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Barri Cohen. (2022). *Unloved: Huronia's Forgotten Children*.

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"It was a deeply loveless place. There are spaces that tell people they are unloved and unloveable at every turn."

- Kate Rossiter, PhD, advocate for Huronia survivors

Barri Cohen's feature-length documentary *Unloved - Huronia's Forgotten Children* details her journey of seeking to reveal the truth about Alfie and Louis, her two long-deceased half-brothers. In the 1950s, the two were both institutionalized at the Huronia Regional Centre in Orillia (1887 - 1971) (Hartil 2022), a "home" for people we would now identify as having intellectual disabilities. One of these brothers, we discover, was quietly buried in an unmarked grave in his early childhood after dying in the institution. Though Cohen hauntingly explores the personal grief of never knowing her abandoned siblings, made exponentially more poignant in her discovery of the ableist abuse and neglect they faced at Huronia, the lens of the personal also expands to provide a damning indictment of this institution, the attitudes and policies that enabled its existence and practises, and the courage and resilience of its survivors.

We ourselves write from the perspectives of the bereaved father and sister of a child with Down Syndrome (Jacob, 2001 - 2005) whose many additional medical complications rendered him fragile and in need of constant careful attention — but for whom the combination of more positive contemporary attitudes towards people with disabilities, along with a reasonably well-resourced universal health care system, enabled him to live in his family home with us. There, he

gave and received love, thrived when he was able, and experienced genuine joy in living. It was, therefore, particularly heartbreaking for us to witness this portrayal of the biopower (Foucault 2007) of the eugenics-obsessed state in goading parents into choosing institutionalization, and the subsequent refusal of the institution to recognize the humanity of its “clients,” ultimately denying that they possessed “lives worthy of life”. (Hodge 2016, p. 1)

Using a range of film vocabulary, Cohen aptly combines aerial footage of the large institution, intimate decades-old family snapshots and films, haunting archival photography from inside the institution, and similarly haunting contemporary footage of its now-abandoned, barren rooms of abuse and neglect. Screen captioning is used to emphasize important names and concepts, policy documents, and historical news and documentary footage, the latter of which suggests that the abuses at Huronia continued well after there was public awareness of them. The stark contrast between the seemingly comfortable, and often fun, middle-class life enjoyed by Cohen and her brother and the squalid conditions endured by her siblings is conveyed poignantly. Early on, the film jarringly lists the former names of the institution, with most of the names combining “Huronia” with references to disability diagnoses we would now find ugly, degrading and extremely deficit-based.

It is our opinion that no child should be subject to institutionalization. Even by the standards of the time, however, the film demonstrates that many of Huronia’s residents were abandoned not on the basis of parental inability to provide care for exceptional needs based on clear diagnoses — rather, many parents of the time were simply unable to afford caring for children of neurodiverse or neurotypical identities under a capitalist system which offered inappropriate social safety nets. Themes of systemic neglect combined with exploitive capitalism are further developed when we learn that the interned children, deemed unfit and too

unmanageable to live with their families, were often tasked with caring for any children younger than themselves, as well as performing most of the kitchen and cleaning duties that comprised the needful routines of the institution.

More harrowing still is the direct recounting of the extent of Huronia's abusive and neglectful practices from survivors. By way of interviews spread throughout the film, they detail the squalor, mental, physical, and sexual abuse, forced medication, and isolation they faced at Huronia — some of which must surely have been causes, or at least contributors, to the many deaths at the institution, and the subsequent hiding-away of bodies in unmarked graves. Again, the filmmaker's talent shows up in the variety of techniques she employs to convey the extent of these practices, from the aforementioned interviews, to unsettling medical records, to the ghostly depiction of abandoned rooms still marked with the scratches of children's fingernails, showing how victims tried, impossibly, to scrape their way out of confinement. Cohen makes a fitting comparative reference to the Indian residential schools as a part of this exploration, which connects thematically to one survivor's comments about having been harassed and bullied by others at the institution for being Indigenous; this episode adds a useful component of intersectionality to the film, demonstrating that survivors' experiences were complex and subject to a variety of influences even within the general climate of abuse and neglect. While the interviews themselves are in equal parts powerful and heartbreaking, though, one small nitpick we have is that the use of music during these portions at times seemed unnecessary; the most haunting moments of these interviews occurred when music was sparse-to-nonexistent, leaving nothing to distract from the voices of the storytellers, so the occasional use of louder, more noticeable background music sometimes felt as though it took away from the stories it was used

for. That said, it speaks to the overall quality of the film that there is little criticism beyond this that we feel is particularly worthy of mention.

Archival media, along with propaganda footage and documents, are also well-employed to suggest that the provincial and federal governments at the time (especially from the late 1940s - 1970s) knew about the abusive practises and wildly disproportionate child mortality rates at Huronia, and chose not to effectively intervene — we say “effectively intervene” because the government, after running a particularly embarrassing feature news story about the institution, *did* intervene by producing a propaganda documentary depicting the “excellent” treatment the residents were receiving, noting how it would surely be even better with charitable contributions.

As necessarily dark as much of the film is, the strongest impression we were left with in the end was that of the incredible resiliency of the survivors. Even with the lasting trauma their experiences in the institution left them with, the community of survivors shows themselves determined to leave a lasting impact. Through highlighting their pursuit of legal action against Huronia, their commitment to telling their stories, and their memorials to the victims of the institution who did not make it out, the film presents us with a group of people actively demanding accountability and working for real change — but also prioritizing their own healing, in whatever small ways possible. We see how each of them have created post-institutional lives which are truly worth living, through engaging with family, with art, and with entrepreneurship, and continuing to offer each other incredible amounts of support and solidarity. Even having experienced great anguish at this film’s masterful depiction of the extremes of socially endorsed cruelty, we nonetheless feel our strongest memories of it will be of those of these scarred, yet beautiful survivors carving out lives of meaning and richness in defiance of the ugliness of their former imprisonment. For both general and academic audiences we highly recommend this film.

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