

## Eugenics and Disability

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### Introduction

For the past 30 years, there has been consistent academic interest in the history of eugenics and in its contemporary significance and resonance, an interest sparked in part by the historian Daniel Kevles' *In the Name of Eugenics* and by the work of the legal scholar Paul Lombardo on the famous Buck vs Bell case (Kevles 1985; Lombardo 2009). More recently, this interest has spiked and the ways in which eugenics has been taken up within the academy has diversified. Since 2010, for example, we have seen the publication of a major handbook on the history of eugenics (Bashford and Levine 2010), several journals that have dedicated special issues to eugenics (Wolbring 2013, Dyck 2014), monographs exploring eugenics in North America in more detail (Lombardo 2011, Begos et al. 2012, Hansen and King 2013), books focused particularly on eugenics in Alberta (Harris-Zsovan 2010 and Dyck 2013), and the appearance of eugenic survivor testimony and memoirs (Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada N.d., 2015, Muir 2014).

This bubble of academic interest can be juxtaposed against two dissonant social contexts. First, in the early 2000s, there were official apologies from the governments of four of the thirty-one American States to have passed eugenic sterilization laws: Virginia, Oregon, and North Carolina in 2002, and California in 2003. These apologies themselves followed in the wake of over 700 settled legal actions in Alberta brought by sterilization survivors against the government of Alberta, Canada, for wrongful confinement and sterilization under the province's Sexual Sterilization Act, as well as revelations of the relative recency of eugenic sterilization in the Scandinavian countries (Broberg and Roll-Hansen 1996). Second, in the past few years it has been revealed that sexual sterilization continues to be practiced in several disparate circumstances : for example, on women and girls with intellectual disabilities in Australia (Women with Disabilities Australia 2013,

The Senate 2013), and on women in the California prison system (Johnson 2013). While the settlements and apologies aimed to make it clear that eugenics was a matter of a regrettable past, that view of eugenics appears undermined by the ongoing sterilization of just the sorts of people who were the target of past eugenics policies and laws.

In the intersection between eugenics past and present, disability has never been far beneath the surface. Perceived and ascribed disabilities of body and mind were one of the core sets of eugenics traits that provided the basis for institutionalized and sterilization on eugenic grounds for the first 75 years of the 20th-century. Since that time, the eugenic preoccupation with the character of future generations has seeped into what have become everyday practices in the realm of reproductive choice. As Marsha Saxton (2000) and Adrienne Asch (2000, 2003) have forcefully argued, the use of prenatal screening technologies to facilitate the selective abortion of fetuses with features that signify disabling traits—the paradigm here being trisomy 21 in a fetus indicating Down Syndrome in the child—express a negative view of such disabilities sufficient to warrant terminating an otherwise wanted pregnancy. The eliminative structure of what Rosemary Garland Thompson (2012) has called *eugenic logic* persists in contemporary practices governing reproductive choice, social inclusion, and democratic participation and their relationship to disability.

The tie between eugenics and contemporary disability studies suggests that eugenics and reflection on its history can also play a more positive role in disability politics. After focusing on eugenics in the first half of the paper, we will shift in the second half of the paper to eugenic resonances in contemporary thought and practice, concluding with some thoughts about ongoing practices of silencing and the very idea of eradicating disability. We begin with a brief, general characterization of eugenics and to its dual status as part science, part social movement.

## **What was and is eugenics?**

Eugenics coalesced as a cluster of ideas and practices in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Part science, part social movement, eugenics gave rise to social policies and laws across much of the globe throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. In general terms, eugenic laws

and policies aimed to improve human populations over time by changing the composition of future generations. A three-part characterization of eugenics allows one to be more precise about just what eugenics is that acknowledges its status as a hybrid of science and social movement. Eugenics is

- (i) an applied science advocating ideas, practices, and policies that
- (ii) aim to improve the quality of human lives across generations
- (iii) by changing the composition of particular human populations to produce more desirable and/or fewer undesirable people.

While eugenics could instead be characterized as a scientifically-inspired social movement with the aim articulated in (ii) and the means described in (iii), marking eugenics as an applied science both better captures the way that eugenics has been conceived by its most influential proponents—for example, Francis Galton, Charles Davenport, and Alfred Ploetz—and conveys the intrinsic connection between eugenics and science that was responsible for establishing the credibility of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth-century.

Eugenic laws and policies sought to achieve the goal of human improvement over generational time in at least four ways : by (1) prohibiting or restricting marriage between certain sorts of people; (2) promoting certain ideals for what ‘fitter families’ looked like and how they behaved; (3) regulating immigration by favouring the immigration of some groups of people over others; and (4) restricting reproductive ability through sexual sterilization. While policies and laws of all of these kinds were in place in many countries prior to the late 19-century, with the articulation of eugenics as an explicit ideology they received more direct, unified justifications that appealed to what was mandated by the good of society and demanded by social progress.

Eugenic policies and laws were responses to a variety of social ills—criminality, moral degeneration, the “rising tide of color”, the menace of the feeble-minded—that were sometimes viewed as posing grave threats to the future of humanity. Eugenics was to provide a systematic framework for averting these threats. By cultivating eugenic mind-sets in the malleable population, and by imposing state-sponsored restrictions on immigration, marriage, and reproductive choice, proponents of eugenics saw themselves

as developing and promulgating a *meliorative science*, one that would provide a systematic basis for intergenerational improvement in the human race.

