

4 | The Role of Oral History in Surviving a Eugenic Past

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Introduction: Stories We (Might) Tell

Sarah Polley's brilliant film, *Stories We Tell* (2012), opens with a quote read by Polley's father, Michael Polley, and drawn from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you're telling it, to yourself or to someone else.¹

Middles are muddles, and it is only by telling a story that we move beyond this muddled middle to achieve "anything like a story at all."

While the words themselves suggest a stark contrast between "confusions" and "real stories," the film itself does much to undermine that contrast. Stories, as they are told "to yourself or someone else," strive to make, and often succeed in making, sense of what would otherwise be a confusion, a confusion about history, about circumstances, about what happened. But the very tellings of those stories can themselves be confusions, or — put with perhaps less hyperbole — they can be the source of much that is confusing or puzzling. Confusion might persist throughout the telling of a story and not just while one is in the middle of the telling of it.

Polley's very personal exploration of her own family history, one focused lovingly on her mother and driven by ongoing curiosity and speculation about the circumstances of Polley's birth, is a story told through

interviews with Polley's siblings, her father, and close friends and associates of her mother; the story told also draws from many hours of home movie footage of the central protagonists in the story.

Part of what the performance of the quotation from Atwood adds to the framing of this particular story is the sense that the story to be told here is one that is told collaboratively, piecemeal, and with twists and turns over time and across tellers. It is a story told not simply by Polley herself but also by her father (whose reading from a script that of unknown origin for much of the film both confirms and contradicts much of what others have to say about "the story") as well as by other family members and friends.

As a family story centred on a larger-than-life personality, one exploring rumour and speculation about a sensitive and intimate matter in a family's history, there is a sense in which the story that Polley wants to convey can only be told collaboratively and with a kind of shared authority that has been acknowledged as critical to the most engaging work in oral history. But that remains simply an optional extra for many other stories we tell, and have told, about ourselves that revolve around the same kinds of sensitive and intimate matters that lie at the heart of Polley's film.

One such story is the story of eugenics in Canada, a story that we may well be in the middle of telling. That story – "history" some would feel more comfortable with – is not well known among Canadians and has been told chiefly by two kinds of authorities. On the one hand, it has been told by historians and other academics interested primarily in reproductive control, the history of medicine, case law, mental illness, or Canadian history; on the other, it has been told by journalists, filmmakers, and others creating a story for popular audiences via the corresponding media.²

While occasionally those most intimately affected by the history of Canadian eugenics have been interviewed by both academics and the media, the story of eugenics in Canada, unlike the story that Polley tells, has been told for the most part without a sharing of narrative authority between these storytellers and the greatest group of those affected: people who have survived the eugenic past to be more than the subhumanized "mental defectives" they were held to be. Indeed, part of this subhumanization is the assumption that those institutionalized, sterilized, and stigmatized in the name of eugenics were not capable of telling their own story, either in part or in full, as they were deemed to lack the basic capacity to contribute directly to the story we tell about

eugenics. In this respect, it is not simply that survivor oral history has been omitted, forgotten, or neglected, as in other cases; rather, it is that survivor oral history has been presumed to be precluded by the putative nature of those deemed mentally deficient.

It is against this background that I want to take up the role of oral history in the story we tell about eugenics in Canada. I suggest that, despite the fact that the history of eugenics in Canada is necessarily part of the larger history of eugenics, there is a special role for oral history to play in the telling of this story, a role that promises to shift us from the muddled middle of the story. Not only has the testimony of eugenics survivors already played perhaps the most important role in revealing much about the practice of eugenics in Canada, but the willingness and ability of survivors to share their own oral histories makes the situation in western Canada almost unique. Conversely, I also discuss the role that oral history plays in “surviving a eugenic past,” trading on the ambiguity of this phrase to reflect both on the survivorship of those who have been viewed as subhuman via some kind of eugenic lens and on the collective legacy with which Canada’s eugenic past presents us.

