television family comedy, for example, says something about the relations between men and women and parents and children, and insofar as these relations involve values and questions of power they are political.⁴²¹

Therefore, it is important to be media savvy and critical of these images, and it is important to understand that these images have a history, a history that has been overlooked.

For all its apparent relevance, some cultural critics have taken issue with the notion that television can be timely. The constraints of the medium, they argue, do not allow for temporally precise renderings. In Edgerton's work on television and history, he writes, "Both TV and film are incapable of rendering temporal dimensions with much precision. They have no grammatical analogues for the past and future tenses of written language and, thus, amplify the present sense of immediacy out of proportion."⁴²² Regardless of how exacting its depiction of specific historical moments, suffice to say that American audiences could not escape the turbulent world of the 1970s in which they viewed *The Waltons*. As Taylor explained "The Waltons inserts a distinctly modern sensibility into a rural past lavishly upholstered in nostalgia."⁴²³ Series' star Richard Thomas clarified conventional thinking about the series when he wrote "those who thought of The Waltons as an escape into a perfect childhood that never was should remember that public issues such as book burning, prejudice, abuse, illiteracy, and poverty were frequently on the agenda, alongside the usual psychic struggles of growing up, growing old, and having a

⁴²⁰ Sally Bedell, *Up The Tube: Prime-time in the Silverman Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), xviii.

⁴²¹ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 103.

⁴²² Gary R. Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 3.

⁴²³ Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 102.

family.”⁴²⁴ Though at first glance *The Waltons* appeared as though not of its own time, rejecting the more topical and edgy formats of its television competitors, and depicting events of America’s past, upon closer examination *The Waltons* was an ideal substrate for a particular vision for 1970s America. As Rymysza-Pawlowska explained, “Television, as it often does, reflected and helped to create the terms for larger American culture. Historically based television put forth modes of engagement that, on the one hand, offered television as a prominent site of historical cultural production and, on the other, modeled close interactions and identifications with the past that rested on a sense of commonality and empathy between past and present.”⁴²⁵ How *The Waltons* 'helped to create the terms for larger American culture', and the ways in which disability factored in to articulating those terms is at the heart of this study.

⁴²⁴ Richard Thomas, foreword to *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, by Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), x.

⁴²⁵ Malgorzata J. Rymysza-Pawlowska, “Broadcasting the Past: History Television, ‘Nostalgia Culture,’ and the Emergence of the Miniseries in the 1970s United States,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42:2 (2014): 84-85.

CHAPTER FIVE

Disability Embodied

Historically, the television industry has been populated by executives of homogenous composition—white, male, and nondisabled chief among them, and principally of Christian, Jewish, or agnostic faith. As far as sexuality and gender identity, these being of a personal and easily concealed nature, it is more difficult to ascertain the variety of gender and sexual identities within the industry. Suffice to say, whatever their precise characteristics, television executives, and the teams they employed to create television, were hardly a diverse group when *The Waltons* reigned on screen. Thankfully, homogeneity in the entertainment industry is eroding, thanks to social media movements such as the previously mentioned #OscarsSoWhite, as well as #OscarsSoAble and #DisRep, that latter two of which advocate for the authentic and affirmative inclusion of people with disabilities in film and television. Revelations about Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein’s abuse of women and power has likewise prompted a re-examination of women’s position in the entertainment industry. Identification of such serious issues of discrimination and abuse in Hollywood has prompted advocacy for diversity by powerful figures in the entertainment industry. At the 2018 Academy Awards ceremony, for example, that year’s best actress winner Frances McDormand concluded her acceptance speech with this phrase,

“Two words: ‘inclusion rider.’”⁴²⁶ McDormand’s call for the widespread adoption of inclusion riders in entertainment contracts, contract clauses which require a minimum threshold of underrepresented groups in a film’s production, was met with thunderous applause at the ceremony, as well as with commitments by some professionals in the industry to adopt such clauses in their own contracts. The extent to which these movements are successful, and the extent to which their adopters are sincere in their quest for diversity and inclusion, will be meted out in the coming years.

This all being said, the thing about disability is, the extent to which it is a minority issue is debatable. Statistically, approximately 1 in 5 Americans currently live with a disability. Strictly-speaking then, disabled Americans are indeed a minority. Yet, disability is one of the most pervasive characteristics in American society, given it transcends all other categories of identity. No group is exempt from disability, and in this way, it is hardly a minority issue. Further, though roughly 1 in 5 Americans currently lives with a disability, this is not to say that in their lifetime *only* 1 in 5 Americans will live with a disability.⁴²⁷ Some will acquire and live with temporary disabilities due to injury or illness. And many will age into disabilities that they will live with for the remainder of their lives. Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames explain,

As a consequence of medical and technological progress, the disability and the aging populations will continue to grow. It is not surprising that as people age, the probability increases that they will become disabled, and the likelihood of that impairment being severe also increases. What is surprising is the prevalence of disability for specific age groups: almost one-fourth of people forty-five to fifty-four, over one-third of those fifty-five to sixty-four, almost one half of those sixty-five to seventy-nine, and almost three-quarters of those eighty years and above.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ Oscars, “Frances McDormand Wins Best Actress”, *YouTube*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gU6CpQk6BE>.

⁴²⁷ Doris Zames Fleisher and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), xx.

⁴²⁸ Doris Zames Fleisher and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), xx.

For aging and elderly populations, disability is actually a majority issue. By life's end, most people will have lived with a disability. Disability is thus a fluid category. A person may be born with a disability, or they may acquire it later in life. Or, a person may be born with a disability, but technology exists which ceases the disability, and the person therefore lives without the effects of the disability following intervention. Or, a person may acquire a temporary disability. That which is considered a disability within the culture may shift, and a person may suddenly be regarded as disabled as a result, or the reverse might be true. What was once considered a disability might no longer be, based on some shift in the culture. Because disability is non-discriminatory of the bodies in which it resides, and because the presence of disability is fluid, disability is not so much an issue of 'us versus them', or 'disabled versus nondisabled', rather it is more a case of 'currently disabled versus currently non-disabled'.

When the principle cast of *The Waltons* was hired in 1972, by all accounts each member of the eleven strong ensemble resided firmly within the 'currently non-disabled' category. As discussed in both chapters 2 and 3, for both practical and cultural reasons, actors with disabilities were rarely employed on the series, regardless of whether or not the role featured a disability. The fact that no disabilities were detected among the eleven principles actors on *The Waltons* when the show began is thus unsurprising. However, over the years and by varying turns disability touched several of the cast members during the series' run. And in a lone instance, a disabled actor was hired to portray a disabled character on the series. The ways these disabilities were approached, portrayed, and accommodated when they emerged in the cast is the subject of this chapter.

The only instance where an actor with a disability was hired to portray a character with a disability on *The Waltons* was when former vaudeville performer-turned-television and film star

Billy Barty was hired to portray a traveling circus performer with dwarfism. He appeared in the second episode ever aired of the series entitled “The Carnival”. Barty’s character was a man named Tommy Trindle, supposedly a descendent of Colonel Tom Thumb, one-time employee and circus performer for P.T. Barnum. Like his fictional ancestor before him, Tommy Trindle earned his living exhibiting his short-statured body and performing vaudeville in the circus.⁴²⁹ Barty’s own history in vaudeville made him a natural fit for the role. He truly embodied the character of Tommy. The case of Barty and his character Tommy is an interesting one. Although his dwarfism is not acknowledged explicitly in the episode, the implicit understanding is that Tommy is an employee of the circus due to his exceptional body. In this way, his disability is an essential part of his character. It is what places him in the story of the traveling circus performers, the likes of which also include an aerial artist, a clown, and a magician. Although computer-generated images have since made it possible to distort the size of actors in relation to other performers in a scene, such as the short-statured hobbit characters in *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001-2003), when *The Waltons* was created it was infeasible to create such an effect. As such, when the series’ writers chose to feature a dwarf body in their storyline, they were therefore committed to hiring a dwarf performer to inhabit the role. In this way, Barty being hired to appear in the series was premised on his dwarf body, in addition to his extensive talent and experience in the entertainment industry.

Though the justification for the character Tommy’s existence, and for Barty being hired, were premised on disability, the episode itself was not. “The Carnival” was a storyline in which disability was featured, but it was not, per se, a disability storyline, and this is evident from the opening narration of the episode. When the episode begins, the voice of an older John-Boy

⁴²⁹ *The Waltons*, “The Carnival”, September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

reflects on what this encounter with the circus troupe meant to him and his family. John-Boy explains that save for radio programs and the occasional magazine, he and his family were sheltered from much of the goings-on in the world outside of Walton's Mountain. They were relatively isolated due to their ruralness, and they had few means to access the world beyond the mountain. For most of the series, the Waltons could not afford a telephone line, and they certainly could not afford to travel far from the mountain. In fact, their poverty, partly as a result of the Depression, is underscored in this particular episode. At the outset of the episode, the Walton children intend to visit the circus, which has just arrived in town. The seven children have pooled their spare change to afford admission, and to share a treat. As it happens, Grandma Walton accidentally breaks her glasses, and worries about how she is going to afford to replace them. Seeing her distress, the children decide to allocate their meager financial resources to fix their grandmother's glasses. They are forced to skip the circus, a great disappointment to them, especially given the circumstances which John-Boy has already established for the audience. The Walton children rarely get to experience elements of the outside world. When circumstances arise which strand a small group of the circus performers on Walton's Mountain, the Walton children finally have the opportunity to encounter people and circumstances beyond their ken.⁴³⁰

The remainder of the episode serves to underscore the differences between the rural, southern, Baptist Walton family, and the wider world from which they feel isolated. Typically, when strangers visit Walton's Mountain, they are the 'others'. Among such examples are a young boy from the slums of New York in "The Boy from the C.C.C." (2 November, 1972), a family of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in "The Ceremony" (9 November, 1972), a black itinerant farm labourer and his son in "The Roots" (11 October, 1973), a city-slicker who is

⁴³⁰ *The Waltons*, "The Carnival", September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD

visiting the mountain for his wedding in “The Shivaree” (30 January, 1975), and a young grifter casing out Walton’s Mountain in “The Big Brother” (29 January, 1976), to list but a very few. Though the Walton family typically learn something of value during their encounter with said ‘others’, the ‘others’ are nonetheless depicted as exceptional, and they often rely on the Waltons for help with some essential problem they are having. In the case of dwarf Tommy Trindle and his colleagues, the education is almost entirely one-sided, and the Waltons are the recipients. Sure, the Waltons provide shelter for the performers while they figure out how to travel to their next professional destination—the Chicago World’s Fair, much to John-Boy’s amazement and envy. However, at the heart of the story are the lessons that the performers furnish for the Waltons, and not the meager assistance the Waltons provide to them. In this particular episode, it is the Waltons themselves who are othered. They are depicted as sheltered, economically disadvantaged southern folk, in contrast to Tommy and his cohort who are worldly and economically self-sufficient, if not well-off.

In this episode, matriarch Olivia displays her somewhat fanatical and naive southern Baptist tendencies when she is shocked to learn from John-Boy that the circus troupe may be smoking and drinking in the family’s barn. John-Boy corrects her thinking, and remarks that they seem like good and interesting people, regardless if they have vices. Later, when seated at the dinner table being regaled with stories of Tommy and his colleagues’ lives in the circus, the Waltons are captivated with discussions of wealth and finery. The aerial artist among the group mentions the plush velvet seating and chandeliers in the train dining cars in which she and her colleagues have traveled, and this impresses the Waltons, most of whom have never traveled by train, let alone one that fancy. During that same conversation, the circus performers reveal that they have met and performed for President Roosevelt, and King George, and that they have

“played all the grand cities”, including New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, and soon Chicago.⁴³¹ This scene reveals the extent to which the circus performers are more cosmopolitan and better connected than the Waltons, further evidence of how segregated the Waltons are from the world beyond the mountain. While the experiences of the performers are not typical, they reveal just how little the Waltons have experienced, and how much they could stand to learn from those different than them.

John-Boy in particular is enraptured with the picture of the wider world that Tommy and his colleagues paint. Olivia senses this in her son, and laments to her husband that she is feeling emotional over the changes in John-Boy. She realizes, “It’s John-Boy. He’s going to leave us one day.”⁴³² Considering that John-Boy is 17 and rapidly approaching adulthood, Olivia’s naivety and limited scope beyond the mountain is revealed in this scene. The fact that it required a visit from a group of outsiders to awaken her to the fact that John-Boy is destined to leave the mountain is a testament to Olivia’s state of mind. In one particularly relevant scene, John-Boy confirms Olivia’s fears and shares with Tommy his desires to leave Walton’s Mountain. John-Boy meets Tommy as he is washing up at a nearby pond, and they engage in a tête-a-tête. Tommy shares his anticipation about the Chicago World’s Fair with John-Boy, and John-Boy reveals his envy. He confesses to Tommy that he feels limited by the constraints of Walton’s Mountain, and feels particularly frustrated when he discovers things that are new and different from the life he knows. John-Boy cites a story which his school teacher has recently shared with the class, about a whaler and his daring adventures. He shares how this story revealed to him a life entirely different than his own, and it inspired him. Tommy chimes in, and he asks John-Boy if he’s referring to the novel *Moby Dick*. John-Boy is amazed, but a little chagrined that Tommy

⁴³¹ *The Waltons*, “The Carnival”, September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

⁴³² *The Waltons*, “The Carnival”, September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

is familiar with the novel.⁴³³ For John-Boy, the novel represents something so much greater than a good story. It represents education, possibility, and the freedom to explore new worlds. In John-Boy's eyes, Tommy already has the whole world at his feet, and when he finds out that Tommy also has access to the private dream-world of books which John-Boy holds so dear, he realizes how truly confined he is by the constraints of Walton's Mountain. This scene between Tommy and John-Boy concludes with Tommy assuring John-Boy that he will find his path in life, and that he will discover his true self within and beyond Walton's Mountain, when the time is right. Never once during this scene is Tommy's height or his disability referenced. In this scene, it is clear that Tommy holds the authority and the power, and that John-Boy is his eager disciple. Tommy mentors John-Boy, and not the other way around, as was so often the case with the Walton family and the disabled people who visited their mountain. Although his disability is the impetus for him being in the circus, and the circus is the means through which Tommy is able to experience the world and achieve economic self-reliance, his disability is not the defining feature of Tommy's character in this storyline. Tommy's life experience and wisdom are the characteristics which are highlighted. This is a departure from practically all episodes involving disability on *The Waltons*, save for situations when embodied experiences with disability unexpectedly touched some principle *Waltons* cast members.⁴³⁴

⁴³³ *The Waltons*, "The Carnival", September 21, 1972 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2007), DVD.