Yet eugenics was not simply science in the service of social betterment; it was also science that reflected certain social values, and whose social direction differentially and detrimentally affected the lives of people perceived to have, in effect, some kind of subhuman status. The laws most readily associated with eugenics were, after all, *sterilization laws*, laws that allowed or even mandated a life-changing, surgical intervention on the bodies of people deemed to possess one or more eugenic traits.

The most prominently listed such trait in sterilization laws was *feeble-mindedness*. 90% (30 of 33) of the state or provincial jurisdictions in North America that passed eugenic sterilization laws list feeble-mindedness as grounds for sterilization, with feeble-mindedness featuring in over 70% (49 of 68) of the statutes and amended laws governing eugenic sterilization on the continent (see Table 1).

<b>Trait / Ground</b>	<b>Statute frequency (total = 68)</b>	<b>Frequency by state/ province (total = 33)</b>
Feeble-mindedness	49	30
Insanity	41	26
Epilepsy	32	21
Criminality	28	16
Imbecility	24	16
Idiocy	23	17

Sexual perversion / depravity	21	12
Mentally unfit / deficient	15	8
Moral depravity	14	8
Rape	7	7
Mental disease / illness	7	5

TABLE 1: Eugenic Traits in North American Eugenic Sterilization Laws

Those deemed to be feeble-minded came increasingly to be confined in institutions with the rise of eugenics, and sterilization was often seen as a justifiable intervention on the bodily integrity and reproductive freedom of the feeble-minded. In effect, the feeble-minded were regarded as a subhuman kind of creature, one whose freedom, bodily integrity, and reproductive future could all be compromised in the name of eugenics. Although that compromise was brokered initially through the explicit intervention of the state, as we will suggest in the second half of the paper, successors to “the feeble-minded” continue to be subhumanized without the guiding hand of the state in contemporary neoliberal societies.

### **From Social Problems to Eugenic Science**

The intricate and many-layered relationship of eugenics to science starts with a shorthand version of Sir Francis Galton’s original definition of eugenics as “the science of improving stock”. Eugenics was originally conceived as a new science emerging from the findings of a range of nascent sciences, including anthropology and criminology in

the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and genetics and psychiatry in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. During the years between the two World Wars many central claims made by eugenicists were critiqued by scientists in these disciplines, leading Daniel Kevles famously to distinguish between *mainline eugenics*—with its focus on hereditarian views of race, ethnicity, and class—and *reform eugenics*—which in distancing itself from the reductionism of mainline eugenics brought a greater level of scientific respect to eugenics. In more recent years, however, forms of eugenics (e.g., liberal eugenics) have been defended as both an inevitable outcome of biotechnologies and respect for autonomous choice (Kitcher 2003) and as a desirable and even morally mandated view of parenting (Savulescu 2001). Understanding the shifting and varied roles that science has played in eugenics requires an appreciation of the ways in which science and values are intertwined.

In coining the term “eugenics” in his *Inquiries into the Human Faculty*, Galton characterized eugenics as “the science of improving stock ... to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable” (1883:24-25). Here Galton identifies eugenics as an explicatively meliorative enterprise, one concerned with improvement of some kind within a population that contains the “more suitable” and the “less suitable”. As such, the science of eugenics presupposes questions about value: which races or strains of blood are more suitable, and which less suitable, and why?

Galton’s earlier studies *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and *English Men of Science* (1874) made it clear that the more suitable “strains of blood” were those found in family lineages with high levels of social and professional accomplishment. Part of Galton’s own aim was to establish grounds for the view that “talents” and “character”, both thought of as mental traits of people, were subject as much to hereditary transmission as were physical traits. In pursuit of that goal, Galton both drew on and made significant contributions to, statistical techniques for studying populations, such as regression and the analysis of covariance (Mackenzie 1981). The reliance of early work in eugenics on social statistics, measurement, and analysis, contributed to a view of eugenics as scientific in nature.

Eugenic views of some of these “less suitable” races and “strains of blood” were incorporated directly from common perceptions of certain groups of people who represented social problems for late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western societies: the poor, the

alcoholic, the feeble-minded. Because of the role of eugenic ideas in regulating socially undesirable populations through the innovation of scientific concepts and techniques that anchored and quantified negative claims about such people, eugenics was tightly entwined with notions of normalcy and social deviance (Rose 1985, Davis 1995).

Around the time that Galton was attempting to show that talent and ability were heritable by examining the patterns of reputation, accomplishment, and profession in British elite families, concerns about expanding reliance on public charity in the state of New York generated the first what became a very influential series of family studies, the study of the family known pseudonymously as “The Jukes”. Based on public health work in the mid-1870s by Elisha Harris, a doctor specializing in infectious diseases who later became the corresponding secretary of the New York Prison Association, Richard Dugdale’s *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*, was motivated by a concern with understanding poverty, criminality, and alcoholism. Beginning as part of the 1874 annual report of the Prison Association to the New York state legislature, this study was published in book form in 1877, with further reflections on its implications presented at a Conference of Boards of Public Charities that same year (Rafter 1988).