Discovering Canadian Eugenics

Although “eugenics” may be a term readily recognized by academics and professionals, many among those who form a part of Emily Murphy’s “upper crust” of Canadian society are surprised when they learn that Canada itself has had quite an extensive involvement with eugenics – an involvement that goes beyond mere ideas and proposals.³ This discovery can be made in a variety of contexts: during a university class in philosophy at the University of Alberta, while attending a public outreach lecture on the “new eugenics,” or through web surfing blogs such as *What Sort of People Should There Be?*, or in engaging with the ongoing conversations generated by the Facebook group “Eugenics Exposed.”⁴

The emotional reaction to this discovery about a hidden part of one’s own cultural history often shifts from surprise to the unease associated with more negatively tinged emotions, such as shock, shame, or even disgust, particularly as the outlines of the history of eugenics in Canada, especially in western Canada, are sketched. Such outlines can be traced from eugenics considered as some kind of abstract ideology to the more tangible testimony of those with lived experience of eugenic institutionalization, sterilization, and stigmatization. Consider four steps in this kind of transition in characterizations of the story of Canadian eugenics.

Transitional Steps in Exploring the Story of Canadian Eugenics

Ideas

The term “eugenics” was coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883, though Galton’s first eugenic work appeared in a pair of articles in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1865 in a study of intergenerational patterns of professional accomplishment in English upper- and upper-middle-class families. Over the next forty years, in the vast majority of countries in Europe and North America, the term “eugenics” came to partially structure wide-ranging public and professional discussions about criminality, disease, euthanasia, immigration, child development and welfare, poverty, medical intervention and treatment, schooling, marriage, and sexual behaviour.⁵ Eugenics became a social movement during this time, one that appealed to science in the service of human improvement by aiming systematically to raise the quality of human populations – whether locally, nationally, or internationally – over intergenerational time. As such, eugenics was interwoven with government regulation of health, including mental health, sometimes under the headings of “social hygiene,” “mental hygiene,” and “human betterment,” and was often advocated by many of the leading social progressives of the time.⁶

One way to so improve the quality of human populations over generations would be to promote ideas and policies that aimed to ensure *every* person’s potential to produce and raise children with at least as much “quality” as their parents. Many public health measures, such as reducing the amount of lead in home and school environments that would likely negatively affect developmental processes, are of this nature. That was not, however, the way of human betterment favoured predominantly within the eugenics movement. Instead, eugenicists typically followed Galton and emphasized that quality was not equally distributed in the kinds of human populations that are regulated by governmental policies and jurisdictional legislation. More specifically, they tended to think of such populations as being composed of *kinds of people*, with some kinds being of higher quality than others. The goal set within the eugenics movement was thus to increase the proportion of higher-quality people in future generations. This was to be achieved by advocating ideas, laws, policies, and practices either that aimed to maximize the reproduction of higher-quality people (positive eugenics) or that aimed to minimize the reproduction of lower-quality people (negative eugenics).

Introduced into societies with a history of racism and colonialism, eugenic ideas were often formulated with respect to the kinds of people picked out by racial or ethnic groups, with some such groups deemed to be superior, others of inferior, quality. This directed social policies concerning the geographical boundaries of national populations (such as immigration policies) as well as those focused on ethnic and cultural groups already within those boundaries (such as Aboriginal and Native peoples). As eugenics movements established institutional bases in particular regions and countries, they typically came to focus their gaze on a putatively underlying menace to society – that posed by the “feeble-minded” or the “mentally deficient.”⁷