⁴³⁴ Here is another example where an actor with a disability was cast on *The Waltons*, though this actor's disability was kept under wraps for the most part, and was not acknowledged in the script for the episode in which he appeared. As it does not readily fit within the narrative flow of this chapter, but seems a significant anecdote nonetheless, I have chosen to include the story here. *Waltons* production assistant and sometime actor John Dayton shared with me another instance where this was apparently the case. Veteran film actor and Academy-Award winner Dean Jagger was hired to portray an educator at a prestigious conservatory where son Jason Walton studied music in an episode entitled "Founder's Day" (March 22, 1979). According to Dayton, when Jagger showed up on the set, it was clear that he was in the early stages of dementia, and that he struggled to remember his lines, and the names of the characters to whom he was speaking them. Dayton shared the following anecdote: Anecdote about accommodating Dean Jagger, in the early stages of dementia: "[T]his is interesting. Earl, this is how sensitive Earl was, Rod [Peterson] and Claire [Peterson] had written a script with a part specifically for me because I needed to, I needed the role to get my SAG health insurance. So, they wrote this role in for me as a piano student and it was, I had a scene with Dean Jagger and the scene was I was playing the piano, and Dean was coaching me, and then Mr.

Sometimes the casts' encounters with disabilities affected production very little. Both Michael Learned and Walton patriarch Ralph Waite lived with alcoholism for some duration during their starring turns on *The Waltons*. While this disease undoubtedly took a personal toll on the actors, neither actor nor their castmates cited this issue as prohibitive to production of the series. Earl Hamner commended the actors for their hard work in recovery and recalled, "We had a show in 1978 about alcoholism. It was directed by Ralph Waite who is a recovering alcoholic who does a great deal of work with groups like AA. He has a great deal of conscience about kinds of things that bedevil us in today's society."⁴³⁵ In addition to her struggles with alcohol, Learned has also been candid about her experience with depression, something she lived with and worked through while filming *The Waltons*.⁴³⁶ Such challenges and disabilities were not only acknowledged in retrospect, but were also publicly acknowledged during the original run on the

Walton...[had to] make an entrance, and then the scene proceeded from there...Earl took me aside before the day that we shot the scene, I was working doing my regular job on the set,...and Earl said to me that Dean had a memory problem. Well, I didn't know it, but Dean evidently had a stroke. Would I work with Dean? And I said, 'of course'. I mean, it was such a privilege to work with Dean Jagger because, like, *White Christmas* is one of my favorite movies ever...So, I felt this real privilege, but Dean really could not remember anything and in that scene, if you watch that scene, you'll see him call me Dayton...I was surprised that actually they left it in. He called me Dayton instead of the name of the character, whatever the character was named...Ralph Waite was directing, and we had to shoot several times with Dean before we could get something that worked. But when we came to shooting that master shot where Ralph and Tammy come in, it's all four of us in the shot. When there was a knock on the door, the camera is at my back, but I'm in the shot. When Dean went to the door to answer it and opens the door he said, 'Mr. Cartwright! How nice to see you!' He didn't say 'Mr. Walton'. And the reason...was because Dean had worked on *Bonanza* and that was the Cartwright family. He had had a recurring role on *Bonanza*...Now, without hesitation we kept rolling. Ralph Waite said to Dean Jagger, he said 'Walton, Walton.' Very kindly. 'Walton,' [Dean replied] 'Oh yes, Mr. Walton.'...I took lunch with him and ran lines in his dressing room. And when we came back, he forgot them all. I don't know if it had something to do with being nervous or whatever, but here's an example of how that [disability] was treated, that was dealt with in kindness. And I don't know, I would highly suspect that Earl Hamner knew that Dean Jagger had physical challenges, and wasn't working, and this was the perfect role for him, and that we would work with him. I never discussed that with Earl, but it wouldn't surprise me, that was all of Earl's doing."⁴³⁴ I could not find any documentation to confirm Jagger's dementia, and both Ralph Waite and Earl Hamner died shortly before my project began, so I could not question them about this incident. I have no reason to doubt the As John Dayton furnished me with many other stories and details which were easily corroborated, and I am inclined to believe there is truth to this anecdote. Whether or not it is strictly verifiable or accurate is uncertain, but the portrait of Earl Hamner which Dayton paints is worth mentioning.

⁴³⁵ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 172.

⁴³⁶ Michael Learned (series regular), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

The Waltons. Writing about Learned's early departure from the series in 1979 (though Learned returned to the series to reprise her role occasionally), journalist Sue Reilly wrote,

For once, the tears at Burbank Studios' Stage 26 were real: Michael Learned, 39, for seven years the loving Mama Olivia on CBS' *The Waltons*, had taped her last show. The emotional wrap party signaled the latest calamity for creator Earl Hamner's semi-autobiographical clan. This time he was losing just about the last bulwark of a closely bound cast whose real-life afflictions - alcoholism, emotional trouble, stroke and even death - had been woven into the weekly scripts and rivaled them in poignancy and drama.⁴³⁷

Interestingly, Learned's departure from the series was handled by invoking disability as a way to explain matriarch Olivia Walton's absence from the series and her family. Reilly explained, "Learned had asked Hamner...to write her out of the script, and on last week's segment Olivia departed Waltons' Mountain for a tuberculosis sanatorium."⁴³⁸ How the decision to use tuberculosis specifically to justify Olivia's absence from the family served the interests of historical authenticity on the series is discussed in chapter 3.

It is hard to imagine disabilities such as alcoholism and depression not impacting the production of *The Waltons*, but reputedly they did not, at least not materially, according to the cast. Undoubtedly, their presence in the lives of Waltons cast members impacted the cast emotionally. Likewise, though Mary McDonough—middle daughter Erin on the show—has been frank about the extent to which her anxieties and eating disorders wreaked havoc on her personal life, she has not indicated that it was disruptive to the production process of the series. In fact, McDonough has described in detail how her lifelong anxiety over being thought of as a nuisance, and of letting people down, incited her to avoid disruption at all costs. In her book *Lessons from the Mountain*, McDonough recalls a time when she had to film a scene which was supposed to

⁴³⁷ Sue Reilly, "The Wonderful Walton Women: As Michael Sobs So Long, The Waltons Face Life as a One-Parent Family", *People*, Vol. 11, No. 4, January 29, 1979.

⁴³⁸ Sue Reilly, "The Wonderful Walton Women: As Michael Sobs So Long, The Waltons Face Life as a One-Parent Family", *People*, Vol. 11, No. 4, January 29, 1979.

take place in the winter, and the way she silently suffered through the shoot. *The Waltons* was set in Virginia, but filmed in southern California, so the set was frequently warm. To make matters worse, in order for episodes set in the winter to be completed in time to air with the corresponding season, they had to be filmed much earlier. Therefore, when McDonough filmed this particular winter scene bundled up in a car resplendent in winter gear, it was a particularly uncomfortable experience in late summer in southern California. She remembers, “I was so well behaved, I never would have complained. I just got quiet and focused on the sweat running down my back. This wasn’t the last time I felt sick or uncomfortable and didn’t speak up—the situation became rote for me.”⁴³⁹ In another instance McDonough recalls,

I remember I couldn’t breathe on the set once, so they called in the studio doctor and he gave me a shot of adrenaline to clear up my lungs. I finished the scene. Then I was sent home with a fever and another prescription. I would often work until I got so sick, I needed a few days off to recover. I would push myself and work until I dropped from exhaustion. When I was about fifteen, I started to have stomach issues. I kept it to myself, thinking it was because of nerves. I didn’t want to bring any attention to myself.⁴⁴⁰

In the ensuing years since the series, McDonough has been active as a motivational speaker on topics relevant to disability, body positivity, and self-advocacy, sharing her experiences with debilitating perfectionism, eating disorders, and the autoimmune disease Lupus.⁴⁴¹

Though at times the cast of *The Waltons* seemingly kept their personal experiences with disability separate from their professional lives on set, at other times, the casts’ experiences with disability were influential to the production process, and/or impactful to the content of the show.

These incidents of disability are the focus of this chapter, specifically series lead Richard

⁴³⁹ Mary McDonough, *Lessons from the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton*, (New York: Kensington Books), 41.

⁴⁴⁰ Mary McDonough, *Lessons from the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton*, (New York: Kensington Books), 78.

⁴⁴¹ Mary McDonough, *Lessons from the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton*, (New York: Kensington Books), 82, 177, 235.

Thomas's acquired mobility disability, *Homecoming* star Patricia Neal's stroke recovery, and, predominantly, series regular Ellen Corby's mobility and speech disabilities due to stroke. Although the preceding chapters have illustrated the uneven and sometimes problematic ways the series dealt with disability, in other ways *The Waltons* dealt with disability and other life events of its cast magnanimously. The three events cited as having the most impact on the series were the departure of series lead Richard Thomas following season five when his contract expired, the unexpected death of Will Geer between seasons six and seven, and the serious stroke which struck Ellen Corby mid-way through the fifth season. That these events occurred in a cluster over two years was particularly trying for the series and its cast and crew. Newcomb and Alley described *The Waltons*' tendency to accommodate personal struggles and unexpected change with aplomb when they wrote, "Through Richard Thomas's career development, Ellen Corby's stroke, Will Geer's death, and the visible growth of the actors playing the fictional Walton children, the show accommodated change." They complimented the series, observing, "It dealt with real growth, injury, and death within its fictional framework, and audiences witnessed the inclusion of these events in the storylines."⁴⁴² Hamner spoke to this as well, and noted that despite the hardship evident in these events, he felt the series did not suffer as result. Rather, because the show was foremost a distillation of multigenerational family life, such events in the life cycles of the cast members reflected real life, and therefore lent credibility to the series. Hamner opined, "In *The Waltons*, the very tragedies we had, like Will Geer's death and Ellen Corby's illness, which we have integrated into the show, have given the appearance of life." Of Thomas' departure, Hamner explained, "When Richard Thomas left, after having worked valiantly for five years, it was a time in the family's evolution when a young man should move

⁴⁴² Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 159.

on. We dealt with John-Boy's leaving in that way. Each of those losses we have dealt with in, I think, a credible way."⁴⁴³

Prior to his departure from *The Waltons*, Richard Thomas incurred a disability of his own just before beginning work on his fifth and final season of the series. As *The Waltons* grew in popularity, so too did series lead Thomas' star rise. During breaks in filming on *The Waltons*, Thomas pursued other acting roles, including those for film. One such film was *September 30, 1955*, a semi-biographical account of the life of actor James Dean. Thomas inhabited this role during production hiatus on *The Waltons* between seasons four and five of the series. Given that Dean was something of a daredevil, the role required Thomas to ride a motorcycle and perform minor stunts. During production of the film, Thomas was involved in an accident, and broke his leg. Thomas remembers, "I was doing a scene on a motorcycle and, although I wasn't going very fast, the bike got away from me and fell on my leg (right leg, I think). I broke my ankle and had to have it put in a cast for several weeks. When I returned to the series, I was still recovering."⁴⁴⁴ He was injured to the extent that when filming resumed on *The Waltons* for its fifth season, Thomas still required the use of a cane to assist his mobility. Therefore, for the first few episodes of season five, Thomas' character John-Boy also required the use of a cane, and he walked with a limp. Because the injury occurred during hiatus of the television series, and Thomas was in possession of the cane from the outset when filming resumed for *The Waltons*, a storyline revolving around John-Boy's use of a cane could not be concocted. The actor playing him could not film scenes without the support of his cane, and so there would be no practical way to show the character John-Boy pre-injury, and subsequently acquiring an injury during a storyline.

⁴⁴³ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 163.

⁴⁴⁴ Richard Thomas (actor), email correspondence with the author, "Re: Quick Question", February 5, 2018.

Therefore, the series' writers made only oblique reference to a previous injury sustained by the character, presumably during an event which was outside of the audience's view.

Series regular Eric Scott recalls, “[A]s far as whether they [the writers] carried a disability from one episode to the other ones...Richard broke his ankle filming a movie on hiatus and when he came back...there were about four or five episodes that he was using a cane.” As to how the presence of the cane was explained, “We made reference to it one time, I think, that he fell off a motorcycle. That's it, we just left it at that.”⁴⁴⁵ What is interesting about this particular example of disability on *The Waltons* was how inconsequential it was. It was not dramatized, or even addressed beyond a remark. In most instances, when disability appeared on the series, it was the main plot point of a storyline, and explored to maximum dramatic effect. But when disability emerged as an embodied experience for the series' lead actor, suddenly it was of little consequence. The presentation of disability in the case of Thomas' broken leg was incidental to the stories in which his character appeared. The disability was organically interwoven into richer narratives for John-Boy, the likes of which conceived of the character outside of his disability. The actor and character's need of a cane was accommodated without incident, and production on the series proceeded apace. Granted, a broken leg, in most cases, is a transitory disability. The disabling effects of a broken leg typically are impermanent, and are often regarded as merely symptoms of an injury rather than as bona fide disability. Knowing that Thomas's prognosis for recovery was good, and that broken bones were relatively commonplace and therefore held less dramatic potential than other injuries and disabilities, it is possible that *The Waltons'* production team determined that the less that was said on the issue, the simpler things would be. In short, perhaps Thomas' real-life injury simply was deemed neither serious nor interesting enough to

⁴⁴⁵ Eric Scott (actor), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

address. Still, his injury did impact production to *some* extent, and the way in which it was accepted and accommodated without fanfare is significant. Previously stated concerns about how disability might impact production—for example, the case where Michael McGreevey speculated on misgivings about hiring a deaf actor for the show—proved immaterial when the production team was confronted with disability in real life. When it came to their lead star, suddenly it was conceivable and feasible to accommodate a disabled actor, and to look beyond the disability as source material for the character. Further, the disability was present for more than one story arc, something that was uncommon to most presentations of disability on the series. Scott points out, “[A]gain that was Richard Thomas, not John boy, Richard breaking his ankle and he had to use the cane for a little bit. That went more than one episode because it was an actor’s need.”⁴⁴⁶

What this shows is multifold. Firstly, when an actor who has a proven track record of television success suddenly presents with a disability, they are embraced and accommodated by the industry. They are not defined by that disability, because they have had the opportunity to demonstrate their performative abilities in a variety of contexts, and they have proven a valuable commodity in the industry. When asked about his experience acquiring a disability while filming *September 30, 1955*, Thomas states, “The bigger question was whether the producers of 9/30/55 would carry me on the picture, because if they did, it could only be resumed after *The Waltons* season had run its course.” In this instance, Thomas’ disability *did* slow down production on the film, and caused considerable interference. And yet, “They did, in fact, shut down the picture until months later, because James Bridges, the director, was determined that I should play the role. I have always been deeply grateful for Jim's decision. It would have been very easy to

⁴⁴⁶ Eric Scott (actor), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

recast and reshoot.”⁴⁴⁷ According to this event, when a veteran actor acquires a disability, they are not merely ‘a disabled actor’, but, in this particular case, they are ‘Richard Thomas, who happens to have a disability.’

