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Survivor accounts of medical experimentation, solitary confinement, corporal punishment, unpaid labour, and sensory and cultural deprivation, performed under the auspices of medical practitioners and government administrators, may seem out of place in 1980s Alberta. Histories of disability, colonialism, and related research into the management and confinement of subaltern groups within Canada have shown otherwise. Claudia Malacrida's latest book, *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta's Eugenic Years*, contributes to a body of work that suggests that humane treatment is only to be expected by citizens who fit under privileged but taken-for-granted categories, while the threats of systemic violence and exploitation are often the reality for those positioned as "less than human" within our national discourses.

A Special Hell focuses on the role that eugenic thinking played in supporting the creation of hell-like conditions for people who were institutionalized as children and confined as residents—often long into adulthood—at the Michener Centre (formerly the Michener Centre for Mental Defectives) in Red Deer, Alberta. The prominent court case filed by survivor Leilani Muir brought Michener's crimes to light during a 1995 trial, generating evidence of staff's contemptuous disregard for human dignity and the routine degrading treatment of inmates. In her book, Malacrida reads Muir's trial records alongside oral history interviews with survivors and former staff and archival material from the institution to argue that the conditions experienced at Michener since its opening in 1923 through to the 1980s, were not so much unexpected as symptomatic of general institutional contexts and systems constructed to manage disabled

people. Malacrida weaves Holocaust imagery throughout this narrative, linking Michener's practices to experiences that emerged during the Nuremberg trials for Nazi war crimes. These comparisons emphasize that while the period following the development of the Nuremberg Code (1947) might have made atrocities more difficult to contemplate against "average" human subjects, those who hold sub-human status due to intellectual or other impairments, or within the context of confinement, were easily subjected to the type of treatment that was received by those who survived Michener. As Malacrida reminds us through examples such as the 2002 beating of Haseeb Chishty by a care worker (232), such individuals are likely to be subjected to violence in existing institutional contexts today.

Malacrida presents Michener's history with a sense of urgency and within the context of the ongoing debate over the closure of the Centre. She explains that advocacy groups disagree as to whether Michener, as it stands today after many improvements, has retained the characteristics that facilitated the harmful environment described in the government-commissioned Blair Report (1969), and exposed through subsequent investigations and court trials. Proponents for community living for people with intellectual disabilities warn that it does, albeit to varying extents. *A Special Hell* must be read within the context of this important debate and against the broader struggle for appropriate funding and services for people with intellectual disabilities. According to Malacrida, proponents of Michener shape their support for the institution around the lack of appropriate community housing options for people with intellectual disabilities. These groups are attuned to the present support vacuum and link the continuing need for the institution to its existence as a ready-made, financially expedient solution to this housing crisis. Malacrida presents their reasoning as an echo of earlier justifications that prevented Michener's closure (233), despite public knowledge of the violence that took place behind its closed doors.

A key insight presented throughout the book is the co-existence of competing interests held by the many stakeholders involved in the institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities. Malacrida discusses how Michener staff members, often in the interest of retaining their jobs in their Red Deer community, have at various times defended Michener despite mobilization toward its closure. While individual parents and parent groups have held differing views, presented criticism, and demanded reform, they have also fought to keep Michener open. Such a diversity of interests and viewpoints underscores the need to consider multiple and historically specific perspectives on issues of disability incarceration. Malacrida's account provides a comprehensive discussion of these complex issues, interweaving source material throughout nine chapters and offering readers different motives and insights through close readings of stories from survivors, former staff members, parents, and official institutional documentation.

The first two chapters reveal that families were often coerced into admitting their children to Michener. The lack of opportunities for education in the community made institutionalization seem necessary to many guardians. Authorities promised that these families could remain involved in their children's care while in reality, staff tried to minimize parent involvement and visits as much as possible, treating parental complaints as misguided and dismissing them with a combative tone. These dynamics add to the aura of secrecy that often surrounds total institutions, contributing to the sense of entitlement and control felt by staff and administrators over their inmates. Chapters Three and Four demonstrate that despite its putative function, Michener was conceived with a different purpose and maintained "an institutional philosophy of lifelong internment rather than one of short-term educational interventions" (41).