Canada was no exception to this general trend. Influenced by the formation of eugenics societies amidst concerns about the “menace of the feeble-minded” in both Great Britain and the United States, both provincial and nation-wide initiatives in the second decade of the twentieth century propelled eugenic ideas into Canadian professional and public policy circles. In 1913, the Ontario government’s newly created position of “inspector of the feeble-minded” was filled by Dr. Helen MacMurchy, who became a vocal advocate of eugenics, based on her view that growing social problems, such as alcoholism, venereal disease, and tuberculosis, stemmed from the rise of mental deficiency as expressed in her popular 1920 book *The Almosts: A Study of the Feeble-Minded*. The Canadian National Committee for Mental Health, founded in 1918, reflected that same sentiment, and over the first years of its existence provided expert advice as requested by the western provinces of Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia on the relationship between such social problems and mental deficiency.⁸

Legislation

Although immigration policy is one major area in which eugenic ideas exerted themselves in the first quarter of the twentieth century in North America, it was eugenic sterilization legislation in the United States, beginning with an Indiana statute passed in 1907, that was to have the most impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals in Canada. By 1914, when Harry Laughlin of the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor introduced a “model eugenic sterilization law,” eugenic sterilization legislation had been passed in twelve states in the United States. Over the next thirty years, an additional twenty-one states would follow suit.⁹

The American precedent was influential in the 1920s in the western provinces as they sought to translate advice and direction concerning the putative dangers of the feeble-minded into legislation and public policy. Legislation authorizing and regulating the practice of eugenic sterilization was introduced into the legislature in the Province of Alberta in 1927, being passed there in 1928, and in the Province of British Columbia in 1933. These were the only two provinces in Canada to pass such legislation, which was repealed only in 1972 and 1973, respectively. The Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta was amended in 1937 to explicitly distinguish between mentally deficient and psychotic residents of institutions and to remove the need for consent from the former with regard to sterilization; further amendments in 1942 broadened the range of conditions that could form the basis for eugenic sterilization, explicitly including epileptics and those with Huntington's chorea and those suffering from neurosyphilis.

Practices

Over the forty-four years it was law, the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta led to the approved sterilization of almost three thousand Canadians, a number that requires some brief explanation to convey what it says about the reach of eugenics in western Canada. First, that act underwrote ongoing practices of sterilization at rates that were among the highest in North America and that continued at relatively high rates through until the repeal of the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta by the newly elected government led by Peter Lougheed. Second, those high rates continued well into the 1950s and 1960s, a time by which, even in jurisdictions in which eugenic legislation persisted, the practice of eugenic sterilization had been largely reduced or stopped altogether. Third, the board that approved such sterilizations, informally known as the "Eugenics Board," approved over forty-eight hundred sterilizations, rarely rejecting an application for sterilization from institutional authorities and representatives.¹⁰

Even following the repeal of the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta in 1972, very little was known about the practice of eugenic sterilization in Alberta and British Columbia. The substantial but still radically incomplete knowledge that we now have about eugenic practices more generally, at least in Alberta, came in the wake of the actions of one survivor of eugenic sterilization, Leilani Muir, more than twenty years later.¹¹

Judicial Action

In a landmark legal case concluded in 1996, Leilani Muir successfully sued the Province of Alberta for wrongful confinement and sterilization as a resident of the Provincial Training School (PTS) in Red Deer, Alberta. This lawsuit uncovered much about the eugenic past in Alberta. The discoveries made here relied, in part, on the personal memories of those, like Leilani, who lived through that past as residents of “training schools” for those deemed “feeble-minded” or “mentally deficient.” Leilani’s courage in launching legal action against the Province of Alberta, and her determination to see that action through to its conclusion over a number of years, resulted in a novel kind of witnessing of the history of eugenics in Canada. In Leilani’s case, this witnessing came from someone wrongfully deemed mentally defective, wrongfully classed as a “moron,” and wrongfully subjected as a young teenager (without her knowledge) to eugenic sterilization.¹²