What this shows is that it is not, in fact, disability itself that the entertainment industry has a problem with, but it is the perception of disability that intimidates casting directors, and writers, etc. Industry insiders perceive that disability will dominate the working environment, or the actor, or the stories in which they can appear. Because of this perception, they forgo legitimate disability in favour of a route which they believe to be easier and more sustainable. Disability as a topic is great, as the many storylines devoted to disability on *The Waltons* prove. The clichés in storytelling which have been described throughout this study notwithstanding, generally presentations of disability on the series were ultimately intended positively and respectfully. Yet, embodied disability is another matter altogether. The embodiment of disability is what intimidates television producers, not the topic of disability itself. It is easier for a production team to imagine accommodating a disability when they are dependent on the person with the disability to provide the star power and acting chops necessary to carry out their production, as the situation with Thomas proves. It is easier for them to perceive the value of the actor, and not persevere on the disability.

Indeed, this proved true in another instance for *The Waltons*—albeit this time in the telefilm precursor to the series known as *The Homecoming*—when stroke survivor Patricia Neal was cast in the role of Olivia Walton for the Christmas special. When Hamner’s novel *Spencer’s Mountain* was made into a film, it starred big screen luminaries Henry Fonda and Maureen O’Hara in the roles of the father and mother of the Spencer family. In this version of Hamner’s

⁴⁴⁷ Richard Thomas (actor), email correspondence with the author, “Re: Quick Question”, February 5, 2018.

family life, the parents, particularly the father, were more central to the story. As such, the producers were able to cast big-name Hollywood stars in the roles. This drew audiences to the picture, and in turn drew people to Hamner's work.⁴⁴⁸ When it came time to cast roles for the television adaptation of Hamner's novella *The Homecoming*, the entire family was recast with new actors. For one thing, the telefilm was made eight years after *Spencer's Mountain*, and the actors once hired to play the children were no longer the appropriate age to fulfill the roles. And for another, television at this time was considered a step down from film-making, and unless there was a compelling reason to do so, many film actors preferred not to work in television. This was true in the case of Henry Fonda, who also shrewdly perceived that the telefilm, and indeed the subsequent television series, revolved most heavily around the character of the eldest son, and not the father of the Walton family. A television role, and a supporting one at that, were not to Fonda's tastes.⁴⁴⁹ His role was recast with Andrew Duggan for the telefilm, and Ralph Waite for the television series. As the young actors cast to the play the Walton children in *The Homecoming* had yet to accumulate name recognition and star power when the film was cast—though Thomas' star was rapidly on the rise at this time—the producers looked to the senior Walton family members to supply the star power to draw viewers to the film. Edgar Bergen, he of Charlie McCarthy fame, was cast in the role of Grandpa Zebulon Walton in *The Homecoming*. And this brings us back to the casting of Patricia Neal as Olivia Walton.

Neal's casting in the film is significant to this study, as she became an actor with a disability late in her career. Neal suffered a stroke in 1965, one so serious that she was not

⁴⁴⁸ Earl Hamner as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House, 2002), 37-38.

⁴⁴⁹ Earl Hamner as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House, 2002), 58.

expected to live. Neal was comatose for three weeks, and she needed extensive rehabilitation thereafter to regain her speech and mobility.⁴⁵⁰ At this point she had decades of stage and film experience under her belt, not to mention a Tony and an Academy Award. She was a decorated veteran of the industry, and she was determined to continue working in Hollywood, regardless of her disability. And work she did, no doubt in thanks to the industry credibility she had accumulated throughout her career. She had one film role, *The Subject Was Roses* (1968), following her stroke, before landing her role in *The Homecoming*. Hamner remembers, “A script was sent to Patricia Neal at her home in Great Missenden, a suburb of London. It was the first acting job [sic] Patricia considered after suffering a severe stroke. She accepted the job.” Of her performance, Hamner remembers, “If we had any concerns about her ability to do the role we need not have worried. She arrived from London with every word of the script memorized!”⁴⁵¹ Here Hamner confirms my previous argument about the perceived value of celebrity versus the perceived limitations of disability. He admits that the production team had some concerns about Neal’s abilities, but her track-record in the industry made her a valuable addition to the cast, and so they proceeded with casting her in the film.

Not only did the producers cast her in the film, but they took pains to ensure that Neal’s disability was accommodated, although Neal declined said accommodations. Hamner remembers that “[Director] Fielder [Cook] had gone to some pains to arrange the filming schedule so that Patricia Neal would not have to go on location. When Pat heard of it she was offended. ‘Of

⁴⁵⁰ Sam Anderson, “Big Sometimes Friendly Giant: Roald Dahl—The Storyteller as Benevolent Sadist, *New York Magazine*, September 5, 2010, <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/67962/index1.html>.

⁴⁵¹ Earl Hamner as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House, 2002), 47.

course,' she insisted, 'I will go on location!'"⁴⁵² The extent to which Neal remained disabled following rehabilitation from her stroke is uncertain. Clearly, Neal herself was not keen on accommodation, and she was not visibly disabled in her role in *The Homecoming*. However, those that worked with her perceived her as disabled, and saw the need to try to accommodate her. Of her experience making *The Homecoming*, series regular Mary McDonough remembers, "Fielder Cook, the director, started talking to us. I don't remember everything he said, but he explained that we would be working with Patricia Neal and we needed to be careful around her."⁴⁵³ McDonough further remembers, "Next time you watch *The Homecoming*, notice how we kids run everywhere. We jump up and sprint to the door when Charlie Snead...arrives. We run to see if Daddy's home; we dash to the barn." In one particularly memorable incident, McDonough recalls, "When we're all gathered around the radio and Claudie... comes in to tell us about the missionary, we practically take out Edgar Bergen... Watch it in the final cut, his rocking chair goes all the way back, and he's left scrambling in our dust." McDonough muses, "Fielder had warned us to be careful around Patricia, who had just recovered from a stroke. But he didn't say anything about Edgar."⁴⁵⁴ Whatever the trepidation and perceived risk of working with stroke survivor Neal, the supposed risk paid off. *The Homecoming* was well-received by audiences and critics, and Neal won a Golden Globe for her role in the film.

As in the case of Richard Thomas, Patricia Neal was accepted as an actor with a disability because the dividends of her talent and name-recognition were viewed as more significant than her disability. And like Thomas, Neal was a consummate professional who was

⁴⁵² Earl Hamner as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House, 2002), 53.

⁴⁵³ Mary McDonough, *Lessons From the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton*, (New York: Kensington Books, 2011), 13.

⁴⁵⁴ Mary McDonough, *Lessons From the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton*, (New York: Kensington Books, 2011), 15.

not intimidated by her disability. She believed in her ability to perform at a high level, and based on her history in the industry, so too did those who hired her...at least for her role in *The Homecoming*. As is so often the case in the television industry—in all industries, really—the powers-that-be got cold feet when it came to disability. The writers and producers of *The Waltons* were willing to accommodate Thomas' disability later in the series, because it was understood that it would be temporary. His outcome was all but certain. In terms of Neal's work on *The Homecoming*, evidently the producers were willing to take a risk on her performance in a one-off television movie. However, when it came to casting *The Waltons* TV series, their confidence eroded. When casting for *The Waltons* began, Hamner remembers, "The machinery of putting together a television series was set in motion. We were way ahead since we had a cast that had already proved they worked well together. Still, network folks need to make their mark on a project or else they feel that have not done their jobs." Though he was thrilled in the end with Michael Learned's interpretation of Olivia Walton, nonetheless it was with regret that Hamner wrote, "Consequently they [the network] dictated some changes. Even though Pat Neal had shown she was the same capable, talented, unique star she had always been, the network was uneasy about her health and suggested the role of the mother be recast."⁴⁵⁵ When asked how she felt about replacing Neal, Michael Learned shared, "[Y]ou know, she [Neal] was always so friendly to me, and very nice, and we became friends. [A] couple of years after we became friends, I said, 'I'm so grateful that you didn't want to do that show, because it really saved my ass.' She said, 'I did [want to do the show]. They didn't ask me.'"⁴⁵⁶ Learned had assumed, based on her strong performance in *The Homecoming* and her reputation in the industry, that Neal had

⁴⁵⁵ Earl Hamner as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad*, (Naperville: Cumberland House, 2002), 57.

⁴⁵⁶ Michael Learned (actor), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

been invited to reprise her role as Olivia Walton. She was surprised to learn that her perceived disability excluded Neal from the role. Though Learned was shocked and regretful over Neal's fate, based on her years of friendship with Neal, she admits, "[She] had wanted to do it, but quite honestly, I don't think she could've. I don't think she could have sustained it, because she was more impaired than she seemed, and, you know, she'd tired easily."⁴⁵⁷

In an ironic twist of fate, and perhaps karma, though the network balked at hiring a stroke-survivor for *The Waltons* in the person of Neal, the network *did* end up having to work with and accommodate a stroke survivor, in the person of Ellen Corby. Whatever the precise nature of Neal's disabilities following her stroke, they were less pronounced and impactful compared to those sustained by Corby following her own. Yet, after portraying Grandma Walton both in *The Homecoming* and for five years on *The Waltons* television series—with three Emmy awards to her credit, no less—Corby was deemed irreplaceable. Her stroke and its resultant disabilities, therefore, had to be addressed head-on. The challenge was, nobody knew what Corby's fate would be immediately following her stroke.

Production assistant John Dayton, who was present on set the day that Corby sustained her stroke, remembers that day, and the upheaval and trepidation which occurred as a result. He recounts, "Monday morning she [Corby] didn't show up [to set], and Will Geer got worried. He was the first one, and he said, 'She's never late.' ... And he became worried." Dayton remembers, "I kept saying, 'Well, she'll be here in 15 minutes. We'll still be okay. Well, when she didn't show... Will and Earl drove over to Ellen's house, and found that she had had her stroke... [T]hey didn't know what had happened, but I believe that they found her on the basement steps. That's to the best of my memory."⁴⁵⁸ Of course, when co-star Will Geer and series creator Earl Hamner

⁴⁵⁷ Michael Learned (actor), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

⁴⁵⁸ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

found Corby at home, they did not know immediately that she had a stroke. They were not able to diagnose her injuries, and they could only assess visually that she sustained a serious injury of some kind. From there, they arranged to have her transported to hospital. Knowing that Corby's situation was serious, but lacking any concrete details about the exact nature of her injuries, and her prognosis, Geer and Hamner could only report back to the set that the situation was emergent. In the ensuing panic and uncertainty, Dayton recalls, "We weren't sure exactly what it was, so I got a call from [producer] Neil Maffeo to white-out Ellen's name off of the cast list. And I did...So, she no longer appeared on the call sheet. I found out later the reason that Neil did that...Neil had said it was for insurance purposes and [to] do it."⁴⁵⁹

That Maffeo was concerned about the insurance implications of Corby's medical emergency comes as no surprise. As discussed in chapter one, television production is an expensive and risky business. A not-insignificant portion of a television's production budget is its insurance policy, which protects the production from all manner of losses, including the loss of a performer due to illness, injury, or even death. A principle actor on a series, such as Corby was, is of tremendous value to a series. In the event that an actor cannot fulfill their role on the series, a television production is liable to incur a number of losses, not the least of which is the loss of the performer themselves, as well as their star power. Further losses may include lost time in waiting for the actor to recover from their illness or injury, or in searching for a replacement for that performer. Production insurance not only covers losses which might be incurred by the production company, it can also protect the health and safety of performers involved in a production. If a performer incurs an injury, develops an illness, or dies on the set of a production, typically the production company and their insurance provider bear some responsibility for that

⁴⁵⁹ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

performer's well-being.⁴⁶⁰ Therefore, production companies try to limit their exposure by creating the lowest risk working environment possible. According to Robin Small in her book on production safety in film and television, risk assessment is a big factor in determining the insurance needs and costs for a particular production. In order to calculate risk assessments for a specific production, Small writes, "Risk assessments should be written down and [they should] identify any individuals or groups of workers potentially at risk from immediate accidents or long-term risks to their health." She explains, "Risk is quite simply probability versus severity. In other words, how likely is an accident to happen? What would be the result if it did?...Steps can then be taken to eliminate the risk, remove it, or substitute the proposed action for something safer."⁴⁶¹ Generally-speaking, the younger, healthier, and more able-bodied a performer, the lower the perceived risk of employing them in a television production. It is assumed that the characteristics make a person less susceptible to injury, accident, illness, or death, and therefore less likely to cause production liabilities. When Corby, already a perceived risk due to her age, suffered a stroke and became disabled, according to production assistant John Dayton, producer Neil Maffeo was quick to do the mental calculus on the liability of retaining Corby as a member of the production.

In Hamner's eyes, this was a sign of tremendous disrespect to Corby. True, Corby was unable to fulfill her duties on set the day she sustained her stroke. And true, her recovery and her future with the series were uncertain, but she was still a valued member of the cast. As Hamner himself was a producer on the series, and was subject to liability should anything further happen to Corby, his advocating for Corby's retention as a member of the cast—both on the day of her

⁴⁶⁰ News and Risk Insight, "Risky Business: Insuring the Film and Television Industry," *Lloyd's*, April 8, 2014, <https://www.lloyds.com/news-and-risk-insight/news/market-news/industry-news-2014/risky-business-insuring-the-film-and-television-industry>

⁴⁶¹Robin Small, *Production Safety for Film, Television, and Video*, (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2013), 5.

stroke, and in future episodes of the series if she was able—was a testament to how much Hamner valued the performers who were stand-ins for his real family. It was Hamner’s hope that, for both her sake and the show’s, Corby would recover, and that she would return to work in due course. The fact that Dayton had literally and figuratively erased Corby from the series’ production schedule at Maffeo’s behest was galling to Hamner. Given that *The Waltons* was based on Hamner’s own life, perhaps it felt to Hamner like a member of his own family was being erased. Corby was not just a colleague, but a corollary for Hamner’s own grandmother. Dayton recalls, “The only time in my life that Earl Hamner came down and chewed me out was because Earl found out that I had whited out Ellen's name, and he came down to the set and he let me have it.”⁴⁶² Hamner said, ““How dare you do this? She's not dead! She's not gone! She's in the hospital. How dare you?...I remember Earl standing there and I had to pencil her name back in over the white out.”⁴⁶³

Cotler similarly recalls the feelings of uncertainty which permeated the production of *The Waltons*. She points out the irony that the cast had previously worked with a stroke survivor, and that they had developed a false sense of comfort from their interactions with Neal. Although they had no way of knowing what Corby’s eventual prognosis would be, the cast and crew could not help but draw on their previous experiences working with Neal. Cotler states, “I don't know if there really was [the expectation that Ellen would recover more fully], but I feel like, *I* thought it would get better. That it would take some time, and get better...because we had all worked with Patricia Neal, right?”⁴⁶⁴ Colter recalls having a sense of hope regarding the ordeal. She says, “I had a sense of, of that it wouldn't always be this way. It might not be the same Ellen that we had

⁴⁶² Robin Small, *Production Safety for Film, Television, and Video*, (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2013), 6.

