

Jacqueline Friedland COUNTING BACKWARDS “Behind the Book”

Back in 1995, when I was a high school senior, my history teacher assigned a project requiring each student to choose any Supreme Court case from the early 1900s and write a big research paper about it. As I searched through old cases, nothing jumped out at me. But then I stumbled upon the 1924 case of *Buck v. Bell*, where the Court considered whether eighteen-year-old Carrie Buck should be subject to a sterilization procedure against her wishes.

Carrie Buck had been deemed “intellectually disabled”, mainly because she’d had a child out of wedlock. Virginia’s lawyers argued that Carrie’s existing baby was intellectually disabled and that any additional offspring Carrie produced would likely be disabled as well. Medical providers in Virginia were hoping that a court of law would uphold Virginia’s new sterilization law, allowing doctors to perform salpingectomies (surgical removal of the fallopian tubes) on people with “undesirable hereditary traits”. All they needed was a test case. Doctors at the Lynchburg Colony saw Carrie as the perfect sample subject because her mother was also institutionalized and her infant daughter, like any infant, could easily be cast as “feeble-minded.” The facility hired a lawyer to represent Carrie who was in cahoots with the doctors at the Colony all along. It is worth noting that subsequent writings about the case show clearly that the three females mentioned in the case were not disabled and possessed adequate cognitive ability to be considered intellectually average.

So many aspects of the case stayed with me after I finished the project, but it wasn’t until eighteen years later that I was thumbing through a fashion magazine and noticed a headline reading, the “Uterus Collector” that I thought of writing about Carrie. The article in the magazine said inmates at an immigration detention center in Georgia were claiming a doctor there had been performing unneeded gynecological procedures on them, removing their reproductive organs without their prior knowledge or consent. In 2020! I immediately thought of Carrie Buck and the shocking connections that can still be made between past and present.

In a time where women’s reproductive rights have once again taken center stage in the news, I thought it was important to show that there are surprising ways female reproductive rights can still be exploited. Whether by private facilities seeking inflated insurance payments, those chasing power, or other personal interests, women’s rights to bodily autonomy are still very much at risk. This revelation propelled me forward to create *Counting Backwards*.