Among the evidence that this legal case generated were indications that the testing of those admitted to the school as mental defectives, and the subsequent processes that led to their sterilizations, departed markedly from both the requirements of the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta itself and the scientific and procedural norms of the day. In her judgment in the case, Madam Justice Veit wrote: “The circumstances of Ms Muir’s sterilization were so high-handed and so contemptuous of the statutory authority to effect sterilization, and were undertaken in an atmosphere that so little respected Ms Muir’s human dignity that the community’s, and the court’s[,] sense of decency is offended.”¹³ In uncovering the details of those circumstances, much was revealed about how, in general, eugenics operated over an extended period in Alberta’s history, and it rapidly became clear that Leilani’s treatment was far from exceptional. In the wake of this legal action, over seven hundred individuals began the process of launching similar legal actions for wrongful confinement and sterilization in the Province of Alberta.

Nearly all of these actions were settled by the Province of Alberta, but only after the Klein government had made an initial decision to oppose those actions, leading to a several-year period in which the kind of first-person testimony and witnessing that Leilani was able to provide began to be elicited from many individuals. Despite much variation in their personal circumstances and aptitudes, many of these people who had been institutionalized, sterilized, and stigmatized via the eugenics movement that generated the Sexual Sterilization Act of

Alberta were like Leilani in that they had a story not just to be told but also to tell. Like Leilani, many of them did not know anything approximating the full story of their own histories when they began this process; they were often very much in the middle of their own stories (at least with regard to this aspect of them).

Living Archives on Eugenics and Survivorship

The four-step transition in the story of Canadian eugenics should, of course, be taken with at least a grain of salt when seen as an attempt to provide a historiographical overview of the direction taken by the story of eugenics in Canada. I am not a trained historian, let alone one versed deeply enough in the ways of history to “do historiography.” What the history I allude to above presents us with, however, is a chain of events and eventualities that creates an opportunity to tell the story of eugenics, at least in Alberta, in a manner that incorporates a role for oral history that is rare, if not unique, in histories of eugenics.¹⁴

In Canada, as elsewhere, eugenic ideology was translated into an active social movement that gave rise to legislation, social policy, and ongoing practices of institutionalization, sterilization, and stigmatization. However, unlike in other places and at other times, many of the people who were socially excluded and marginalized by eugenic ideas, laws, and practices in Canada in ways that supposed that they could not tell a story not only are *able* to do so but also are, with various degrees of circumspection and enthusiasm, *willing* to do so. The idea that their stories – however difficult they may be to tell and however difficult they may be to hear – are integral to whatever story is told about eugenics in Canada has been central to the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada project. It is very much a community-university initiative that strongly emphasizes a shared authority model of the practice of oral history construction and that strives to incorporate both eugenic survivors, and community members who most readily identify with those survivors, as tellers of the broader story that the project aims to tell about eugenics in western Canada.¹⁵

The most obvious form this shared authority model takes is in the opportunity it provides for eugenics survivors to tell their stories, to have them recorded, and to create avenues for them to be retold through recordings. Before turning to these stories, however, I want to illustrate some ways in which the project embraces the ideal of shared authority that go beyond the individual stories of survivors of a eugenic past and

that speak to the idea of a *living archives* on eugenics. I focus on two examples. The first of these concerns artistic responses to eugenics, the second concerns the stories of people who parent, or are considering parenting, in a society that continues to systematically discriminate against those with disabilities.

In October 2011, several summer interns who had worked with the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada project the preceding summer rounded out their internships by organizing and hosting an art exhibition entitled the Collective Memory Project: Responses to Eugenics in Alberta. Curated by Anne Pasek, a graduating undergraduate major in art history and visual culture, this exhibition featured the work of thirteen artists whose submissions were the culmination of a larger community-focused project led by Anne. The Collective Memory Project involved soliciting art work from community members in general, engaging interested artists in conversations about eugenics (and supplying information that some of them would otherwise lack), and providing studio space and opportunities for potential contributors to explore their own responses to eugenics over an extended period of time during the late summer and early fall of 2011. Responses came from artists with disabilities, from recent immigrants to Canada, from residential school survivors, and from women whose ongoing institutional experiences formed the basis for a shared sense of social marginalization with those from past generations. Eleven of the thirteen artists whose work was represented in the exhibition were women, and the majority of those submitting were not professional artists.¹⁶