⁴⁶³ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

⁴⁶⁴ Kami Cotler (actor), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

before the stroke, but [I expected that] there would be more progress than I think we ever saw.”⁴⁶⁵ Cotler, who would have been twelve years old when Corby sustained the stroke, was the youngest regular cast member on *The Waltons*. Her optimism about Corby’s recovery, and the limits of her knowledge regarding stroke recovery at the time, are thus understandable. Though the writers and producers of *The Waltons* shared Cotler’s hopes, they were less optimistic about Corby’s prognosis. Following Corby’s stroke, production on the series continued without her. Initially, the absence of the grandma character was not addressed in storylines. For all the writers and producers knew of the matter, Corby’s speech and mobility could be more-or-less restored and in quick fashion, in which case there was no need to dramatize Grandma’s absence. Her character simply would not appear for a few episodes, and then would be reintroduced to the series with little fanfare, if Corby’s recovery permitted. On a graver note, the production team also acknowledged that it was possible that Corby would not survive the stroke, and writing stories which acknowledged Grandma’s absence, but which operated under the pretense that Grandma Walton would return one day, would be awkward and devastating if Corby did not survive. Thus, Grandma Esther Walton was quickly relegated to the sidelines of the fictional *Waltons* universe, while the producers of the series anxiously anticipated Corby’s outcome. Viewers likewise fretted over Corby’s fate. Of *The Waltons* and Corby’s stroke, food writer Elissa Altman remembers, “They were all convivial, casserole-passing people, even though they didn’t actually exist; for me, the line between television family dinner and reality was blurred like a picture taken from a shaky camera, and when I saw in the news that Ellen Corby had had a stroke, all I could think of was who’s going to make biscuits for John-Boy now that Grandma

⁴⁶⁵ Kami Cotler (actor), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

can't move her arms?"⁴⁶⁶

When it eventually became apparent that Corby would survive her stroke, but before it became apparent what her recovery would look like, and whether or not she would be able to return to the series, the writers began acknowledging Grandma's absence in their scripts. Grandma was said to be recuperating from an unidentified illness in a hospital out of town, and that is as far as the writers dared tread, in case the backstory they concocted for Esther Walton was not befitting Corby's ultimate outcome. Throughout the rest of the fifth season and into the sixth season, the writers continued to make oblique references to Grandma Walton's absence. Sometimes members of the Walton family would mention Grandma's convalescence, or a visit they supposedly paid to her outside of the bounds of the aired storylines. As one faithful *Waltons* viewer observed, in hindsight the writers' vagueness did a disservice to Corby's actual experience. This viewer observed: "[W]hile Grandma is in the hospital every visitor comes home saying Grandma says this, Grandma says that, Grandma says, Grandma says... 'That's our Esther' says Zeb. Or someone is off to the hospital and Zeb says 'Ask Esther where she hid my wool socks.'" This viewer laments, "Then home comes Grandma unable to talk because of her stroke and they do a whole episode about her struggle with not being able to speak." The viewer allows, "I know the writers couldn't foresee Ellen Corby's eventual return but it still seems sloppy to me. Couldn't they have said she'd had a stroke instead of just speaking of her being in the hospital with some vague unknown illness?"⁴⁶⁷

Series regular Eric Scott has been known to join *Waltons* web forums, and answer fan

⁴⁶⁶ Elissa Altman, *Poor Man's Feast: A Love Story of Comfort, Desire, and the Art of Simple Cooking*. (Berkeley Books: New York, 2013), xii.

⁴⁶⁷ "Dough Girl", "All Episodes Talk: Goodnight Everyone," *Previously TV*, August 15, 2014. <http://forums.previously.tv/topic/3553-all-episodes-talk-goodnight-everyone/>

questions from time to time. In response to viewer concerns about how Corby's absence was handled, Scott shared this post:

Just another way to look at the situation. At the time, Ellen was very much on all our thoughts and prayers. We were visiting her at home and she was visiting us on the set. We really did not know if she would be able to return to the rigors of a TV series. How to deal with it on the show was discussed constantly by the producers. I remember the opinion was we did not want to constantly bring it up, it would deter from the new storylines that we were trying to convey. It was not meant as a disrespect and I am sorry you feel that. Remember, the show was not a constant thread of life, like the TV show "24", we intentionally missed alot [sic] of lifes [sic] events...I hope that clarifies some of the wonderful mysteries of this show.⁴⁶⁸

Fans of the series may have desired a more satisfying and thoroughgoing approach to Corby's stroke and disabilities prior to her return, but as the cast and crew recall, this simply was not possible. Corby's disabilities as a result of her stroke were such that in the early days of her recovery it was impossible to predict whether she would be able to return to the series.

What viewers saw when Corby eventually returned to the series and reprised her role as Grandma was a woman had speech and mobility disabilities, but who otherwise appeared healthy. By the time she returned to *The Waltons*, Corby was able to walk with the assistance of a cane, and produce some speech, albeit very limited. Thereafter, Corby lived with highly limited speech due to aphasia and partial facial paralysis. Scott recalls that it was her left side which was affected, but in viewing film of *The Waltons*, it appears as though it was her right side which incurred disabilities. Both Corby's right arm and right leg had limited mobility. During her recovery, Scott recounts, "I remember going to see her and it was...quite shocking to see Ellen. I mean, she was a fireball and to see her down like that, she couldn't say a word, and her left side was so compromised. And again, the facial tics that happened just from... It was a complete shutdown of that side of the body. We were – it was quite shocking for me." Not only was

⁴⁶⁸ Eric Scott, "Grandma's Absence Season 6," *Waltons Web Page*, December 8, 2009, <http://waltonswbpage.proboards.com/thread/956/grandmas-absence-season-6#ixzz4peruxYcR>

Corby's new physical state a shock to Scott, but the reality of her circumstances was also emotional for Scott, who thought of Corby like family. He explains, "I was 17 at the time, and she was a grandma to us, for the last five years." When asked about when he knew for certain if Corby would be rejoining the cast of *The Waltons*, he says, "I do remember them talking about her coming back, in a limited role and I thought, 'I don't know... how's she going to do it?' She couldn't even talk to us yet." Scott recalls admiringly, "But she worked so hard on her speech therapy and her physical therapy...occupational therapy... And she did it, she pulled it off. And it was so emotional for us." In retrospect, Scott realizes what a remarkable thing it was to the reintroduce Corby to *The Waltons* with significant disabilities. "We didn't think about the fact that it was breaking all original taboos," he says. But he now acknowledges that at the time, "You never brought someone that wasn't perfect—and I'm saying perfect in quotes—onto TV or movies to portray that. And if they were portraying it [disability], it wasn't real...[T]his was a real disability."⁴⁶⁹

When it was eventually determined that Corby had recovered enough that she could reprise her role as Grandma Esther Walton, some questions still lingered. Firstly, would she want to come back? Would Corby want to work through the challenges of being an actor with significant disabilities? Further, would she want to exhibit her disabilities on screen for tens of millions of viewers?⁴⁷⁰ And if she did indeed want to contend with these circumstances, would she be permitted to return to work? Corby's return to work was not a foregone conclusion for the powers-that-be. Dayton remembers, "I did hear talk on the set that the network was not in favor of bringing her back because it would slow us down." But Corby and her *Waltons* family agreed that returning to work would be good for her recovery. If nothing else, the work would provide

⁴⁶⁹ Eric Scott (actor), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

⁴⁷⁰ Eric Scott (actor), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

her with goals to achieve, a sense of purpose, and a supportive community. Dayton explains, “It was Will [Geer] who said Ellen needs this, she needs to come back here to help her to recover. And I just remember being told that, Ellen needs this. And he was relentless.”⁴⁷¹ Learned confirms this thinking, and elaborates, “People thought she was being exploited, but no. The producers didn't want her back because, you know, they didn't want to be responsible if anything happened to her. But she really insisted on coming back, and I think it was good for her.”⁴⁷²

Though the network had its misgivings, those who worked directly on *The Waltons* team were supportive of Corby's return. Dayton explains, “Needless to say Will Geer and Earl Hamner prevailed, because it was Will, and it was Earl, and it was [writer] Claire Whitaker--[I]t was Rod [Peterson] and Claire who wrote that episode, ‘Grandma Comes Home’--who knew that she could do it.”⁴⁷³ As in the case of Patricia Neal, the network and those higher up in the production hierarchy expressed concerns about employing an actor with a disability on a long-term basis. Contrary to the case of Neal, however, Hamner and his trusted coterie of *Waltons* creators were not willing to kowtow to the network's concerns this time. And the network acquiesced to continue employing Corby. For one thing, the absence of the Grandma character was thought to be more of a liability to the series than was the presence of a disabled actor and character. By the time Corby was ready to return to work, the central character of John-Boy Walton had been written out of the series when lead star Richard Thomas' contract expired. The void left by John-Boy's absence was large enough, never mind Grandma's absence. The show could not afford to lose another principle character, and the character of Grandma Walton was an audience favourite. Reporting on the series in 1973, journalist Penny Anderson wrote, “Ellen

⁴⁷¹ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

⁴⁷² Michael Learned (actor), interview with the author, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.

⁴⁷³ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

Corby never gave much thought to grandmotherhood until a year ago when she joined the cast of CBS-TV's *The Waltons* and quickly became North America's FAVORITE grandma. Now it's a way of life."⁴⁷⁴ In some respects Corby's Esther Walton was the quintessential grandma. She was plain-faced, greying, diminutive, and adept at all manner of domesticity. Yet, Corby's portrayal of Grandma Walton was far from the stereotypical sweet-as-pie old woman. To the role Corby brought a welcome acerbic note. A devout Baptist, and a notorious teetotaler, Grandma Walton was at the moral center of the Walton household. Where Olivia Walton was sweet and pious in her morality, Esther Walton was matter-of-fact and brusque. She loved her family, and was fiercely committed to them, but was seldom sentimental about or demonstrative of her affections. For a television show that was, frankly, just so darn *nice*, critics and audiences appreciated the peppery note Corby added to the mix. Her presence on the series struck a welcome balance between sugar and spice.

Another thing which Corby had on her side when it came time for the networks to decide whether to maintain her role on *The Waltons* was her legacy in Hollywood. Corby was respected as a consummate professional. She was never what one would call a 'star', but she garnered tremendous respect from her peers as she worked her way through the ranks of Hollywood. Corby began her career as a script girl under the old Hollywood studio system in the 1930s, and over time accumulated acting experience, appearing in small roles in dozens of films in the 30s and 40s. In 1948 she was nominated for both a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for her role in *I Remember Mama*. By the time she was cast on *The Waltons*, Corby's professional reputation preceded her. She was a skilled character actor who always knew her lines, was always on time, and who understood the ins and outs of the production process from her decades

⁴⁷⁴ Penny P. Anderson, "America's Favorite Grandma," *New York Times*, 1973.

behind the scenes and in front of the camera.⁴⁷⁵ Of Corby being invited to reprise her role as Grandma following her stroke, director Ralph Senensky observes, “If the person with the disability was also a competent performer, I mean that, that helps...Ellen Corby does a magnificent job on ‘Grandma Comes Home’, and she had this disability.”⁴⁷⁶ The network and producers of *The Waltons* rationalized that Corby understood the rigors of producing a weekly television series, and that she would not advocate for her return to the show if she did not feel prepared to take on the challenge.

Beyond the void that Corby/Grandma’s absence would create in the series, Hamner came to appreciate the value that Corby’s reintroduction to the series as a disabled person would have. What the network got wrong the first time around when they replaced Patricia Neal with Michael Learned was that they could not imagine what it would be like to hire a disabled performer to play an able-bodied role. They were concerned about the feasibility of accommodating an actor with a disability, and having Neal embody an abled matriarch on a long-term basis. Since Hamner and his team of producers had no answer to that dilemma, they deferred to the prevailing logic that hiring an abled actor to replace Neal was the best course of action. Had anyone in the production team approached the problem with a little more imagination, they might have arrived at the same conclusion that they did when Corby became disabled. They could simply rewrite the character as having a disability, and integrate that very authentic and familiar life experience into storylines. After all, *The Waltons* was nothing is not a series about the trials and tribulations common to a family’s life cycle. Logically, viewers should accept Grandma’s stroke and

⁴⁷⁵ "Obituaries - Ellen Corby; Actress Played Grandma on ‘The Waltons,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1999, 121.

⁴⁷⁶ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

disabilities, just as they had accepted all manner of personal challenges that beset the Walton family throughout the series. Reflecting on this revelation, Hamner explains:

I like to think *The Waltons* has affirmed things that have made people feel good about themselves or helped them live their lives somehow. It may have helped overcome adversity in the Ellen Corby case where she had her stroke dramatically there on the air. The knowledge that she has struggled to attain even the limited speech that she has, that personal example of the actress in this case, must be encouraging to some people who've had a stroke or have some disability to overcome.⁴⁷⁷

Although it is unfortunate that this logic was not applied to Neal's situation, In Hamner's defense, surely it was much easier to advocate for Corby to reprise her role as Grandma with a disability when she had more than half a decade of experience on the series under her belt, and three Emmys to show for her work on the series. Although Neal was a bonafide star, she was not indelibly linked to the role of Olivia Walton. Her presence in *The Homecoming* was a boon, but her identification with Olivia Walton was not cemented in the minds of viewers. As history proved, she could be replaced in the series with little perturbation from the audience.