The study itself focused on constructing genealogies of 42 families that could be traced to a common ancestor. A putatively disproportionate number of these family members were imprisoned, had engaged in behaviour deemed criminal or immoral, or were economically impoverished. Despite Dugdale’s own resistance to hereditarian explanations of the genealogies that he identified, *The Jukes* became a model for future studies—The Tribe of Ismael, The Kallikaks, The Nam Family—and was often cited in those studies. Many such studies were funded directly by the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor and published by members of its staff, most notably Arthur Estabrook, and by prominent figures at state institutions, such as Henry Goddard, whose work was supported by the Eugenics Record Office. Collectively these family studies played an influential role both in the science of eugenics and in the social movement of eugenics that this research fed.

The “less suitable” also included, as Galton made clear, certain “races”. Here folk views that reflected nineteenth-century racist biases were incorporated into and

reinforced by science, in this case the science of anthropology. Eugenics took racial categories, such as “Black” and “Indian”, as biologically distinct kinds of people, each associated with a suit of different characteristics that made them more or less suitable for civilization and its requirements. The German term *Rassenhygiene*, introduced in 1895 by Alfred Ploetz in Germany and usually translated as “racial hygiene” was, in essence the term for eugenics, and came to be associated through Ploetz with the superiority of the Aryan race in twentieth-century Nazism.

### **From Science to Social Policy**

If anthropology, criminology, and the development of social statistics provided the scientific grounding for the origins of eugenics, genetics, psychology, and psychiatry can be taken as the sciences that facilitated the transition of eugenics from the realm of ideas to social policy. Although “genetics” was coined by William Bateson only in 1906, the idea that eugenic traits ran in families was typically underwritten by some kind of appeal to hereditary material that was passed down a family lineage. Likewise, the idea that mental defectiveness or feeble-mindedness was at the root of what made people “less suitable” was given its scientific grounding in psychology and psychiatry through the rise of psychological testing, the regimentation of scientific categories of mental deficiency, such as “imbecile” and “moron”, and the development of formal manuals of psychiatric classification.

Much of the scientific work here was done by institutions established as part of the eugenics movement. For example, the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor in the United States, and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in Berlin, Germany, both supported scientific research that collected statistics on traits putatively running in families. Scientists at the ERO significantly expanded both the list of traits and the kind of people that fell within the purview of eugenics, including Hebrews, Greeks, Slovenians and other ethnic and national groups as “races”, and subjecting traits such as thalassophilia (love of the sea) and rebelliousness, to eugenic analysis (Allen 1986).



The scientific credibility of both the research and research personnel were influential in policies governing immigration, education, and the lives of marginalized people. For example, Harry Laughlin from the Eugenics Record Office was an expert witness to the committee that shepherded the restrictive Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 in the United States. In Canada, eugenicists with influential scientific authority included the psychiatrist Charles Kirk Clark, who linked feeble-mindedness and mental deficiency in Canada to immigration from southern and eastern Europe, and Helen MacMurchy, the first woman to graduate from medicine at the University of Toronto, who became Ontario's Inspector of the Feeble-Minded in 1915. Clark's role as the medical director for the Canadian National Committee on Mental Hygiene, and MacMurchy's publication of the widely-read *The Almosts: A Study of the Feeble-Minded* (1920) were instrumental in reinforcing both hereditarian views of mental deficiency and sterilization as a policy response to the putative menace of the feeble-minded.

## **Eugenics and Sorts of People**

As we have seen, eugenic ideas, laws, and policies were often cast explicitly in terms of a person's having certain kinds of socially undesirable *properties*, such as feeble-mindedness, mental deficiency, or psychosis. However, in practice eugenics has operated in both popular culture and in science in terms of the corresponding sorts or kinds of *people*: the feeble-minded, the mentally deficient, and psychotics. One may wonder about the significance of this perhaps innocent-looking shift from talk of people with certain properties to sorts of people, especially in reflecting on the resurgence of eugenic thinking in contemporary contexts. What role does distinguishing between various sorts of people, and attaching a differential value to those sorts of people, play in both the history of eugenics and its contemporary aftermath?

Thinking of there being distinctive sorts of people is one response to the perception of human variation. This response, however, was not new with eugenics in the nineteenth-century. In fact, thinking about members of our species in terms of various sorts or kinds can be found in ancient civilizations and is often bound up with the very idea of what it is to be human. Many societies, including those of ancient China and ancient Greece, refer

to themselves with terms that are associated with full humanity, whereas they refer to people from alien cultures and distant lands with terms that lack that association. For example, for the ancient Greeks, “barbarians” were people who did not speak fully human language, merely “ba-ba”ing instead. The idea of there being different sorts of people across time and space, not all of whom are valued equally, is many thousands of years old (Lloyd 2012).

We can approach the eugenic development of this appeal to sorts or kinds of people by reflecting a little further on the nature of human variation. Human beings vary in an unlimited number of ways. People have different heights and weights, different hair and eye colour, and different physical and mental abilities. Some variation, such as that with respect to height and weight, is continuous: the varying characteristic or property exists on a continuum. Other variation, such as that with respect to hair and eye colour, is discrete, or at least is usually thought of as such: there are a relatively small number of categories used to classify the variation here, such as blonde, brown, black, or red (for hair colour), or blue, brown, or green (for eye colour). Both continuous and discrete variation can be the basis for distinguishing between sorts of people, such as when we distinguish tall from short people, or, moving to categories that wear their evaluative dimension more clearly on their sleeve, such as when we distinguish fat from skinny people.