Foremost among these submissions were artistic responses received as a result of the Collective Memory Project's community outreach to those who were incarcerated in Edmonton-area prisons and who felt a particular identification with those who had survived a eugenic past. Many of these artists were women of Aboriginal heritage, and their artworks often evoked a feeling of social segregation and exclusion from family life that created continuities between past and present. Although their circumstances limited the extent to which they could be more fully involved in the Collective Memory Project – as attending artists, as speakers, as participants in the opening of the exhibition itself – their artworks proved to be among the most powerful in terms of the responses they elicited from viewers.

The Collective Memory Project also included a walk-and-talk with artist Kay Burns, drawing on her collaborative performance art piece, *Perambulate*. Struck by the fact that there are a number of Edmonton

landmarks named in honour of leaders whose advocacy of eugenics is typically unregistered or forgotten as part of their legacy for and influence on Canadian society, Kay led groups of participants through Louise McKinney Park in the summer of 2011. Along with other members of the Famous Five – the five women who successfully fought for the full political recognition of Canadian women in the case commonly referred to as “The Persons Case” – McKinney was a vocal advocate for eugenics. The walk through a familiar public space provided the leisure to absorb and reflect on what, for many participants, was new information about McKinney, and the walk itself ended with a ceremonial renaming of the bridge connecting McKinney Park to the downtown side of the river as the Leilani Muir Footbridge. The Collective Memory Project provided the opportunity to revisit and reflect on Kay’s *Perambulate*, to see and hear about the documentation of the original event, and to participate in a communal reclamation of public space that was evocative of a eugenic past. One of the special features of this opportunity involved walking with sterilization survivors, something that allowed for the kind of informal sharing of experiences that often occurs in a common public space.¹⁷

Because of their putative cognitive and other disabilities, sterilization survivors were denied the opportunity to parent and to form their own families. While those parenting in circumstances of disability today are presented with choices that were not available to survivors of sterilization, these choices are very much constrained and influenced by the eugenic past. For this reason, issues concerning parenting and disability are integral to the project’s being conceived as one working to sustain a “living archives” of the history of eugenics in western Canada. This is especially so for community partners, such as the Alberta Association for Community Living and Neighbourhood Bridges, whose day-to-day advocacy work with and for members of the disability community often concerns parenting and disability.¹⁸

A person with a disability in contemporary Canadian society faces systematic barriers to parenting that often reflect, and in some cases are a continuation of, the kind of views of “intelligent parenting” and cognitive disability that dominated the eugenics movement. For that reason, the stories of those parenting with disability form an important part of the story of eugenics in western Canada to which the Living Archives project sees itself as contributing. While such stories are not testimonials from survivors of the period during which eugenic

sterilization was legally practised in Alberta and British Columbia, they often convey experiences with child welfare services and legal, educational, and medical agencies that reflect a view of their own subhuman status and misgivings about their ability to parent adequately. The similarity here to views of people who were deemed feeble-minded or mentally defective and were thus sterilized during the middle half of the twentieth century invites reflection on the story we tell about eugenics in Canada, reflection informed by interviews, public panel discussions, and working group conversations in which the lived experience of those parenting with disability speaks for itself.¹⁹

The link between the eugenic past and contemporary technology and reproduction extends beyond the realm of actual and ascribed disability to that in which there is the mere possibility of disability. Any Canadian who makes parenting decisions, including the decision of whether to be a parent, does so within contemporary medical and social contexts that differentially value foetuses, infants, and children deemed to have actual or even merely likely disabilities. For example, foetuses are routinely screened in Canada in pregnant women over thirty-five for Trisomy 21 – the presence of an additional chromosome, in part or in whole, on chromosome 21 that correlates with Down Syndrome. In 2007, a Society for Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada working group recommended that this screening extend to all pregnant women, given that the majority of children born with Down Syndrome were born to mothers under thirty-five. In the United States, the vast majority of foetuses found to have Trisomy 21 are aborted – despite the fact that only a small minority of the infants and children that such foetuses would have become would have been likely to manifest severe or life-threatening symptoms.²⁰