When it was determined that Corby was able to and wanted to return to work, that the series was the better for Corby's presence, and that Corby would only be capable of inhabiting the role as a person with a visible disability, the creative team on *The Waltons* had to devise a strategy for Grandma's televised reintegration into the family. By now, it was common knowledge to the viewing public that Ellen Corby had sustained a stroke while filming the series. Her stroke was reported in trade publications such as *Variety*, and it was acknowledged in other trade periodicals such as *TV Guide* and *People Magazine*. A little more than half a year after her stroke, Bill O'Hallaren, writing for *TV Guide*, reported on the status of Ellen Corby, writing, "In mid-November, Corby, the peppery Grandma, suffered a stroke and was out for the rest of the

⁴⁷⁷ Earl Hamner, "Earl Hamner" in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 171.

season. She is currently undergoing intensive speech therapy at the Motion Picture County home.” O’Hallaren elaborated, “Hamner, a constant visitor, reports she is ‘improving dramatically. She’s such a strong, determined lady. She’ll be back the minute she’s able, even in a wheelchair.’ The producers are hopeful she’ll be able to appear on the show next season - and, if so, she will be portrayed as exactly what she is: a stroke victim fighting hard to recover her speech.”⁴⁷⁸ With these words, Hamner influenced the course of television and disability history. Suddenly it was conceivable that a person with a disability could appear on television, and unabashedly perform within the embodied experience of their disability. With lofty promises such as these, viewers were anticipating Ellen/Grandma’s return to the series, and the production team knew her reintegration had to be handled deftly. Hamner enlisted friends and writers Rod Peterson and Claire Whitaker to write the episode in which Grandma returned—aptly named “Grandma Comes Home”—and he tapped veteran *Waltons* director Ralph Senensky to direct it. By the end of the series, Senensky had more *Waltons* directing credits to his name than any other director for the series. He remembers, “*TV Guide*, they used to do a half page presentation, I can’t remember what they called it, of some special shows, and they did feature ‘Grandma Comes Home’ that week.”⁴⁷⁹ Anticipation for Corby/Grandma’s return to the series was high, and the network capitalized on this by deploying this marketing campaign.

Though the public knew that Corby had had a stroke, the nature of Grandma’s illness and the extent of her disabilities were not mentioned within the fictional *Waltons* universe until

⁴⁷⁸Bill O’Hallaren, “Growing Pains on Walton’s Mountain,” *TV Guide*, June 25-July 1, 1977.

⁴⁷⁹ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016. Senensky shared a poignant story with me which I think bears sharing here. Of that *TV Guide* advert, Senensky shared, “I can tell you a story there, that was the morning *TV Guide* came out...I was in the hospital sitting at the hospital bedside with my mother, she was in very bad shape, and it was Tuesday, and I knew that *TV Guide* was coming out and I went down...to the magazine counter in the hospital, and sure enough, it was there. And I looked at it, and the episode was featured as one of the events of the week, and then I came back to the room and the next hour my mother died.”

Corby returned to the series in the season six finale in “Grandma Comes Home”. Because of this, the episode begins with a scene around the Walton breakfast table with the characters engaging in a lot of exposition. They discuss with excitement their anticipation of Grandma’s return. Eldest daughter Mary-Ellen, in particular, is instrumental in communicating Grandma’s journey through her illness, and bringing to light the extent and nature of her newly acquired disabilities. By this point in the series, Mary-Ellen is a trained nurse, and so Mary-Ellen is relied upon to furnish the medical and technical details of Grandma’s illness and recovery, supposedly for her family’s benefit. The subtext of this scene is, of course, a way to prepare the audience for what to expect when Grandma finally appears on the screen. Significantly, it is revealed that Grandma is only coming home because Grandpa Zebulon Walton badgered the doctors into letting her come home early. He believes that at this stage of her recovery, the presence of family is more important than medical intervention, a demonstration of the recurring motif on *The Waltons* of integrating medical science, family, and faith in healing practices. Notably, Grandpa Zeb offers a prayer to Grandma and to her recovery at the dinner table. Esther is also formally acknowledged by the minister and welcomed back to Walton’s Mountain during a church service that takes place in the episode.

The entire episode revolves around Grandma’s reintegration to the family, with the central problem being the tension between Grandma desiring a return to normalcy on the one hand, and her family’s desire to shelter her from any hardships on the other. Throughout the episode, the family is shown mollicoddling Esther in a variety of ways. When Grandma attempts to wash the breakfast dishes, her granddaughters Mary-Ellen and Erin refuse her help, much to Grandma’s shame and disappointment. Wanting to prove herself useful, Esther then proceeds to sweep the large front porch of the Walton homestead. Here again, Erin intervenes. In one of the

episode's most telling scenes, Grandpa Zeb intervenes on Esther's behalf and speaks for her when it comes time for the family to bid each other goodnight. As previously referenced, the Waltons had a ritualistic way of bidding each other goodnight, a running bit that was typically featured at the conclusion of each episode. In this particular episode, the bit is performed twice, the first time being mid-episode when Zeb speaks on Grandma's behalf. Rather than allowing Grandma to attempt communication in her own way, Zeb bids the Walton family goodnight in her stead. Senensky describes the heart of the "Grandma Comes Home" story in this way: "That story, to me, it centered on Ellen, but...also...a major factor in it was how does a family react to it [a newly disabled family member]? And of course, in the case of this, the big thing was they overreacted. And that was the story. That was the story, the overreaction of the family that instead of helping was hindering." Senensky observes, "[S]he is still the focus, but the story was about the Walton family."⁴⁸⁰

The inflection point of "Grandma Comes Home" occurs when Grandma, who has been struggling to communicate verbally throughout the episode, finally utters the words "Need me! Need me!" to daughter-in-law Olivia while they are snapping beans on the front porch. Up to this point, Olivia has been encouraging Esther to take it slow, and not strain herself in her chores. Olivia is trying to be empathetic to Grandma's recovery, and she references her own experience with polio as a way of relating to Grandma's struggle. Olivia recalls how difficult it seemed at first just to put one foot in front of the other. While this kind of empathy may have been welcome in the early stages of Esther's recovery, what Olivia and the family fail to acknowledge is the months of rehabilitation Esther spent away from the family, and the personal adjustments she has made in existing as a disabled person. Implicit in this scene is the acknowledgement that

⁴⁸⁰ Ralph Senensky, telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

disabled people do not need pity, and they do not need abled on-lookers to dictate the limits of their bodies. Disabled people know their bodies and their limits better than anyone else. The time and energy that they spend navigating how to exist in an inaccessible world, and how to reside contentedly within their bodies needs to be acknowledged and respected. On the beauty of this scene, Ralph Senensky effuses, “It was incredible.” Senensky knew he had directed a powerful television moment when this scene was previewed the next day during the “dailies”, that is, the stage during which raw footage of a production is viewed to check its quality. Senensky recalls with pride,

The ultimate moment was the next day in the dailies, because Earl was not on the set when we did it...He was not one to stand and watch what was being done. [Earl] had seen the words on the page, and knew what he was going to expect and then the first take of that scene, the angle across Olivia's shoulder to Ellen, played until the end, and then in that dark auditorium I heard Earl say, “Senensky you son of a bitch.”⁴⁸¹

Hamner was thrilled with the end result.

Indeed, the “Grandma Comes Home” storyline was produced to great effect. Reflecting on the series as a whole, Newcomb and Alley write,

[T]he Waltons explore the process of maturation as the major theme of the show...The fictional process has been enhanced by the complexities related to the real development among cast members...Ellen Corby's stroke added to the sense that here was a deeper reality, one that transcended fiction and sentimentality, even while it traded in fictional images and themes often cloying in their ‘noble mountaineer’ expressions.⁴⁸²

Grandma's return is depicted as a joyous and triumphant event, albeit an emotional one. In one memorable scene, John Walton has a heart-to-heart conversation with his mother on the front porch of the family homestead. He tells her, “I don't mind telling you I miss hearing the sound of your voice. But the doctor says it won't be long before you're bossing us around just like you

⁴⁸¹ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

⁴⁸² Horace Newcomb, and Robert S. Alley, “The Television Producer: An Introduction” in *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, edited by Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley (New York Oxford University Press, 1983), 28-29.

used to. Meantime I guess we'll find out there's nothing to be afraid of in silence."⁴⁸³ Although a little sentimental, the scene works because the sentiments are real. Dayton observed that Ralph Waite became emotional when filming this scene, and it occurred to him how poignant this moment was. Waite was not merely acting out the relationship between John Walton and his mother Esther, he was working through his feelings about his colleague Ellen Corby, and her journey to this moment. Dayton remembers thinking, "[T]his is not just filmmaking. This is life, this is real, this is of the moment."⁴⁸⁴

The "Grandma Comes Home" episode was significant not only for the cast and their characters. It also marked a significant moment in television and disability history. In small, but significant ways, Ellen Corby's disability moved the needle in Hollywood as far as disability representation and accommodation. As previously cited in this study, Lorimar, the production company responsible for *The Waltons*, was extremely frugal. Readers will recall that production assistant John Dayton was once chastised for spending a trifling amount on an extra space heater during a cold day on the set. By contrast, when it came to accommodating Corby's disability and her return to the series, Lorimar was more generous. Ralph Senensky shares, "I know that they gave me two cameras, which doubles the expense, whenever I wanted it. On every scene with Ellen, I had two cameras." The reason for this, Senensky explains, was "Because of my background in live television...I knew how to use two cameras so that you had two effective shots...Like in the green beans scene, I mean the angles on Ellen, the over the shoulder and the close-up, are shot by the same take, at the same time."⁴⁸⁵ By achieving two effective shots of Ellen Corby at the same time, Senensky was able to spare Corby from performing additional

⁴⁸³ *The Waltons*, "Grandma Comes Home," March 30, 1978 (Burbank: Warner Bros. Home Video, 2008), DVD.

⁴⁸⁴ John Dayton (production assistant), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

⁴⁸⁵ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

takes, and therefore could accommodate her new physical capacities. When Corby felt ready and able to perform her job, Senensky had the resources in place to make the most of her performance. Of Lorimar's support for accommodating Corby's disabilities, Senensky recalls, "They were wonderful about that, they were just wonderful about that... On Ellen's stuff they just gave me carte blanche. 'Whatever you need, just use your two cameras, double print when you need. Whatever you need to get a good performance, to get a good production with minimal effort on Ellen's part, curtail her use. That was fine.'"⁴⁸⁶ Kami Cotler similarly recalls that Corby was well-accommodated on set. "I remember the experience of working with her and the kind of structures they tried to put into place to support her. In terms of, like, cue cards and eventually once they learned what vocabulary she had access to, kind of rewriting so that, or writing so that that matched her vocabulary, depending on how hard it was."⁴⁸⁷ This, coming from the same power structure that, just half a decade before, had resisted accommodating Patricia Neal.

The positive reverberations of Corby's acquired disability were evident on set, on screen, and in Corby's description of her experiences as a newly disabled actress. More than half a year after her return to *The Waltons*, Corby shared with journalist Sue Reilly, "I realized there were people I could reach with a message of strength through my visibility on *The Waltons*. I wanted to show them that I may be 65 and the victim of a stroke, but I can think and function. After the first show I was flooded with mail from all over the country. Those letters made the struggle worthwhile."⁴⁸⁸ Corby's presence on television as a person with a disability in a highly visible role was landmark event in television production. In fact, it was unprecedented. *One Waltons* viewer noted,

⁴⁸⁶ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

⁴⁸⁷ Kami Cotler (actor), interview with the author, Gardena, California, August 2016.

⁴⁸⁸ Sue Reilly, "The Wonderful Walton Women: As Michael Sobs So Long, The Waltons Face Life as a One-Parent Family," *People*, Vol. 11, No. 4, January 29, 1979.

Ellen Corby deserves all the credit in the world for coming back to *The Waltons* after her stroke. It just occurred to me though, that Howard McNear, who played the barber Floyd on *The Andy Griffith Show*, did the same thing. I recall reading that he had a stroke in one of the early seasons. In order to hide it, he was never shown standing or walking again, or if he was, it was because they built him some type of a frame to prop him up. Quite a difference in the way this was handled. Trying to hide it on *TAGS* [*The Andy Griffith Show*], and dealing with it in a forthright manner on *The Waltons*.⁴⁸⁹

In Corby's case, her disabilities were significant enough that they could not be concealed with deceptive camera work. They had to be dealt with in a forthright manner. Scott believes, "[*The Waltons* team] did such a graceful job of really presenting her disability to America...[B]efore that, I don't think there was a lot of talk about strokes and stuff like that, there really wasn't."⁴⁹⁰

Through their combined efforts, Ellen Corby and *The Waltons* production team helped to normalize disability. As Corby herself remarked, her performance probably encouraged many stroke survivors, and educated and comforted a lot of people who had friends or family living with the effects of stroke. The significance of this should not be underestimated. In their paper on the employment of actors with disabilities, Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopic explain, "Just like TV characters influence our attitudes to groups of people we don't identify with, so do they influence our view of groups of people we do identify with. As is the case with stories, fictional and real, seeing someone who we can relate to offers connection and validation."⁴⁹¹ Corby's work as a disabled performer on a well-known series challenged previously held perceptions regarding disability and aging. Corby was a high-profile example of an aged person with a disability who was getting up, going to work, being productive, being social, and contributing something positive and meaningful to American culture. Corby and her fictional counterpart

⁴⁸⁹ 'Clyde', "Grandma Could Write After her Stroke?", *Waltons Web Forum*, July 4, 2014, http://waltonswbpage.proboards.com/thread/5522#.XH_V6yhKjIU

⁴⁹⁰ Eric Scott (actor), interview with the author, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.

⁴⁹¹ Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, "The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television," *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 26-27. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

Esther Walton, through their proud and unapologetic demeanours, boldly and publicly challenged the fallacy that the aged and disabled have nothing of value to contribute, and that they should be relegated to the margins of society.