Some of this variation matters more to us than does other variation. For example, variation with respect to skin colour, language spoken, and cultural practices and affiliations have been highly salient in human history. They have been the basis not simply for distinguishing between sorts of people on the basis of race and culture, but for the differential and often discriminatory treatment of the resulting different sorts of people.

Eugenic policies and laws here straddled everyday, “folk” categories and categories for classifying sorts of people that are the result of scientific practice. For example, during the eugenic heyday, “idiots”, “imbeciles” and “morons” were sorts of people who were characterized in terms of their level of putative mental deficiency, where that level corresponded to the IQ score those people gained on one or more standardized psychological tests. Here “idiot” and “imbecile” moved from their origin as folk

categories to receive some kind of scientific regimentation; the term “moron”, by contrast, was invented by Goddard (1912) specifically to name the highest grade of feeble-minded person as the potentially most dangerous of the feeble-minded, given their ability to pass as normal. The kind of thinking that drove eugenic family studies, such as those of “The Jukes” and “The Nams”, also utilized folk categories of people, such as paupers, criminals, and the sexually promiscuous, to pick out sorts of people whose continuing family lineage was viewed as contributing significantly to ongoing social problems resolvable by eugenic intervention (Rafter 1988).

It is in part because of this straddling of folk and scientific views that eugenic thinking has survived the late twentieth-century distaste for eugenic sterilization laws and policies. In a world with heightened sensitivity to reproductive autonomy and increased technological capacity to channel that autonomy, eugenics remains more than a historical idea in contemporary societies.

## **Newgenic Practices**

Focusing largely on reproductive technologies, scientific and medical advances have overhauled eugenic practices since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century—giving rise to what is often termed new eugenics, or “newgenics.” Prenatal screening and diagnosis for “abnormalities” such as trisomy 21 and spinal-bifida are now regularly encouraged by medical professionals (Skotko 823) and have become a routine part of family planning. Although the numbers vary, of all the Down Syndrome cases detected prenatally, 88% of those in Europe (Boyd et al., 2004) and around 85% of those in the US (Natoli, et al., 2012) result in a termination of pregnancy.

New technologies such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) and *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) are capable of screening for disability while avoiding the more pointed moral quandaries of selective abortion. PGD is already being used to profile embryos with Down Syndrome and neural tube “defects”; a newgenic future where prospective parents can select from a set of embryos the most desirable (or “enhanced”) before implantation is not that far away.

The bioethicist and philosopher Robert Sparrow has argued (2013) that an even more extensive and deliberate form of newgenics, which he terms “*in vitro* eugenics,” is lurking on the biomedical horizon. Scientists hypothesize that in the not-too-distant future it will be possible to create human gametes from human stem cells. Sparrow argues that this technology will enable the *in vitro* production of multiple generations by repeatedly deriving and then combining gametes from a) the stem cells of the newly formed embryo and b) different stem-cell lines. Proceeding through multiple generations of embryos in the laboratory before implantation holds the possibility of producing desired genotypes and deliberately raising the quality of “human stock” without the messy business of non-consensual sterilization and selective abortions. Moreover, unlike PGD, and as Sparrow points out *in vitro* eugenics is not limited by the chance recombination of genes, but is a deliberate selection process.

While perhaps dazzling and portending of a brave new world, these newgenic technologies are of course neither a clean break from, nor coterminous with, early twentieth century eugenic practices. It is an uneven relationship that must carefully be untangled.

## **Backdoors to Eugenics**

One link between old and new forms of eugenics is a continuing preoccupation with the science of genetics and with the control and direction of human populations through an enhanced grasp of human genetics in particular. This preoccupation has been adapted to shifts in the science of genetics itself, particularly as it has progressed beyond Mendelian to incorporate population and molecular models of genetics. This progression initiated a shift amongst eugenicists away from the characterological study of “types” of people that marked early forms of eugenics towards a statistical consideration of human “traits” triggered by specific genetic markers. As eugenicist Frederick Osborn explained already in 1940:

Eugenics in a democracy seeks not to breed men to a single type, but to raise the average level of human variations, reducing variations tending toward poor health,

low intelligence, and anti-social character, and increasing variations at the highest levels of activity (296–97; as quoted in McWhorter 2009:249).

A focus on statistical traits at the level of populations recognizes the genetic diversity within groups and thus purportedly steers clear of the racist, classist, and ableist typology of early eugenics. At the same time, molecular genetics locates desirable and undesirable human traits at the level of DNA sequences. The Human Genome Project has emboldened the search for genetic markers of disability in the hope of “banishing genetic disability” (Watson 228). Going molecular, like focusing on statistical traits, allows for the pursuit of the general eugenic goal of improving human populations while ostensibly avoiding the categorization of *types* of “less desirable” people tracked through blood lines.

It is accordingly important to note that for many contemporary geneticists, historians, and bioethicists, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century eugenics was simply bad science, although they find little to object to in the idea of enhancing the traits found prevalently in human populations. Renewing the now ill-fated eugenic project requires denigrating early eugenic science and social policies, while recoding contemporary discourse and practices to sharply distinguish the old from the new. For example, Nicholas Agar proclaims that, “experts on human genetics consulted by the prospective parents of tomorrow’s liberal societies will give vastly better scientific advice than that given by Hitler’s scientific lackeys” (2004:7). Enhancing humans by manipulating traits is altogether different. For bioethicists, much as for historians, eugenics *is* past.