Survivorship for the Subhuman

As touched on earlier, Leilani Muir's legal case against the Province of Alberta and the cases that were settled out of court in its wake have revealed much that, previously, had been virtually unknown about the history of eugenics in western Canada. This includes aspects of day-to-day life for those residing in institutions such as the Provincial Training School of Alberta in Red Deer. It also includes facts about the treatment of children in these institutions – treatment that many find deeply disturbing. Paramount among these facts was the use of

bare “quiet rooms” in which residents could be left in relative isolation for days or weeks and, during this time, the apparently extensive psychotropic experimentation on children deemed mentally deficient or psychotic. Especially striking in Leilani’s court case was the revelation of a number of cases in Alberta during the 1950s and 1960s in which testicular tissue was unnecessarily removed during eugenic castrations (not simply sterilizations via vasectomies) performed on males with Down Syndrome, tissue that was then used for experimental research purposes.²¹

The cumulative documentation of Alberta’s eugenic past suggested practices that not only violated the spirit and letter of the Sexual Sterilization Act itself but that also involved systematic disregard for persons who found themselves at governmental institutions for the feeble-minded and mentally ill. Madame Justice Veit’s statement in Leilani’s case – “the community’s, and the court’s[,] sense of decency is offended” – could be readily extended to characterize the likely response that both community and court would have had to the treatment of many other eugenics survivors in western Canada.

Like other oral histories, those of people institutionalized, sterilized, and stigmatized by Alberta’s eugenic enthusiasm convey something both of what life was like in the past (in their case, in government-run institutions such as the Provincial Training School) and of what life is like having survived a traumatic past (in this case, a eugenic past). Apart from the distinctive content provided by survivor standpoints, the resulting narratives are notable for being coherent, partial, and personally reflective stories from those thought incapable of this kind of narration. Here the restoration of full humanity that narrative brings counters both the dehumanization caused by traumatic episodes and events and the subhumanization of people whose putative reasoning deficits excluded them from an important part of family life and was the basis for their extended segregation from the rest of society. That restoration also helps to build some sense of community feeling among survivors, both with one another and with others participating in a common project. Since today’s popular views of cognitive disability share much with those of the middle half of the twentieth century, people who have, or are assumed to have, cognitive disabilities continue to confront subhumanizing attitudes and policies. For these reasons, oral history has a special role to play in the story we tell about eugenics in Canada.

Stories Being Told

Living Archives only began recording interviews with sterilization survivors and with those parenting or considering parenting in circumstances of disability in the second half of 2012. Our approach to recording these stories has been cautious in that we are especially sensitive both to the vulnerabilities of all those whom we interview and to our affiliation with a university that had been directly involved in the practice of eugenics in Alberta.

A key component of our approach to oral history is to work, at least primarily and in the first instance, with individuals who have a high level of comfort with their own story and who have both antecedent and developing trustful relationships with other team members. Such individuals have often become their own advocates, and, as with participants in other oral history projects, such as Montreal Life Stories, they tend to view the process of constructing their own narratives in a positive light.

The process of story construction is coordinated by Nicola Fairbrother of Neighbourhood Bridges, a key partnering organization of the Living Archive project and one that has extensive outreach in the local disability community. While we aim to produce stories that are video-recorded and that can be shared in a fully public way, our co-participatory method also allows for the construction of audio-only and restricted-viewing stories. To date, Nicola has conducted nearly all of the small number of interviews and has been the only team member present for them, apart from videographer Jordan Miller. While the process of story construction continues, we can convey some sense of the stories that are beginning to emerge. I focus on three video stories that have now been completed. The first two are stories told by sterilization survivors who are now in their sixties; the third is a story told by a much younger person, and it reflects on his own experiences with disability and parenting.

