CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association | Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

Review of Jess Whatcott's *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics* (2024). Durham & London, U.S.A. ISBN: 9781478030751

Maverick Smith, Ph.D. Candidate
Critical Disability Studies, Faculty of Health, York University
smithmsm@yorku.ca

In the prologue to this book, Whatcott explains that during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, her existing involvement in prison solidarity work began to incorporate the issue of immigration detention which they connect to eugenics. In this book, Whatcott argues that connecting eugenics to carcel systems produces a new, relevant angle about eugenics as an ideology. Whatcott introduces "carceral eugenics" which she defines as,

> "a concept that analyzes how state confinement functions to control the reproduction and life choices of groups of people who have been deemed biologically undesirable" (page 3).

For disability studies scholars, the specific concept of carceral eugenics connects two seemingly unrelated ideologies. Linking the terms 'carceral' and 'eugenics' helps to show how the broader theory of eugenics operates in practice through the implementation of carcerality as a praxis.

As Whatcott explains, this book builds on earlier work done by scholars of carceral studies. In other words, the theoretical perspective about institutionalization being part of

carcerality, which Whatcott uses in this book, is not new. What is new is how this book successfully utilizes an extremely narrow focus to analyze how eugenics as a pseudoscience has helped create and maintain the conditions of carcerality.

For Walcott, connecting eugenics to carceral systems requires drawing on theorists from critical disability studies to clearly position institutions for disabled people as part of eugenics. The author discusses various models of disability including the "political relational model" developed by Alison Kafer (2013) to explain the connections between disability and eugenics to the uninformed reader. Whatcott also supports her argument by using an intersectional approach, drawing on critical race theory, feminist theory and queer theory.

The primary sources the author draws on when making the case for this new concept are all archival materials. These materials include images, government reports, newspaper articles, patient letters, institutional records, architectural plans and non-fiction books. All of these materials come from one state in the U.S.A., California. The depth of analysis in the chapters reveal that limiting her analysis to one state is a strength. This is because focusing on one state allows the author to provide an extremely detailed analysis of the discourse contained in these texts Whatcott was able to locate.

By meticulously detailing her search for archival materials, Whatcott explores how her ability as well as her inability to view such materials connect to her argument about carceral eugenics. In a moving research-related anecdote, Whatcott shares her frustration about how some archival materials that do exist, including texts by patients, have been

deemed irrelevant and are off-limits to scholars. For Whatcott, both the existence and the absence of archival material connect to her argument that carceral eugenics should be a scholarly concept.

Several points in this book support the existence of carceral eugenics as a concept. The first point which supports the argument being made by the author is how the terminology of 'defective' became enshrined in discourse. Meticulously interpreting archival materials spanning a period of forty years, Whatcott explores how 'defective' has been constructed as a social category. Using an intersectional approach, the author then explores how this occurred in California due to an intertwined process of racialization and a codification of gender norms. For the author, the archival materials offer relevant insights about how "more and more people were deemed to be defective," a designation which created "a number of so-called incurable patients" (Whatcott, 2024, 64). The use of these theories also strengthen the points the author makes about white supremacy.

Introducing the idea of social construction by using the category of 'defective,' Whatcott explores how racialization as well as the concept that bodies must be cisgender, heterosexual and exist in a hierarchy where cisgender men are at the top, implicitly upholds white supremacy. This racialized history of 'cisheteropatriarchy' is not specific to California and is familiar for most disability studies scholars. However, Whatcott is also writing for scholars in other disciplines as well as the general public, all of whom may be unfamiliar with this history. As a result, how she discusses the intersectionality of various

oppressions including cissexism, classism, colourism, heterosexism, sexism and various types of racism in plain language is a strength of this book.