Yet when all is settled, the fact remains that intellectually disabled people are disproportionately targeted by newgenetic practices. Cognitive disability may no longer be a subhuman *kind* in the scientific and bioethics literature as feeble-mindedness was, but it remains an especially undesirable trait. Another way of understanding the transition from eugenics to newgenetics is thus through what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has termed “eugenic logic”—the belief that “our world would be a better place if disability could be eliminated” (2012:339-40). Perversely echoing Hannah Arendt’s indictment of Adolf Eichmann for claiming “any right to determine who should and should not inhabit the world” (Arendt 2006:279), eugenic logic asks “why should the world we make and occupy together include disability at all?” (Garland-Thomson 2012:340).

Garland-Thomson argues that while eugenic logic manifests itself in a wide array of practices and discourses—from segregation to extermination and from practical health programs to social justice initiatives—at its core it is necessarily eliminativist (2012:340). That is, no matter the means of execution, disability both can and should be rooted out of populations to produce a better world. The utopian edge to eugenic logic follows from the rendering of disability as an inevitable suffering and a tragic mutation of the human condition. Disability in this reading is subhumanizing, alienating us through pain, stigma, suffering, dependency, and limitations (2012:340) from our status as proper humans. As Mitchell and Snyder have suggested, disability is the master trope of human disqualification (2003, 861). The ubiquitous and presumptive nature of eugenic logic—e.g., *obviously*, high IQs are better than low IQs; *obviously*, being sighted is better than being blind (McWhorter 2009:249)—calls into question the possibility of newgenic practices overcoming the horizon of ableism.

## **Bioethics and Eugenic Logic**

Given this doubt, it is worth reflecting on contemporary bioethical discourse to discern how eugenic logic has been smuggled into newgenic practices. As foreshadowed by Osborn, advocates of newgenics attempt to sever the old from the new, fostering human improvement without explicitly devaluing certain types of human lives.

One such newgenic perspective is what Agar terms “liberal eugenics.” As a radical form of reproductive freedom, liberal eugenics spurns state involvement in the figurations of a good human life and advances “the development of a wide range of technologies of enhancement ensuring that prospective parents were fully informed about what kinds of people these technologies would make” (Agar 2004:5). In perfect liberal fashion, parents’ *individual* conceptions of the good life direct the selection of preferable traits for their child, and parents “will acknowledge the right of their fellow citizens to make completely different eugenic choices” (Agar 2004:6).

This *laissez-faire* approach to eugenics has struck many as irresponsible and incapable of avoiding the horrors of early twentieth century eugenic practices. While Agar maintains that liberal eugenics endorses a pluralistic view of the good life (vi), he fails to

take seriously the ubiquity of eugenic logic that disposes individuals to equate disability with suffering, pity, and something to be avoided at all costs.

Agar has more recently amended his position to restrict procreative choices “likely to result in harm either to the child or to society” (Agar 2013:286). Yet in the same breath he demands a high threshold for proof of harm and explicitly lays the onus on those claiming harm to present sufficient and “demonstrable, rather than merely theoretical” evidence. Given, as we will argue below, that eugenic logic (a) does not circulate within a neutral arena but renders disability a profitable neoliberal commodity, and (b) operates in part through techniques of silencing and discrediting those it excludes, the demand for burden of proof is far less equitable than Agar would like to admit.

Julian Savulescu takes a different approach than Agar, arguing that autonomy is simply not a strong enough principle to guide reproductive ethics. Liberalism, in Savulescu’s view, can do little against morally implausible views of the good life. Sustaining his theory of reproductive ethics is thus what Savulescu terms the principle of Procreative Beneficence (PB):

If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life can be expected, in light of the relevant available information, to go best or at least not worse than any of the others (Savulescu and Kahane 2009:274).

PB claims that given a choice, parents have a moral obligation to produce children with the best chance of the best life. PGD and selective abortions are encouraged by Savulescu to maximize the advantage of one’s child. Since PB is a maximizing principle, it is not enough to claim, for example, that choosing a deaf child will lead to a good life within a Deaf community. One must argue that in choosing deafness parents are promoting an outcome in which the child will have a *better* life than if she was not deaf.

Thus while Savulescu and Kahane concede that the constitution of a “best life” upon which PB is premised remains highly contestable and cannot be agreed upon positively, he insists that “there is considerable consensus about the particular traits or states that make life better or worse, a consensus that would rule out many procreative choices as grossly unreasonable” (Savulescu and Kahane 2009:279). This “considerable consensus”

operates within the milieu of eugenic logic that construes disability as a tragic suffering (Barker and Wilson N.d.).

Moreover, Savulescu and Kahane's reliance on eugenic logic leads him to trite conclusions like: "We all vary in our abilities and our disabilities. To a degree, we all suffer from disability" (Savulescu and Kahane 2009:290). Such sentiments erase from our consciousness of the lived realities of disability, often situated along multiple axes of oppression (Withers 11), and paradoxically usher in its eradication. Stating that "we all suffer from disability" veils the eliminative abortion rates of Down Syndrome fetuses and the fact that autistic self-advocates are currently fighting for their survival against well-funded organizations such as Autism Speaks that are, by contrast, actively working to "cure" and ultimately stamp out autism.