Early in his story, Roy Skoreyko tells us that he's now retired and enjoys what he does, adding, with a laugh, that he "has a life." He then reflects on some of his experiences at the Provincial Training School, now called the Michener Centre:

The first day that I moved into Michener Centre, I was about ten years old. My parents dropped me off there, and man it was so

hard for me to leave my family. All they did was give me some other clothes. I couldn't wear my regular clothes; they gave me jeans and all that, and a shirt. And they would just drag you and put you in your day room there. [...] And we all had to line up to the dining room to eat, lined up to go take a shower. When you lined up to take a shower, you had to walk down the hallway, no clothes on at all, and people could see you. [...] It was scary, 'cause the doors were always locked. And they just went like this [moves hands together] [...] and they always had a key, to lock the dayroom doors, lock the dormitory doors where people would go to sleep [...] Some of us were scared to say anything, scared for our lives. And I have seen some of the people there that there were taken [*sic*] into this little room by themselves. No clothes on, and all there was just [...] there was no sink, all there was was just a mattress on the floor, and there was no bed, no bed at all. You had no clothes on. And you could see, they had these thick, thick glass windows, but you still could see people walking around in there. And you would be locked in there.

Beginning with his feelings about being “dropped off,” Roy moves quickly to say how clearly he remembers the regimentation of life at Michener – how he was clothed, the lining up, the locked doors, the “quiet rooms,” his nakedness, being seen by others. Returning later in his story to talk about his ongoing, positive relationship with his parents while he was at Michener – including visits home, his reluctance to return to Michener, and his discussions with them later in life about his sterilization – Roy ends his story by reflecting on disability and his pride in how far society has come. Of his sterilization, Roy simply says: “I feel offence and a little bit disappointed that that was done. You know, they took control of our body, and they did it, and they didn't ask us. There was a lot of things that went on there that, you know, shouldn't have.”

The second story is that of Glen George Sinclair. Glen, who is soft-spoken, tells his story by sharing with Nicola photograph albums and material from his legal case file. For Glen, as for other sterilization survivors, while the photograph album prompts many personal memories, the legal file contains information (from institutional and other government authorities) about his life that, for many years, had remained unknown to him. Glen has spent much time reading and reflecting on this “information.” Shrugging, Glen characterizes society's

attitude towards those resident at the Provincial Training School as follows: “Lock ’em up, throw the key away. Like I didn’t really have any purpose in life.” He goes on to talk about being ordered around “like a dog” while resident at the school.

Despite their brevity, Glen’s comments on the documents contained in the legal file are powerful, especially when juxtaposed with their visual presence in the video story. Part of what Glen, Roy, and other survivors grapple with are the views expressed about them in these documents and, in turn, the broader societal attitudes towards the “mentally deficient” that they convey. Glen does not need to say much in order to convey the absurdity and wrongfulness of his labelling and subsequent subhumanizing. His visual presence in telling his story provides an immediate, direct, and re-humanizing connection to anyone listening to and watching him.

The third story is not that of a sterilization survivor but, rather, someone more than a generation younger than Roy and Glen – someone whose reflections resonate with much of what survivors have to say about family life and disability. Kyle communicates non-verbally. His story is presented via photographs and music, and he uses text-to-voice software to present a verbal narrative. Kyle’s story focuses on his positive views of his family and friends, his work with children at the Glenrose Hospital, his status as a role model for children (especially given his own history), and his views of the rights and responsibilities of parenting. After saying, “I know that I am not ready to start a family right now,” Kyle notes what a big commitment this would be. He then turns to the views of others:

I am sure that some people would react poorly if I became a parent. But those people do not know the real me, so their opinions do not matter. I have every right to be a parent. I am a good person who knows how to love. No one can tell me otherwise and I would fight for the right if somebody told me I couldn’t have children.