Viewers responded positively to Corby/Grandma's reintegration into *The Waltons*. One viewer shared, "I think Ellen Corby's return to The Waltons after she suffered her debilitating stroke, is one of the most valiant events ever on a TV series. I think it's one of the things that makes the Waltons seem like real people to us. Perhaps it's why we can relate to them so well."⁴⁹² Following her debut as a disabled character in "Grandma Comes Home", Corby was incorporated into storylines organically. That is, she continued to appear as a character with a disability, but storylines did not revolve around her disability. Grandma Esther Walton resumed her traditional place within the Walton family, and persisted in relating to her family and community in a traditional manner, albeit with some physical differences. That being said, the writers did occasionally capitalize on the richness of the disability experience, and they wrote stories which highlighted Grandma's disabilities. For example, in the aforementioned episode "The Obstacle" where disabled serviceperson Mike Paxton visits Walton's Mountain, a meaningful relationship develops between Mike and Esther as they bond over what it is like to contend with acquired disabilities. Contrary to the tired trope of the 'abled saviour' where an able person mentors a character with a disability, in this episode Grandma Walton serves as a mentor of sorts to Mike Paxton. She has had slightly longer to adjust to her life as a disabled person. True, there are plenty of other moments in the episode where the abled Waltons are prescriptive about Mike's approach to his disability. But that that mentor/mentee relationship between Grandma and Mike developed was significant and impactful. Scholar of media and

⁴⁹² 'Administrator', "When Did Grandma Have Her Stroke?", *Waltons Web Forum*, January 17, 2013, http://waltonswepage.proboards.com/thread/3705#.XH_WyChKjIU

disability, and *Waltons* fan Beth Haller reflects, “Ellen Corby (now disabled) has several scenes with the Mike Paxton character to encourage him. I thought this was a powerful message that visibly disabled people were the characters with the wisdom to give good advice.”⁴⁹³ Several other episodes incorporate Grandma Walton’s disability meaningfully into storylines. When actor Will Geer died during the hiatus between the sixth and seventh seasons of *The Waltons*, Geer’s character necessarily died. Rather than replace the actor, Hamner and his writers decided once again to use this real-life event to reinforce the natural rhythms of change, and life and death inherent to families that were so prevalent in the series. The character Esther Walton was, thus, widowed. In “The Beau” (23 November, 1978), Grandma is courted by an old beau, and struggles to reconcile the loss of her husband, and to confront the realities of being a romantic prospect now that she is a woman with a disability. In “The Inspiration” (31 January, 1980), recurring character Mamie Baldwin is reluctant to accept that she is going blind, and fearful to pursue the cataract surgery that might restore her sight. John Walton, who cares for Mamie as a neighbour and friend, and Mary-ellen, who places a lot of faith in medical science in her role as a nurse, urge Mamie to undergo surgery. They enlist Grandma Esther to help plead their case, reasoning that Esther’s personal experience with disability might make Mamie more comfortable with her own disability, and might encourage her to pursue therapeutic intervention.

Corby continued to appear on *The Waltons*, though in a reduced role, until 1980, just a year before the series concluded. She also appeared in five of six *Waltons* reunion movies, which aired on television following the conclusion of the original series. These telefilms were made sporadically between the years 1982 and 1997. Corby’s role in the sixth and final reunion movie in 1997 was her last acting role. Corby died two years later in 1999. Following her stroke, Corby

⁴⁹³ Beth Haller, email correspondence with the author, December 2018.

did not engage in much of an acting career outside of *The Waltons* oeuvre. Corby had only two non-Waltons roles following her stroke, the first in 1981 in the television movie *All the Way Home*, and the second in a guest role on the series *The Mississippi* in 1983. Though her acting roles were limited following her stroke, Corby's impact in the entertainment industry was not. Following her death, Corby was memorialized in an obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* which acknowledged the watershed moment in which she appeared as a stroke-survivor on *The Waltons*, and which commended her skills embodying this role.⁴⁹⁴ As this study has made clear, *The Waltons* explored notions of disability consistently throughout its run, and in a wide variety of ways. Whether invoked for commercial gain, dramatic effect, as a badge of historical authenticity, as a proxy for relevance, or as an embodied experience, disability was ever-present on Walton's Mountain. Of all the ways in which disability was portrayed on *The Waltons*, the reintroduction of Grandma Esther Walton to the series as a disabled character is arguably the most significant example of disability on the series. It is also, as I discovered through my many conversations with cast and crew members, and *Waltons* fans, apparently the most memorable example.

⁴⁹⁴ "Obituaries - Ellen Corby; Actress Played Grandma on 'The Waltons,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1999, 121.

CONCLUSION

Coming Down the Mountain

The reintroduction of actor Ellen Corby, and of her character Grandma Esther Walton, into *The Waltons* series as people with disabilities was a significant milestone in television and disability history. Of the many achievements *The Waltons* had during its nine-year run on television, this was among its finest. As the preceding chapter makes clear, the decision to embrace Corby's disabilities and incorporate them into *Waltons* storylines had positive impacts on Corby's sense of self, on her career and ability to work, and on her recovery following her stroke. Though her physical recovery was limited following her stroke, as Corby attests, her psychological recovery was positively impacted by having the opportunity to work, and by resuming her routine. Beyond the benefits to Corby herself, the presence of a newly disabled Grandma on Walton's Mountain resonated with viewers as well. As Corby and Earl Hamner attested, viewers identified with and took comfort in seeing an aging family member live through the realities of old-age and disability. As this study has made clear, among its many strengths *The Waltons* was particularly adept at conveying the beauty and poignancy of the life cycles through which all families live, and so Grandma Walton's disabilities were both natural and fitting for the series.

These emotional, psychological, and artistic dividends of affirmative disability representation were tremendous, and clearly Hamner himself perceived these benefits as sufficient justification to retain Corby as a member of the cast. According to Hamner and those

who knew him, respect for Corby and her well-being were foremost on Hamner's mind when he decided to re-write the character of Grandma Walton as being disabled. As creator and executive producer of *The Waltons*, Hamner had considerable sway. However, as chapter one of this study makes clear, television is a profit-motivated industry above all else, and had Corby and Grandma's return to the series with disabilities been a liability for the series, one could speculate that things might not have turned out so well for Corby and Grandma. As it happened, Corby's return to *The Waltons* in "Grandma Comes Home" was an asset to the series. The episode in which Grandma Walton was reintroduced to the family as a person with a disability attracted a sizeable audience, and garnered praise from critics and fans alike.⁴⁹⁵ Following Corby's return to the series at the end of season six, *The Waltons* had three more successful years on the air before wrapping up production, further proving that, far from a liability, affirmative disability representation and casting is embraced as an asset by audiences.

Research has indicated the case of Ellen Corby and *The Waltons* is not unique when it comes to the impact of representation on TV and in film. For decades industry leaders have used supposed consumer discrimination as a scapegoat to justify the lack of inclusivity in their hiring practices. They have argued that the blandness and homogeneity of their casting is a reflection of viewer tastes, and not a function of ableism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like. Further, the ever-present desire to attract and retain advertisers has long been a scapegoat for television producers, who claim they are at the behest of advertisers when it comes to certain aspects of television production. The television industry is largely dependent on sponsorship from advertisers desirous of selling their products during television's commercial breaks. Advertisers not only hope to reach the largest audience possible; They also hope to reach the most 'desirable'

⁴⁹⁵ Ralph Senensky (director), telephone interview with the author, July 2016.

audience possible, that is, audiences they perceive as having the largest disposable income, and highly levels of influence in their communities—i.e. young, white, upper and middle-class individuals. Advertisers once believed that such viewers would only respond positively to certain kinds of media, and so they preferred to hitch their wagons to programs which they believed reflected the tastes, lifestyles, and/or demographic composition of such audiences. Advertisers further believed that such viewers were the only viewers worth targeting, and thus geared their investments towards those media products which they believed reflected the interests of this group.

| However, industry leaders and advertisers are realizing the untapped wealth of audiences they have spent years alienating. They are also starting to appreciate that the audiences to whom they used to cater are becoming increasingly interested in a broad spectrum of representation on TV, whether or not it is a direct reflection of their own experiences. Evidently, industry leaders have underestimated audience desires for diverse representation in media, and have used audience tastes as a flawed justification of their reticence to embrace change in the entertainment industry. In 2016, Venkat Kuppuswamy, and Peter Younkin, U.S. scholars of business and entrepreneurship, published a study, the results of which debunked the beliefs historically held by film and television producers that their exclusion or underrepresentation of certain groups of people was simply business savvy. Kuppuswamy and Younkin analyzed “the commercial and artistic performance of films released theatrically within the United States between 2011-2015 as a function of the racial diversity of their cast.” Their findings are significant and potentially game-changing for underrepresented groups in entertainment media. Of their results, they write, “We find that films are not penalized for the diversity of their casts; instead employing multiple black actors in the principal cast achieves significantly higher domestic box-office revenues than

films with no black actors.” They go on to report, “Moreover, we find that international audiences do not exhibit evidence of bias against diverse casts, and that the net returns to diversity remain positive when worldwide box-office revenues are considered.” Thus, their findings “advance an alternative interpretation of the consumer bias thesis, where consumers prefer employers reflect their world or values, rather than their traits.”⁴⁹⁶ The critical and box office success of films such as Jordan Peele’s black-led psychological thrillers *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), as well as Ryan Coogler’s superhero celebration of black culture *Black Panther* (2018) handily bear this out.

Although Kuppuswamy and Youkin’s research focused on race as a variable in filmic representation, their findings are easily extrapolated to television, and to other underrepresented actors and characters. Where gender and film are concerned, one need look no further than Patty Jenkin’s *Wonder Woman* (2017), and Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck’s *Captain Marvel’s* (2019) female-led box office phenomena. In terms of racial diversity in television, Lee Daniels and Danny Strong’s record-setting African American-led series *Empire* (2015--), and Shonda Rimes racially diverse *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005--)—now the longest-running medical drama in television history—suggest that Kuppuswamy and Youkin’s research is transferrable to television. The critical and ratings success of Lizzy Weiss’s *Switched at Birth*, and Scott Silvestri’s disability-focused *Speechless* further suggest that affirmative disability representation likewise has a favourable economic impact on television media. And the critical and box office success of John Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place* (2018), featuring a deaf leading actor and extensive use of ASL, is a testament to the power of disability in cinema.

⁴⁹⁶ Venkat Kuppuswamy, and Peter Youkin, “Testing the Theory of Consumer Discrimination as an Explanation for the Lack of Minority Hiring in Hollywood Films,” *SSRN*, June 30, 2016, 2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2738728>

While these recent screen additions celebrating affirmative representations of race, gender, and disability may seem like a revolution in television and film, cultural critics point out that there is precedent for the positive economic and social reverberations of diversity in media. According to Jay Ruderman of the Ruderman Family Foundation, “People are really influenced by entertainment.” He adds, “*Ellen* and *Will & Grace* changed a lot of opinions in American society about gay people.”⁴⁹⁷ The sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) was, and Ellen Degeneres’ daytime talk show *The Ellen Degeneres Show* (2003--) is, tremendously popular. When each debuted on the scene with their gay stars, far from being alienated and turned off by the gay figures, large numbers of viewers embraced both series. Ellen Degeneres’ success as a talk show host is particularly significant because just five years earlier, Ellen’s own sitcom was cancelled after a ratings slumps following her and her television character’s coming out in 1997. Though Degeneres’ sitcom did suffer from its depiction of a gay lead, arguably *Ellen* (1994-1998) primed the pump for audiences to accept *Will & Grace*, which debuted on television mere months after *Ellen* was cancelled. Five years hence, arguably the affirmative work done by *Will & Grace* in turn paved the way for Ellen Degeneres once again to be embraced by audiences when her talk show debuted in the Fall of 2003. One potentially crucial difference between *Will & Grace* and *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, and *Ellen* is that the former made it known from the outset that its leads were gay, whereas the latter show began with its lead as a straight character, until Degeneres herself was ready for she and her character to come out. Audiences may have been surprised and put off by this change. Regardless of why audiences responded precisely as they did when *Ellen* was cancelled in the summer of 1998, research indicates that positive

⁴⁹⁷ Michael Levin, “Blind Rage: In Hollywood, The Real Disabled Are Still Out Of Sight,” *HuffPost*, July 10, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/blind-rage-in-hollywood-the-real-disabled-are-still_us_5963e4bbe4b09be68c0054bb.

exposure to gay characters generally leads to a decrease in prejudice among viewers over time. Guy Raz reported that “In five separate studies, professor Edward Schiappa and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have found that the presence of gay characters on television programs decreases prejudices among viewers.”⁴⁹⁸ Schiappa reflects, “[*Will & Grace*] was enormously popular, so the popularity of that show and the fact that there were two major gay male characters who were very different, allowed the show to do what I call important 'category work'.” By ‘category work’, Schiappa means work which susses out the distinctions between people of a certain category, and which enlightens people to the spectrum of experience within that category. Schiappa explains of the two gay leads on *Will & Grace*, “there were some critics who said, 'Well, Will isn't gay enough, and Jack's too gay.' Well, actually that's great, because you learn that there's diversity within that category that you had in your head before of gay men.”⁴⁹⁹

All this to say, whatever its perceived risks or downsides, recent history shows that positive and authentically cast representations of minority groups in television and film are largely success stories, both for the groups they depict, and for the industry itself and its bottom line. Business analysts are beginning to appreciate the economic dividends of appealing to untapped markets, rather than focusing solely on the largest common denominator.⁵⁰⁰ In his

⁴⁹⁸ Reported by Guy Raz, “How TV Brought Gay People Into Our Homes,” NPR’s All Things Considered, May 12, 2012. Archived/transcribed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/12/152578740/how-tv-brought-gay-people-into-our-homes>. See Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, Dean Hewes, “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Communication Monographs* (2005): 72, 92-115; See also Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, Dean Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? Will & Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2005: 51(4), 15-37.

⁴⁹⁹ Reported by Guy Raz, “How TV Brought Gay People Into Our Homes,” NPR’s All Things Considered, May 12, 2012. Archived/transcribed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/12/152578740/how-tv-brought-gay-people-into-our-homes>. See Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, Dean Hewes, “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Communication Monographs* (2005): 72, 92-115; See also Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, Dean Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? Will & Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2005: 51(4), 15-37.

⁵⁰⁰ Whatever that means these days, if it means anything at all. It used to mean white, middle-class, straight, and male.

personal essay on being a performer with a disability in the entertainment industry, Danny Woodburn cited another actor with disabilities to convey his message:

As Mat Fraser, an actor with a disability from *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, said: ‘TV executives — bless their little, normative, unimaginative cotton socks — they're people that only want to produce something that was last year's hit. Because they're so scared that if they do anything their boss might not like they'll lose their job. They're wrong. Audiences are ready. They want to see us on TV.’⁵⁰¹

Concurring with these sentiments, business insider Robert Reiss emphatically stated when writing for *Forbes*, “For years organizations seeking a competitive advantage have embraced diversity; but today the leading enterprises have found a new source of growth--people with disabilities.” Beyond just people with disabilities themselves, “The global market represents 1.3 billion people and their 2.3 billion family members, friends, caregivers and colleagues; aggregately people with disabilities account for an astounding \$8 trillion dollars in disposable income.”⁵⁰² So, while this project largely advocates for the inclusion of disabled people in entertainment media because it is simply the just thing to do, there is evidence to support the fact that it is also the economically smart thing to do. Surely this is a language which television industry leaders can understand.