Savulescu and Kahane echo Agar in erecting a public/private divide to distinguish newgenic practices from the unfortunate and misguided eugenic practices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. PB, like liberal eugenics for Agar, steers clear of eugenics (a term Savulescu refuses to employ in relation to PB) insofar as eugenics, in a tripartite censure, was a state-level project of producing a better population through coercive tactics (Savulescu 2001:424). Reproductive choices and PB are rather a distinctly *private* enterprise that aim not at producing better populations, but a best child through morally informed choices of what constitutes a good life (Savulescu 2001:424). The aggregate effects of individual choices informed by eugenic logic do not register for Savulescu as morally relevant. As a private enterprise, reproductive choices are not political considerations.

However, what neither Savulescu and Kahane nor Agar appreciate is that eugenic logic is agnostic towards social organization; it is highly adaptable, working just as well bottom-up as top-down. In early twentieth century discourse and practices, eugenic logic circulated explicitly and unabashed. It has since gone underground and, as Troy Duster quips, snuck in through the backdoor: "The fact that the banner of health, medicine, and science waves over the new biotechnologies has lulled us into a complacency, even a receptivity, to a re-hearing of claims made a century ago when the science of human genetics, in its infancy, was most seductive" (Duster 2003:130). In our liberal, post-colonial, and post-holocaust society we now talk benignly of human lives that are "advantaged" or "preferable" rather than seeking human perfection measured against a



hegemonically “normal” subject. Yet the underlying eliminativist logic remains largely the same: the world would be better without disability.

## **Diversity and Neoliberalism**

Agar and Savulescu respectively insist that liberal eugenics and PB are not eugenic in the sense of improving human stock due to their liberal and utilitarian trappings (Agar 2004:vi; Savulescu 2001:424; Savulescu and Kahane 2009:282). However, given the ideological and socio-economic shifts that have occurred since early 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenic practices—from the welfare state to neoliberalism, and from a disciplinary to a control society—why would one expect eugenics to look the same? Indeed, we will suggest that while eugenics’ internal logic has altered little, it has been augmented and depoliticized by neoliberalism.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, normalcy has been a central concept used to sort those deemed worthy of inhabiting the world from those who are not. Yet while normalcy is still often quoted as driving contemporary eugenic practices (cf. Armer 2007:90), this cannot simply be assumed. Lennard Davis, who in 1995 wrote the landmark book *Enforcing Normalcy*, has more recently argued that ‘diversity’ is replacing ‘normal’ as the reigning ideology in the cultural imaginary. The shift away from a universal standard of embodiment (Davis 2013:3) towards a liberal valuing of heterogeneity is captured well by a recent slogan for Tylenol: “get back to normal...whatever your normal is.™” Within a post-colonial and globalized society, the concept of normalcy as a hegemonic gold standard can no longer maintain appearances in the public realm. More importantly, and as this advertisement hints at, ‘normalcy’ is too monolithic a category for neoliberalism to exploit optimally. The ideology of diversity, on the other hand, generates an endless configuration of marketable traits through which we become increasingly enmeshed and complicit within neoliberalism. Trading on normalcy is no longer profitable, so human variation has—quite literally in this example—been trademarked. In a final move that reanimates a universal human identity, neoliberalism reduces diversity to consumption through the logic of market functioning. As neoliberalism would have it, race, gender, and disability dissolve under the common banner of consumption.

Although Davis is not explicitly concerned with eugenics in this analysis, we suggest the (ostensible) displacement of normalcy provides an important cue for understanding contemporary eugenic practices. Consider first that for Davis, the sustainability of diversity as an ideology requires the suppression of the abject or hypermarginalized (2013:13). As he argues, “You can’t have a statement like ‘we are different, and we celebrate that diversity’ without having some suppressed idea of a norm that defines difference in the first place” (2013:9). ‘Diversity’ must quell the spectacularly and incurably disabled in order to maintain itself. Davis points out that it is difficult to imagine neoliberalism celebrating “homeless people, impoverished people, end-stage cancer patients, the comatose, heroin, crack, or methamphetamine addicts” (2013:4). These, and other custodial forms of disability such as Tay-Sachs and spina-bifida, are resistant to the flow of neoliberal capital; they are the “outside” that must be excluded to make ‘diversity’ culturally and economically salient.

Put otherwise, the hypermarginalized are the remainders of a system, what Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1971) termed the medical-industrial complex, in the business of investing highly mobile and malleable subjects with capital. The rapid growth and consolidation of corporatized medicine, in the estimation of Estes, Harrington, and Pellow (2000), has led to attenuated rather than increased care. This is to be expected from an industry driven by profit weighed only against the need for “healthy” and productive human capital needed for the stability of private capital (1817). The totalizing logic of neoliberalism thus marks the fantastically and incurably disabled as disposable, or, as Davis suggests in reference to Giorgio Agamben, as *zoë*, bare life (2013:4). It is no surprise that the choice *not* to select against Tay-Sachs or spina-bifida is unintelligible within this milieu.

## **Eugenics as Private Enterprise**

By itself, the hypermarginalization of fantastically and incurably disabled bodies results in nothing new, a rehashing of eugenic anxieties for a new era. However, the exclusion of these bodies makes space for an emergent form of eugenics under the banner of

difference. Davis claims that disability is too rigid a social category ever to be included within the neoliberal category of ‘diversity’ (2013:6), but this claim is perhaps premature. Jasbir Puar has argued that the binaries of normal/abnormal, abled/disabled have been increasingly dismantled by neoliberal formulations of health, agency, and choice. “All bodies,” she argues, “are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity. . . . [T]here is no such thing as an ‘adequately abled’ body anymore” (Puar 2013:182). The gradation and constant modulation of ‘ability’ is profitable for capitalism insofar it is not attainable once and for all. Rather, “In neoliberal, biomedical, and biotechnological terms, the body is always debilitated in relation to its ever-expanding potentiality” (Puar 2013:180). Note that while Davis’ claim is incomplete, Puar’s formulation of “debility” as a continual and productive modulation of bodily capacities conversely seems implausible without Davis’ insistence that hypermarginalized bodies are erased.