The second point the author makes is how the key insight of her new concept, carceral eugenics, is that when analyzed as praxis, eugenics and institutions mutually reinforce each other. Whatcott argues that eugenic segregation occurs within an existing framework that upholds norms related to gender and racialization. Drawing on the work of abolitionists, Whatcott explores how carceral eugenics impacts groups of people deemed 'defective' differently, depending on how the social constructs of race and gender have been applied to them. This analysis supports the existence of carceral eugenics in a way that connects to carceral theory, queer theory, critical race theory, feminist theory and disability studies theory.

Another relevant point is how the author analyzes archival materials to uncover some hidden history about the professionalization of helping professions. The author draws connections between the pedagogies of helping professions and classism as well as cisheteropatriarchy. This analysis demonstrates through archival materials how the helping professions have upheld social inequities. Though these connections are likely familiar to most disability studies scholars, analyzing how helping professions became established in California by drawing on carceral eugenics helps show how spaces and places of confinement have always been connected to wider social inequities.

Whatcott also makes the point that carceral eugenics is intertwined with political economy. The author makes this point by critically analyzing the discourses contained

within various texts. The concept of patients within institutions engaging in labour is familiar to many critical disability studies scholars. However, in this book Whatcott introduces this conapt to an uninformed audience by connecting it to politics and the economy. As the author states, archival materials frame "inmate labour as one of the cost-saving and income-producing strategies of progressive reformers facilitating the transition from laissez-faire to the administrative state" (Whatcott, 2024, 86). Drawing on specific archival materials including photographs as well as letters by inmates, Whatcott explores how the racialized and gendered aspects of this type of labour also reflect the broader political economy.

The author also draws on architectural plans of institutions and prisons as part of her argument that carceral eugenics is a relevant concept. For Whatcott when interpreted using a theoretical lens, these architectural plans support her point that 'defectives' was a socially constructed category due to racialization and gender as well as ability. This influenced how the state determined which spaces and places of confinement deserved funding. According to the author, this was because embedded within these seemingly innocuous architectural plans was the ableist assumption that confining 'defectives' in particular ways based on racialization, gender and ability was understood to improve the political economy of the state.

In addition, analyzing the archive upholds, establishes and entrenches the norm, Whatcott also analyzes how the archival materials disrupt the norm. This point about how resistance to carceral eugenics is present in spaces and places of confinement including

institutions and prisons offers a hopeful slant on how resistance to these inequalities is inevitable. When interpreting the existing materials for evidence of these hidden histories of resistance, Whatcott uses image descriptions of archival materials to weave an emotional tapestry for the reader that contains hope. Using this metaphor, some confined individuals as well as instances of wider resistance are threads that exist within a larger tapestry of carceral eugenics. These threads are counter-narratives of resistance, counter-narratives which complicate the pattern about how carceral eugenics is an accepted norm.

The final point made by the author takes up the argument expressed in the introduction about the relevance of this new concept. The author analyzes how this expanded understanding of eugenics is relevant in contemporary times within and beyond the borders of the state of California. This book bridges the gap between academia and activism by examining how current federal policies in the U.S.A. are contemporary examples of carceral eugenics. These federal policies involve confinement and exclusion, including the detention of immigrants as well as migrants during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. By including these contemporary policies as part of this history of carceral eugenics, the author connects archival materials to contemporary times. This demonstrates how this new nuance of eugenics can inform a critique of nation-states.

One critique of this book is that carceral eugenics does not only occur within the borders of California or the larger borders of the USA. A weakness of this book is that only

one chapter examines this idea in detail. However, this is a very minor criticism since the author describes this book as a history specific to California and mentions that applying this concept to other spaces and places should be covered in-depth in future research.

Taken together, the archival materials the author analyzes show the historical outcome of carceral eugenics has been the confinement and reproductive control of those whom the broader pseudoscience of eugenics determines should not be present in an ideal world. This analysis of these archival materials is informed by a broader historical analysis, one which discusses both race and gender as relevant social constructs. I recommend this text to all scholars who are interested in understanding how theory connects to social policy.

References

Kafer, A. (2013) *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Whatcott, J. (2024) *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics.* London: Duke University Press.