However, television and film producers need to understand that it is not enough to simply include disabled characters in storylines. The inclusion of disability in film and television needs to be portrayed by disabled actors, and ought to include people with disabilities in the production process. As Kristen Lopez explains in her piece on the problem of the ‘able-bodied saviour’ in the film *The Greatest Showman* (2017):

⁵⁰¹Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, “The Ruderman Family Foundation White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities,” *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 37.

http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

⁵⁰² Robert Reiss, “Business's Next Frontier: People With Disabilities,” *Forbes*, July 30, 2015.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertreiss/2015/07/30/businesss-next-frontier-people-with-disabilities/#31c280be104a>

Interviews with Eddie Redmayne and Daniel Day-Lewis have the actors discussing a desire to tell stories about disabled people to spark conversation and enhance audience knowledge, to challenge themselves and present an emotional life that both honors the people they're playing and provides the audience with new insight. This, in itself, is ableist thinking: They want to represent disabled people on the screen to educate able-bodied audiences about the existence of disabilities. They may believe they're making a movie that will connect with people but the lack of people shaping these narratives who aren't disabled will always present a limited scope.⁵⁰³

The best and most productive portrayals of people with disabilities—and indeed any other minority group—will always be those that include the talents and perspectives of members of those communities. The success of these portrayals also hinges on the construction of stories which organically include such group members into the narrative. There is a fundamental and artistic difference between telling a reductive story about disability, and having a specific and misguided agenda in doing so, and in telling stories which include disabilities, with the only agenda being the conveyance of the full spectrum of human experience. As *Waltons* star Richard Thomas opines, “I’m very wary of art that wants to explain itself or that wants to fulfill an agenda outside of the aesthetic. Because the best intentions in the world will create the worst luck in the world. Witness the ‘disease of the month club’ on television movies for years and years... [Y]ou look at the movie and you go, oh please. The intentions don't substitute for artistic excellence, they just never do.”⁵⁰⁴ He elaborates, “But that is a challenge when you're creating a show to get those messages across, try to keep them human, so that...the character's learning, and something happens that allows the audience to not be hit over the head with a message, but provokes them maybe to think, and to question, and to maybe see something and change.”⁵⁰⁵

It is important to note that the opinions being changed are often those which are implicit,

⁵⁰³ Kristen Lopez, “*The Greatest Showman* and the Able-Bodied Savior,” *Paste*, July 10, 2017. <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/07/the-greatest-showman-and-the-able-bodied-savior.html>

⁵⁰⁴ Richard Thomas (actor), interview with the author, New York, New York, January 2017.

⁵⁰⁵ Judy Norton (actor), interview with the author, Glendale, California, August 2016.

rather than explicit. Those who engage in ableist behaviours⁵⁰⁶ may be unaware that they are doing so. It goes without saying that explicit discrimination against and prejudice towards minority groups is deeply problematic. But the insidious effects of unconscious bias are likewise problematic, and probably more common. The Ruderman Family Foundation has found that, “[r]esearch into explicit attitudes towards individuals with disabilities suggests that these have become less negative over time. ... It would appear however from the results of [such] studies...that relatively strong negative implicit attitudes remain.”⁵⁰⁷ One of the ways to temper such implicit attitudes is through positive exposure to the groups against whom one holds such biases. In their white paper on the employment of actors with disabilities, the Ruderman Family Foundation write,

It is argued that when it comes to people with disabilities, television representation is imperative for stigma reduction. Due to factors such as frequent inaccessibility of public places, abysmally low employment of people with disabilities, and segregation in education, mainstream culture often doesn’t have the chance to organically encounter and interact with people with disabilities. So almost by default, most attitudes toward people with disabilities arise from the stories we encounter around us—stories which are woefully underrepresented in the most widely consumed medium: television.⁵⁰⁸

Michael Antecol, in his paper on the legacy and influence of Marshall McLuhan in television studies, affirms these ideas and writes, “[T]he medium of television gives viewers the ability to experience new situations with their inherent frames and consequent behaviours.” This ability, in turn, “leads to changes in culture as the frames and behaviours experienced through television are unconsciously absorbed, or informally learned, by individuals and taken into society. This is

⁵⁰⁶ As well as racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic thinking.

⁵⁰⁷ Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, “The Ruderman Family Foundation White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities,” *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 5. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

⁵⁰⁸ Danny Woodburn, and Kristina Kopic, “The Ruderman Family Foundation White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities,” *The Ruderman Family Foundation*, July 2016, 5. http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf

made easier because television activates the audience through its ease of use and in the way it promotes both parasocial interaction and non-verbal communication.”⁵⁰⁹ Autistic writer Sarah Kurchak elucidates the importance of television’s influence on social behaviours, not only for nondisabled viewers whose attitudes towards disabled people need changing, but for disabled people themselves. She writes, “When you’re learning social skills from examples that don’t include anyone who is like you, there’s a good chance you’ll come to the conclusion that there’s no genuine place for you in situations like that.”⁵¹⁰ Reflecting on the significance of *Sesame Street*’s recent inclusion of an autistic Muppet named Julia in its cast of characters as an example, Kurchak explains, “[W]hat few of us have mentioned is that this Muppet doesn’t just have the potential to teach allistic kids how to treat autistic kids better. She can also teach kids like me how to treat themselves better.”⁵¹¹

Returning to the main subject of this study, *The Waltons*, I want to make some things very clear. This study is not a castigation of *The Waltons* itself, nor of those who created it. In researching this study, and in spending copious amounts of time with the cast, crew, and fans of the series, I would call myself a bona fide fan of the show. I think the show is a sensitive, sophisticated, well-produced, and frequently nuanced examination of the beauty of everyday life. And I think the people who created the show, and the people who love the show, are lovely people for whom I have tremendous respect. I hope they will appreciate the difference between my calling out an industry, a history, and a culture which necessarily constrained *The Waltons*

⁵⁰⁹ Michael Antecol, “Abstracting the Later McLuhan: Television’s Cool Role in the Creation of the Global Village,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 24:2, (1999). <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1096/1002>

⁵¹⁰ Sarah Kurchak, “I Have Autism. Watching Television Helped Me More Than Therapy,” *Vox*, April 10, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/10/15223982/autism-julia-sesame-street-muppet>

⁵¹¹ Sarah Kurchak, “I Have Autism. Watching Television Helped Me More Than Therapy,” *Vox*, April 10, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/10/15223982/autism-julia-sesame-street-muppet>

ability to tell affirmative and representative stories about disability, and calling out the series itself. As mentioned in the introduction, this study could easily have been written using another television series as its subject matter. Many television series of *The Waltons* era engaged in uneven, conflicting, and problematic representations of disability, and I could have easily selected one of the more egregious examples for my study. As this study has made clear, *The Waltons* did sometimes transgress best practices in disability representation. After all, *The Waltons* was plying its trade in an ableist culture. In other words, the biases against disability depicted on the series—whether conscious or unconscious—reflected wider biases in the period in which the show was produced. Yet, I did not choose to study *The Waltons* for its transgressions. I chose to study *The Waltons*, in some ways, for precisely the opposite. I chose the series because of its high caliber, and its apparent earnestness in telling subtle, yet important stories about our humanity. The show itself was frank about humankind’s foibles. *Waltons* guest star and writer Michael McGreevey observes,

I think Richard Thomas says it in [the Earl Hamner documentary] *Storyteller*, people think it was a goody-goody show. It wasn’t. It was a show about people *trying* to be good. And I think that’s...one of the elements...that makes it so attractive to everybody is, we’re not saying ‘You better be good or you’re going to hell.’ We’re saying ‘It’s really hard to be good. It’s worth the effort and we all make mistakes.’⁵¹²

It should come as no surprise that such perspectives were imbedded in the series, given its creator. Earl Hamner, by all accounts, was a man committed to a deep sense of respect, admiration, and sense of justice for his fellow humans. Reflecting on his values in 2005, Hamner eloquently shared:

I was told that I was my brother's keeper, but I learned that we had enslaved a good many of our brothers. I was told all men were created equal, but I saw women pretty much consigned to activities suitable only for the bedroom and the kitchen. I learned that I should do unto others as I would have others do unto me, but gay people seemed to be

⁵¹² Michael McGreevey (guest star and writer), telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

scorned and reviled. How true is everything we have been taught? How reliable is the information we are given? It is incumbent upon us to question and decide for ourselves exactly how valuable the 'traditional' values are in today's society.⁵¹³

Hamner was also a man of with a deep sense of humility, and an innate desire to evolve and do better for the world. He concluded, “[A]s we grow more in God's image, does it not make sense that we modify the old values to help us reach for a more perfect life for each of his children?”⁵¹⁴

Hamner’s words beautifully articulate the path to disability justice. The quest for disability justice need not be predicated on being a perfect disabled representative or ally, but on ‘modifying the old values’ and ‘reaching for a more perfect life’. The quest for absolute perfection versus a ‘more perfect’ situation for humankind is a foolhardy one, since what is believed to be best practices in disability justice will evolve through history and across cultures. Therefore, disability justice is achieved when disabled people themselves and their allies commit everyday to doing the best they can within the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is achieved when people with disabilities are given the platforms to express themselves, and when allies learn to listen. It is achieved when the ‘old values’ are allowed to be tested, when current values are seen as provisional, and when future values are considered, and ultimately embraced, if they serve the best and most ends. As I mentioned in the introduction to my study, I am not disabled. I am a disability ally, and an admittedly imperfect one at that. Yet, I am comfortable in my imperfection, because it keeps me vigilant and constantly striving to do better by the disabled people who form such an important part of my life. The work that I have put into this project reflects my desire to be self-conscious and critical of the systems from which I have benefitted. It

⁵¹³ Earl Hamner, as quoted in Deborah Rieselmann, “Earl Hamner's View on Values: Famous Hollywood Writer, Producer Gives a Grown-up John Boy Take on Values,” *UC Magazine*, 2005, <http://magazine.uc.edu/famousalumni/tv/HamnerValues.html>.

⁵¹⁴ Earl Hamner, as quoted in Deborah Rieselmann, “Earl Hamner's View on Values: Famous Hollywood Writer, Producer Gives a Grown-up John Boy Take on Values,” *UC Magazine*, 2005, <http://magazine.uc.edu/famousalumni/tv/HamnerValues.html>.

is meant to encourage other allies in both scholarly communities, and in the entertainment industry to do the same. Paul Longmore once wrote, “The scholarly task is to uncover the hidden history of disabled people and to raise to awareness the unconscious attitudes and values embedded in media images.” He went on to explain, “The political task is to liberate disabled people from the paternalistic prejudice expressed in those images and to forge a new social identity. The two are inseparable.”⁵¹⁵ It is my sincere hope that my work has made a contribution on both of these fronts.

⁵¹⁵ Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 146.

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Appendix A: The Waltons Disability Episode Guide

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The Carnival. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1972.
The Thanksgiving Story. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1973.
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The Conscience. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1979.
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The Parting. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1979.
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The Waiting. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1979.
Founder's Day. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1979.
The Inspiration. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1980.
The Pledge. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1980.
The Move. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1981.
The Tempest. DVD. The Waltons. Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1981.

Appendix B: List of Interviews

- Cissy Wellman Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- Claire Peterson Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Written, September 2016.
- Claylene Jones Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- Elayne Heilveil Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- Eric Scott Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. In Person, Los Angeles, California, August 2016.
- Erica Hunton Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- James Person Jr. Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- John Dayton Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, August 2016.
- Jones, Claylene. Letter to Haley Gienow-McConnell. "Quick Question," February 13, 2018.
- Judy Norton Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. In Person, Glendale, California, August 2016.
- Kami Cotler Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. In Person, Gardena, California, August 2016.
- Lizzy Weiss Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, September 2016.
- Michael Learned Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. In Person, Petrolia, Ontario, July 2016.
- Michael McGreevey Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, August 2016.
- Ralph Senensky Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. Telephone, July 2016.
- Richard Thomas Interview. Interview by Haley Gienow-McConnell. In Person, New York, New York, January 9, 2017.

Appendix C: Sample Consent Form

The following is an invitation to participate in interviews related to knowledge, recollections, and impressions of representations of disability on CBS Television's *The Waltons*. Please see below for details on the project for which this research is being conducted, and for details on the parameters and expectations for participation.

Study Name: Defining Disability on Walton's Mountain: From New Deal Story-lines to New Right Living Rooms

Researcher:

Haley Gienow-McConnell
PhD candidate
Graduate Program in History
York University

Dissertation Supervisor:

Geoffrey Reaume, PhD

Purpose of the Research: I am conducting research for the purposes of completing my dissertation as one of the components of my PhD program in History at York University.

Description of the Project: This project is a work of history, specifically a disability history of the United States. I propose a critical and focused examination of incidents of disability on CBS Television's *The Waltons* as an illuminating inroad to the study of disability in American history and culture. This project is concerned with both *The Waltons'* use of disability as a plot device to promote a specific set of themes and values, as well as *The Waltons'* role in contributing to the narrative of disability in American culture. This project is concerned with the specific portrayals of disability on *The Waltons*, as well as concerned with how and why these representations of people with disabilities were produced. In other words, it goes beyond the images to consider their architects. Film historian Robert Niemi explained it well when he said: "Treating a film as an event also means dealing with the aesthetic, personal, and political character of the people who conceived it, the historical moment in which it was spawned, the film's genre kin and antecedents, the resources the filmmaker had at hand, the commercial requisites that shape tone and narrative structure, the concrete circumstances of the film's production, and the sort of critical and popular reception it received. All these factors make up the gestalt of the film as representative of history, as an historical event in its own right, and as part of a larger historical mosaic formed by the entire body of films on the subject." Investigating these factors of television production as they co-mingled with disability-themed episodes of *The Waltons* is the methodological thrust of this project. This project, then, builds on previous studies of disability on screen by moving beyond the images themselves, and delving into a specific television artifact, *The Waltons*, and its production of disability. A two-pronged approach will be employed to explicate the frequent invocation of disability on *The Waltons*. Firstly, a qualitative analysis of

specific disability-related story-lines on *The Waltons* will be employed to explain how disability was ultimately depicted on the series. How the fictional Walton family and their surrounding community understood disability, reacted to disability, characterized disability, and negotiated disability throughout the series' run is critical to the discussion of how disability as a trope reflected the series' core themes and values. Since this project holds that such portrayals have the power to create lasting impressions with audiences, and to inform future decisions when confronting disability in real life, the substance of these episodes is significant. A critical examination of episode transcripts and digital video recordings of original *Waltons* episodes as cultural texts in and of themselves will provide insight into these queries. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, this project will examine the architects (the production team and cast) of those stories, and the historical context in which those portrayals of disability were produced, using both documentary and oral research. That is, oral interviews will serve to illuminate how and why certain images of disability were produced and disseminated. Participation in these proposed interviews will form the basis of my oral research.