From this perspective (and whether unwittingly or not), Savulescu is not wrong to conclude that “to a degree, we all suffer from disability” (2001:290). The first segment of this statement, “to a degree,” acknowledges the necessary exclusion of certain forms of disability from the neoliberal equation, while the latter is complicit with the shift, as foreshadowed by Donna Haraway (1991:161), from perfection to optimization. Within this logic, biomedical enhancements such as genetic therapy do not aim at normalcy but, as Savulescu indicates throughout his discussion of PB, at fluid and infinitely productive notions of health, enhancement, and advantage. These notions and corresponding bodies are deeply invested with neoliberal capital, sustaining entire industries (Ben-Moshe 2013; Charlton 1998) at often tremendous economic cost to individuals that further stratifies socio-economic inequalities (Puar 2013:177; Cf. Himmelstein et al., 2007).

Agar and Savulescu distance their reproductive ethics from eugenics by emphasizing that the latter were public interest justifications for intervening in reproduction, while PB, and by extension, liberal eugenics, are explicitly *private enterprises* (Savulescu 2001:424). The irony of this claim is that since the era of Reagan and Thatcher, direct state provision has progressively given way to the privatization of healthcare and biomedicine. Similarly, Savulescu maintains that “it was the eugenics movement itself which sought to influence reproduction, through involuntary sterilisation, to promote

social goods” (2001:424). Yet he fails to appreciate the increased outsourcing of social goods to the private sector, and more specifically, the outsourcing of bio-social goods (or in Foucauldian parlance, biopower), to the medical-industrial complex. Eugenic practices and logic have not gone away when one considers the sustained attention to given genetic counselling human augmentation as major opportunities for investment and profit growth (Estes, Harrington, and Pellow 2000:1817). Agar and Savulescu have just not been watching the back door.

It is therefore important to recognize that under the watchful eye of neoliberalism, newgenics has become dangerously depoliticized. Recall that Agar places the onus on those who would restrict reproductive choices to prove harm (Agar 2013:286), while Savulescu argues that it is “up to us whether we love our children and give all people in society a fair go. This need not be affected by decisions about selecting which people come into existence” (Savulescu 2001:290). Not only is disability justice here divorced from questions of reproductive ethics and who should and should not inherit the world, but the latter is rendered an individual (market) choice rather than an issue of justice at all. The hyper-reliance upon the self rather than community or the state, congruent with the neoliberal flattening of power relations, is what Judith Butler has referred to as “responsibilization” (2009:35), and what Angela Davis has wryly described as a “neoliberal conspiracy designed to keep us from connecting with one another and bringing about change” (2014). In this regard, our earlier comment that eugenic logic is agnostic regarding social organization should be amended. Sneaking through the back door, eugenic logic thrives when its manifestations are finely distributed throughout the social field and reduced to individual, private choices. It is possible that eugenic logic works even better bottom-up than top-down.

## **Eugenic Techniques of Silencing**

Eugenic logic highlights the stakes for disability politics. While we must continue to fight for nonnegotiable issues of accessibility and inclusion as full citizens, it is important to be mindful that our survival, our right to inherit the world, is increasingly at risk. Cochlear

implants and PGD are not benign technologies but tactics of erasing disability from our consciousness and ultimately the human condition.

Reading disability politics through the history and future of eugenics thus requires that we pursue operative sites of eugenic logic within which it can be contested. A central, yet unstable, tactic through which eugenic logic functions is suppressing any voices that deny that disability is tragic suffering to be avoided at all costs. For example, survivor knowledge from the eugenic past is often precluded from serious analysis, taken to be unreliable and lacking in authority (Wilson 2015). After returning from an academic conference, a team member of the *Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada* project recently reported the comment of one professional historian: “If morons and lunatics telling their own stories provided a reliable way to learn about the eugenic past, what would historians like me have to offer?” (personal communication).

Consider also the experience of autistic self-advocates. Organizations such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), alongside a host of autistic self-advocate bloggers (e.g. McKenzie, Aspie Rhetor, Grace, Neuroqueer) relentlessly criticize Autism Speaks: a major international non-profit organization that sponsors autism research. While putatively advocating for autistic individuals and their families, members of the neurodiversity community unanimously condemn Autism Speaks for fear-mongering media projects such as “I Am Autism” and “Autism Everyday” (The Caffeinated Autistic 2014), for funneling large percentages of their income into prevention technologies (ASAN 2012), and for not representing but rather dehumanizing autistic people (Evans 2009). Autism Speaks, they argue, comprehends autism merely as a problem to be solved. A recent editorial by Suzanne Wright, the founder of Autism Speaks, demonstrates the eugenic logic of this organization that autistic individuals find so deplorable: “This is autism. Life is lived moment-to-moment. In anticipation of the child’s next move. In despair. In fear of the future” (Wright 2013). Wright desperately calls for a national plan—“for the children” and “for the future”—to effectively rid the world of autism.