Following Goffman, Malacrida carefully reconstructs the structures and practices that made Michener a total institution, outlining the processes that degraded and deprived inmates. Readers encounter the autocratic superintendent and staff, and the routines of over-medication, surveillance, and deprivation of privacy through regular events that were introduced by these personnel, such as group showers. An important theme that emerges throughout these descriptions is the existence of internal hierarchies that accorded worse treatment to Low Grade inmates, inmates who were considered to be "more disabled" and subhuman. Perhaps the most extreme example of this stratification is the treatment of an inmate referred to as Vicky, who was kept in lifelong solitary and used as a spectacle and "monster" to frighten other inmates into good behaviour (120-121). Interview evidence from survivors and former staff support Malacrida's overriding argument that efficiency was pursued at the cost of meeting personal needs, shaping a system of care that ranged "from systematic neglect to systematic abuse" (92). Casual and more "unexpected" forms violence are provided as further examples of such abuses. Chapter Five describes that even within this oppressive context, some inmates gained a sense of resistance, either through subtle means or more overtly through escape attempts.

Chapters Six to Eight return to the promise of educational opportunities and better care, contrasting this with the systemic labour exploitation that occurred through unpaid work within the institution as well as through the contracting-out of inmates into unfair work arrangements in the Red Deer community. Further violence and exploitation are revealed in Chapter Nine's discussion of medical experimentation and forced sterilization. Malacrida documents the use of inmates for research purposes by Dr. Leonard Jan Le Vann, explaining that these experiments were performed without inmates' or their parents' consent or knowledge, and despite existing legislative prohibitions. Such experiments often involved unnecessary and methodologically

questionable tests that were never in the interests of the inmate. Alberta's Eugenics Board is revealed to have operated through similarly dubious processes and decision-making standards, for instance, forcibly sterilizing inmates who were already thought to be infertile (205), and allocating an average of 7.5 minutes for the adjudication of certain decisions (210).

Alongside these severe actions, Malacrida details the many barriers she encountered in accessing Michener's records. Her struggle throws into light how oppressive systems often depend on secrecy to preserve and perpetuate their power, making the importance of writing these histories all the more evident. Her methodology highlights the need to privilege the knowledge of survivors and people with intellectual and other impairments. At the same time, noticeable challenges arise from combining these source-types with more conventional archival material. For example, institutional records suggest that a policy context that enhanced the scope of Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act through a 1938 amendment facilitated non-consensual sterilization. This made common the issue of "not knowing one's medical background" (45), which causes the author to cast doubt on survivors own claims that they were not sterilized, which in turn raises important considerations about historical "truth" which may cause discomfort to readers less acquainted with these issues.

The book's broader point, that people with intellectual disabilities are too readily treated as exceptions to ethical norms and legislative standards, is made through the powerful case study of this Albertan institution. Less attention, however, is paid to historiography and to existing research on disability and confinement in other regions within Canada. While Malacrida's focus is on Michener, the conditions she describes go back a long way in Canadian eugenic history and might be brought into productive conversation with this body of research. *A Special Hell* complements earlier studies on institutionalization and sterilization undertaken by Erika Dyck

(2013) and Geoffrey Reaume (2000), and in particular Reaume's work on the Toronto Asylum, which takes an inmate-centred approach to psychiatric incarceration. This book adds valuable knowledge to histories of confinement in Canada, and although the somewhat lengthy discussion of Goddard, Dugdale, and the hereditarean stance of early eugenicists has been covered elsewhere, it provides a helpful introduction to the topic for those unfamiliar with eugenic history.

Malacrida presents an inspiring methodology that is relevant to those studying disability history and eugenics, as well as to advocates for people with intellectual disabilities concerned with the current housing crisis and the need for appropriate and equitable educational and employment opportunities. Through its nuanced analysis of institutional conditions, this study encourages Canadian disability scholars to complicate their understanding of institutionalization and to seek its characteristics in current services affecting people with intellectual disabilities and within the private group home sector. As proposals to regulate this decentralized system are promoted through new models that enhance accountability, it will be important to incorporate lessons from Michener. Indeed, *A Special Hell* offers warnings that go beyond institutionalization, drawing our attention to the contradictions between promise and practice, the similarities between care and punishment, and the exploitation of disabled people as employment-creators through service industries—all of which help bolster broader arguments about the importance of people with disabilities directing their own care and supports.

References

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