Conducting the Research: For my primary research, I will be relying primarily on transcripts and digital video recordings of *Waltons* episodes; interviews with and written recollections of cast and crew members of *The Waltons*, as well as network employees; Nielsen ratings; television trade publications; and legislation and social policy initiatives contemporary to both the era in which *The Waltons* was set (1933-1946) through to the era during which it was produced (1972-1981) to address my research inquiries. For my secondary research, I will be consulting scholarly and critical histories of disability, television, the United States, and popular culture.

In terms of conducting interviews with individuals who agree to participate in this study, I will be asking participants a series of pre-determined questions relating to their recollections of representations of disability in original episodes of *The Waltons*, and the circumstances behind their production. Though the questions are pre-determined and formal, and participants are encouraged, but not compelled, to answer all of the questions to the best of their recollections, participants are also permitted to engage in free-ranging discussion following the interview if there is any additional context they would like to provide. The researcher also requests some latitude in their questioning in cases where they wish to ask for clarification or to ask their participant to elaborate on an answer. The researcher will not otherwise deviate from the pre-determined interview questions, and will not surprise the participants with questions or topics which they are not prepared to discuss.

Interviews may be conducted in person, via an email questionnaire, over the phone, or through a video conferencing service such as Skype at the convenience and comfort of both the researcher and the participant. In cases where the interview is conducted in person, over the phone, or through a video conferencing service, the interview will be recorded as an audio file, and/or an audiovisual file to be transcribed into a written document following the interview. In cases where

the interview is conducted as an email questionnaire, the participant's written responses will serve as the transcript.

Interviews will serve as research and oral testimony to support the writing of the researcher's dissertation. Excerpts from interviews will be reported in the researcher's written dissertation. Excerpts of interviews may also be presented at the researcher's dissertation defense before an audience of academics and interested parties. In the event that the researcher's dissertation work yields publications such as books or scholarly articles, excerpts from interviews may also be presented in this format. Participants will be informed by the researcher when the written dissertation is complete via the participants preferred method of contact (email, mail, telephone) and will be informed of the date of the oral dissertation defense, as well as informed when the researcher has completed the requirements for their PhD. Should the results of the research be published in forms other than the dissertation (e.g. scholarly articles, chapters in an anthology, monograph) participants will also be informed of such dissemination. In all cases of dissemination, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant will be respected to the extent outlined in the confidentiality and anonymity portion of this document.

What You Will Be Asked to do in the Research: As a participant, you will be asked to participate in an interview which requires you to answer a series of questions. Interviews may be conducted in person, via an email questionnaire, over the phone, or through a video conferencing service such as Skype at the convenience and comfort of both the researcher and the participant. The researcher anticipates conducting and completing interviews between January 2016 and August 2016, following a schedule determined by the availability of the researcher and participants during that time. Some latitude with this time-frame is possible per the needs of the researcher and participants. The questions you will be asked all will relate to your affiliation with/knowledge of CBS Television's *The Waltons*, and will focus predominantly on your recollections of representations of disability on the television series, and the circumstances behind their production. You will be encouraged, but not compelled, to answer all of the questions posed to the best of your abilities and recollections. In terms of a time commitment, participation in the study is expected to constitute no more than a one day affair. The time required to conduct the interview will depend on the method of interview agreed upon by the researcher and participant, and on how much detail the participant is able to or chooses to provide when answering the interview questions. In general, the researcher anticipates a time commitment of not less than two hours, and no more than four hours. In cases where clarification on or follow-up to an interview is deemed necessary by the researcher, a small additional commitment of time may be necessary, though the researcher anticipates that such instances will be rare.

Risks and Discomforts: Upon agreeing to participate in this research, the researcher assumes that the participant is able to and comfortable speaking freely on the topic of the research. Thus, the researcher identifies no specific risks or discomforts, be they physical, emotional, psychological, economic, or social, to participating in this study.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Broadly speaking, the benefits of this research are that they will contribute to the advancement of human knowledge in the humanities and social sciences by supporting the completion of the researcher's dissertation. Because this research is focussed on representations of disability in American history and culture, the potential dividend to such advancement of knowledge is a better understanding of the place, status, and meaning of disability in American culture, and thus a better foundation upon which to build the future of disability policy, human rights, and a more equitable and accessible society.

In terms of the benefits to you the participant:

For those participants who were affiliated with the production of *The Waltons*, an indirect benefit of your participation in this study is that an art form which you had a hand in creating (*The Waltons* television series) will be examined and commended as an important artifact for scholarly historical inquiry. If the results of the research are widely disseminated, then an additional indirect benefit to you may be increased relevance and notoriety of your work in the art and entertainment industry, as well as in the broader culture. These benefits are hypothetical, and no concrete benefits nor inducements are being offered to you for your participation.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to continue participating will not influence your relationship or the nature of your relationship with researchers or with staff of York University either now or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You may stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: Interviews may be conducted in person, via an email questionnaire, over the phone, or through a video conferencing service such as Skype at the convenience and comfort of both the researcher and the participant. In cases where the interview is conducted in person, over the phone, or through a video conferencing service, the interview will be recorded as an audio file, and/or an audiovisual file to be transcribed into a written document following the interview. In cases where the interview is conducted as an email questionnaire, the participant's written responses will serve as the transcript. The data from interviews conducted, in the form of audio and/or video recordings and written transcripts, will be securely stored as digital files on a removable storage device that will remain at all times either on the person of the researcher or locked in the researcher's office when not in use. If the reviewer chooses to print any of the transcripts from the interviews, these will also remain either with the reviewer when in use, or locked in the researcher's office when not in use. Identifying information will be removed for digital and hard copies of the interviews, and the interviewees identities will be coded, with the

code key being stored as a separate digital file which will be password protected and/or encrypted, and/or as a separate hard copy stored in separate location from the interviews, and accessible only to the researcher. Rendering data anonymized by assigning codes and keeping contact information and consent forms apart from data are standard procedures for safeguarding participants' privacy.

The data will be stored securely until the completion date of the researcher's dissertation. The tentative completion date of the dissertation is year's end 2017, but may be extended if extenuating circumstances arise that bar completion within that time frame. Upon completion and defense of the dissertation, the data will be archived in the researcher's personal research files as either a removable digital storage device, or printed transcripts, or both, in a secure location locked in the researcher's office for potential future research, and will be anonymized following the measures stated above. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Anonymity: In cases where individuals participating in the study wish to remain anonymous, the researcher will honour their request for anonymity. In cases where individuals participating in the study are known individuals affiliated with the television series (cast and crew), it is expected that their identity will be disclosed in the research. As they are public figures who are already known to be affiliated with *The Waltons* television series, the researcher opines that disclosing their identity in the research poses no additional risks and causes no undue hardship to the participants over and above their original affiliation with the television series. If for some reason they are uncomfortable having their identity disclosed in the research, the researcher will ultimately consent to their decision to remain anonymous. The data will be kept confidential insofar as the researcher will be the only individual attending the interview, and will be the only individual with access to the records of the interview, that is, recordings (audio, video, or both) and transcripts. However, participants are advised that they are providing oral testimony for inclusion in a research project, and they can expect that their words may be quoted in documents that are accessible to the public. These quotes will be attributed to the individual where permitted by the participant, or quoted anonymously in cases where the individual requests anonymity.

Questions about the Research: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____ consent to participate in research interviews conducted for "Defining Disability on Walton's Mountain: From New Deal Story-

lines to New Right Living Rooms” conducted by Haley Gienow-McConnell. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Additional Consent:

-I consent to video/audio recording of the interview(s). Y / N

-I consent to waive my anonymity in the research findings, that is, I consent to have oral testimony provided by me during the interview(s) attributed to me in the reporting of the research. Y / N

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator

Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions

1. Please describe your role in the production of *The Waltons*.
2. How would you categorize *The Waltons* as a television program? E.g. comedy, drama, soap opera etc. Feel free to deviate from these categories, and to use as many descriptors as you feel necessary to accurately categorize and describe the show.

3. Would you describe *The Waltons* television series as having cores themes and values?

If yes:

- How would you describe those core themes and values?

4. Do you recall disability being depicted on *The Waltons*?

If yes:

-Which disabilities do you recall having been depicted on *The Waltons*?

-Are there any disabilities that you can think of that you do not recall having been depicted on *The Waltons*?

-Do you recall any discussions about the decision to include disability in story-lines with the series' creator, script writers, network executives, etc? If yes, please elaborate.

-Do you recall depictions of disability on *The Waltons* as inspiring conversations on the topic of disability among cast and crew members? If so, please elaborate.

5. Do you recall if your character ever experienced disability (either temporary or permanent) on *The Waltons*?

If yes:

-Which disability/disabilities did your character experience?

-Do you recall if there was any preparation involved for you to portray that disability? If yes, please elaborate.

6. Do you recall if any of the performers depicting characters with disabilities on *The Waltons* lived in real life with the disabilities they portrayed?

If yes:

-Do you recall having discussions with these performers about their disability/disabilities? If yes, please elaborate.

If no in any or all cases:

-Do you recall why performers with disabilities were not hired to portray these roles?

7. Prior to filming *The Waltons* during its original run (1972-1981), do you recall having any prior experiences with disability in your own life, whether yourself, a member of your family, or a member of your community? Please elaborate.

If yes:

-How do you recall depictions of disability on *The Waltons* comparing with your own encounters with disability?

8. Do you recall being familiar with all of the disabilities depicted on *The Waltons* prior to filming episodes of *The Waltons* involving disability? Or do you recall *The Waltons* as your first exposure to some disabilities?

9. Would you describe episodes involving disability on *The Waltons* as having a consistent tone, theme, or message?

If yes:

-How would you describe the tone, theme, or message of episodes of *The Waltons* depicting disability?

If no:

-Can you describe individual tones, themes, or messages of the individual episodes of disability on *The Waltons* that you listed when answering question 4?

10. Would you describe episodes involving disability on *The Waltons* as being consistent with other story-lines, ideas, and values of *The Waltons* television series overall? Feel free to elaborate on your answer.

11. How do episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities rank in your memory in terms of memorability relative to other episodes of *The Waltons*?

12. How do episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities rank in your memory in terms of relevance compared to other episodes of *The Waltons*?

13. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities as being intended as educational or informative?

If yes:

-What indications did you receive that this was the intent behind these episodes, and from whom did you receive these indications?

-Do you recall learning anything personally from episodes of *The Waltons* that depicted disabilities, either generally or about disabilities specifically?

14. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities as being intended to achieve ends other than education or information?

If yes:

-What indications did you receive that this was the intent behind these episodes, and from whom did you receive these indications?

15. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities influencing your understanding of disability/influencing your relationship to people with disabilities?

16. Do you recall any writers, producers, story consultants, and/or other cast and crew members (including yourself) as having a vested/personal interest in disability which might explain or have influenced depictions of disability on *The Waltons*?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to say on the topic of *The Waltons* and depictions of disability on the series? Please elaborate.

Sample questions for production team of *The Waltons*

1. Please describe your role/affiliation with *The Waltons*.
2. How would you categorize *The Waltons* as a television program? E.g. comedy, drama, soap opera etc. Feel free to deviate from these categories, and to use as many descriptors as you feel necessary to accurately categorize and describe the show.
3. Would you describe *The Waltons* television series as having cores themes and values?

If yes:

- How would you describe those core themes and values?

4. Do you recall disability being depicted on *The Waltons*?

If yes:

-Which disabilities do you recall having been depicted on *The Waltons*?

-Are there any disabilities that you can think of that you do not recall having been depicted on *The Waltons*?

-Do you recall any discussions about the decision to include disability in storylines with the series' creator, script writers, network executives, etc? If yes, please elaborate.

-Do you recall any specific preparation involved in creating storylines including disabilities?

-Do you recall depictions of disability on *The Waltons* as inspiring conversations on the topic of disability among cast and crew members? If so, please elaborate.

5. Do you recall if any of the performers depicting characters with disabilities on *The Waltons* lived in real life with the disabilities they portrayed?

If yes:

-Do you recall having discussions with these performers about their disability/disabilities? If yes, please elaborate.

If no in any or all cases:

-Do you recall why performers with disabilities were not hired to portray these roles?

6. Prior to collaborating on *The Waltons* during its original run (1972-1981), do you recall having any prior experiences with disability in your own life, whether yourself, a member of your family, or a member of your community? Please elaborate.

If yes:

-How do you recall depictions of disability on *The Waltons* comparing with your own encounters with disability?

7. Do you recall being familiar with all of the disabilities depicted on *The Waltons* prior to collaborating on those episodes of *The Waltons* involving disability? Or do you recall *The Waltons* as your first exposure to some disabilities?

8. Would you describe episodes involving disability on *The Waltons* as having a consistent tone, theme, or message?

If yes:

-How would you describe the tone, theme, or message of episodes of *The Waltons* depicting disability?

If no:

-Can you describe individual tones, themes, or messages of the individual episodes of disability on *The Waltons* that you listed when answering question 4?

9. Would you describe episodes involving disability on *The Waltons* as being consistent with other storylines, ideas, and values of *The Waltons* television series overall? Feel free to elaborate on your answer.

10. How do episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities rank in your memory in terms of memorability relative to other episodes of *The Waltons*?

11. How do episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities rank in your memory in terms of relevance compared to other episodes of *The Waltons*?

12. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities as being intended as educational or informative?

If yes:

-What indications did you receive that this was the intent behind these episodes, and from whom did you receive these indications?

-Do you recall learning anything personally from episodes of *The Waltons* that depicted disabilities, either generally or about disabilities specifically?

13. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities as being intended to achieve ends other than education or information?

If yes:

-What indications did you receive that this was the intent behind these episodes, and from whom did you receive these indications?

14. Do you recall episodes of *The Waltons* involving disabilities influencing your understanding of disability/influencing your relationship to people with disabilities?

15. Do you recall any writers, producers, story consultants, and/or other cast and crew members (including yourself) as having a vested/personal interest in disability which might explain or have influenced depictions of disability on *The Waltons*?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to say on the topic of *The Waltons* and depictions of disability on the series? Please elaborate.