Despite their sustained and well-supported critiques, self-advocates are silenced. Autism Speaks has never acknowledged the voices of neurodiversity self-advocates, even though they have plagiarized their work (Hillary 2014). Moreover, organizations such as

Autism Speaks discredit self-advocates by creating a binary between “low-functioning” and “high-functioning” autistics (Autism Speaks 2010), where the former “severe” and often non-verbal autistics represent what autism “truly” is while the latter cannot possibly understand nor represent autism (McKenzie 2014). Not only is the binary itself decried by self-advocates (Sequenzia 2014), but as McKenzie notes, there are *many* so-called “low functioning” self-advocates (e.g. Reyes 2014, Sequenzia 2014, Emma’s Messiah Miracle of Music 2014, Bissonnette 2014, Thresher 2014) who have taught themselves to communicate and strongly resist Autism Speaks.

The silencing of disabled people under eugenic logic is accordingly two-pronged. On the one hand, the *sites* of knowledge production are discursively controlled. Oral histories and blogs are rendered unreliable and unauthoritative, lacking peer-review processes and the corroboration of data by “experts” that provide a discursive stamp of approval. On the other hand, as plainly evidenced by the *Living Archives* team member, the authority of the “voices” of those targeted by of eugenic logic are continually undermined and discredited. Neoliberal organizations such as Autism Speaks add an economic valence to this equation. That is, discrediting the voices and sites of knowledge production of autistics is necessary to suppress any opposition to the big business of the medical-industrial complex.

## **Conserving Disability**

In response to eugenic logic, Garland-Thomson has advocated for “conserving” disability; resituating disability not as a disadvantage or liability, but as a resource that must be encouraged to flourish. Disability is here not, as eugenic logic supposes, an extraneous facet of the human community that can be shrugged off in a utopian future. To deny disability is to deny a fundamental aspect of humanity. As Garland-Thompson explains, “The idea of preserving intact, keeping alive, and even encouraging to flourish denoted by *conserve* suggests that the characteristics, the ways of being in the world, that we think of as disabilities would under such a definition be understood as benefits rather than deficits” (Garland-Thompson 2012:341). Likewise, Alison Kafer has argued that “to eliminate disability is to eliminate the possibility of discovering alternative ways of being

in the world, to foreclose the possibility of recognizing and valuing our interdependence” (Kafer 2013:83). If disability is a generative and intrinsic aspect of the human condition, there is much to lose if disability and disabled people are eliminated from the world.

Garland-Thomson organizes the transformative potential of disability under three rubrics: disability as narrative resource; disability as epistemic resource; and disability as ethical resource. The first appeals to disability as a common belonging that both unsettles and transforms pejorative cultural narratives of disability. The second speaks to the privileged and unique forms of knowledge-production that follow from disabled subjects’ particular, though threatened, mode of embodied being-in-the-world. The third encourages an openness to the unexpectancy and contingency represented by disability as a model for human flourishing.

While Garland-Thomson does not explicitly take up the issue of silencing, it is never far away in her insistence that disability be mobilized as a narrative and epistemic resource. However, we suggest that the appeal to disability as an epistemic resource be expanded upon to articulate more clearly the critical task of contesting and reclaiming sites of knowledge production. Standpoint epistemology is here particularly useful.

Starting with the assumption that *all* knowledge is situated, standpoint epistemology positions itself against dominant philosophies of objectivity and epistemic-neutrality (Harding 2004; Wylie 1998, 2003, 2012). From this starting point, standpoint epistemology inverts power structures such as sexism, classism, racism, or ableism by asserting that those marginalized by systems of oppression have better insight into how the system works than those who benefit from its operation. In this case, standpoint epistemology resituates eugenic survivors and autistic self-advocates as possessing privileged epistemic resources vis-à-vis manifestations of eugenic logic (Wilson 2015, N.d.).

This epistemic privilege isn’t simply given once and for all; a standpoint is best understood as a form of epistemic engagement, “a matter of cultivating a critical awareness, empirical and conceptual, of the social conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized” (Wylie 2012:63). As a critical form of engagement, a standpoint cultivates and accrues political awareness and subjectivity over time. To “take up” or “occupy” a standpoint is therefore a project in the existential and political sense:

realizing oneself in increasing measure as a political agent who as disabled has been subjectivized to be silent, but nevertheless possesses subversive epistemic privilege.

Standpoint epistemology thus shifts the discursive authority to those who have been targeted by eugenic logic and edged out of sites of knowledge production. Contesting and reclaiming these sites is to recognize that self-advocates and those otherwise targeted by eugenic logic are the authorities of their oppression and must lead the way in disability politics. It is to recognize that the onus of proving “harm” in debates of liberal reproductive ethics does not take place on a neutral playing field, but is skewed by eugenic logic. The perspectives of disabled people must have greater weight in these discussions.

If disability politics is to conserve disability in the face of ongoing eugenic practices and a eugenic logic that seeks to “trade the present in on the future” (Garland-Thomson 2012:352), we must continue to make recourse to a past that ripples through to the future. A key way of conserving disability in light of the marginalization of voices from the eugenic past is to take seriously the central message of standpoint epistemology. Those who have lived that eugenic past, together with their successors whose lives have been most directly shaped by the legacy of eugenics have much to teach us all about eugenics and disability.

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