



## CSLS SPEAKER SERIES

Monday, October 24, 2016

### RABIA BELT

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#### **“Outcasts from the Vote: Woman Suffrage Activism and Disability over the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century United States”**

Drawing upon a diverse array of sources, from visual media to constitutional convention minutes, I examine the significance of mental disability for the woman suffrage movement in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. I make two separate but intertwined points. First, elite white woman suffrage activists employed a variety of tactics that employed lunatics and idiots in a campaign to shore up their own potential enfranchisability. Second, this strategy played an active part in creating and reifying the regime of compulsory able-mindedness for voting that disenfranchised lunatics and idiots. Women were also ensnared in this regime, but they were able to leverage their way out of it while lunatics and idiots remained disenfranchised.

White woman suffrage activists used the category of mental disability to position themselves as mentally fit political actors. The lunatic and the idiot became useful — and successful — devices to highlight and set white women apart as enfranchisable. Additionally, mental status acted to stigmatize those racialized men who were also potentially enfranchisable, first African Americans and Indians, and then white ethnic and Asian-American immigrants. Woman suffrage activists tightly linked together the requirement of compulsory able-mindedness with a politics of respectability that served as a prerequisite for full political citizenship. Mental disability was not a benign category of belonging; instead, it was tied to political corruption, social degradation, aesthetic unpleasantness, and individual immorality. Women chiseled themselves out of the category of mental disability by highlighting their own respectability and mental status and juxtaposing it with grotesque caricatures of male idiocy, insanity, and ignorance.

Professor Belt's paper is available on the CSLS website and in hard copy at the Center.

PLACE Selznick Seminar Room, 2240 Piedmont Ave.  
TIME **12:45 – 2:00pm**. Coffee and water provided. Bag lunches welcome.  
INFO <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/center-for-the-study-of-law-society/>  
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