Kyle then lists some of the things that he would help with, and some that he would not need help with, once he is ready to start a family. Kyle’s story concludes with a short reflection on government intervention and an affirmation of his right to parent: “I don’t think that the government would let me keep my child. But like I said before, I would fight for my rights to make sure I keep my child. The government has no right to tell me that I am not fit to be a parent.”

Like the other two stories highlighted above, Kyle's story focuses on what he thinks is important to express both about himself and his views. In constructing these stories, each storyteller has authorial control through active participation in the extensive editing and re-editing of his story as well as the opportunity to give, re-give, and retract consent to the story that evolves throughout the process.

Although all three stories are told in distinctive ways and convey much about the unique personalities of each of the storytellers, as I hope even this brief look at them suggests, they overlap and contrast in rich and provocative ways. For example, the conclusion to Roy's story shares a strong sense of disability activism with Kyle's story, while Glen's reflections on how he was treated convey more of a sense of a personal injury, one that was, as Glen acknowledges, shared with many others but is nonetheless very much his own. Glen's and Roy's stories both bring out some of the fears, humiliation, and sense of day-to-day trepidation that were part of institutional life, whether brought about by being paraded through hallways naked (as in Roy's case) or by feeling that the institution's attitude towards them was "lock 'em up, throw the key away" (as in Glen's case).

Conclusion

The year 2012 marked the fortieth anniversary of the repeal of the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta, while 2013 marked the fortieth anniversary of the repeal of the corresponding legislation in British Columbia (it was eighty-five years since it had been introduced). As works on the history of eugenics make clear – and as the emerging stories of those whose lives were radically changed by eugenic ideas, policies, and laws make vivid – for those who survived it, there is much more to eugenics than sterilization and its aftermath.

The stories that survivors are starting to tell both compensate for the paucity of accessible documentation on the history of eugenics in western Canada and redress some of the biases of academic history and philosophical reflection conducted in the absence of personal experience. Enabling survivors to move beyond the middle of their own stories is one way in which oral history can be of value. And moving Canadians beyond the middle of the collective story of the history of eugenics in western Canada is one way in which the Living Archives project can be of value.

Notes

- 1 *Stories We Tell*, dir. Sarah Polley, prod. Anita Lee and Silva Basmajian (National Film Board of Canada, 2012); Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996).
- 2 For general academic works, see Carolyn Strange and Jennifer A. Stephen, “Eugenics in Canada: A Checkered History, 1850s-1990s,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, 523–38 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885–1945* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990); and Erika Dyck, *Facing the History of Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization and the Politics of Choice in 20th-Century Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). For a more popular recent work, see Jane Harris-Zsovan, *Eugenics and the Firewall: Canada’s Nasty Little Secret* (Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing, 2010). The most common access point to this history is perhaps *The Sterilization of Leilani Muir*, dir. Glynis Whiting, prod. Graydon McCrea (National Film Board of Canada, 1996).
- 3 Emily Murphy was a strong advocate of eugenics, and her advocacy here was extensive. As part of that, Murphy wrote a regular column in the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper under the name “Janey Canuck”; the article “Should the Unfit Wed?” published on 10 September 1932, used “upper crust” in this way.
- 4 Mention of these three particular venues is deliberate. With regard to the first venue, following 1996 revelations about the operations of Alberta’s Eugenics Board – a board chaired for most of its history by the founding chair of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology, John M. MacEachran, who is also the longest-serving provost of the university – a report issued within the Department of Philosophy, the “MacEachran Report,” recommended both the removal of honours associated with MacEachran’s name and the incorporation of the history of eugenics in Alberta into philosophy courses. The second venue, the *What Sorts* blog, it was established in 2007, played an important role in raising awareness about the history of eugenics within the context of a broader discussion of the question “What sorts of people should there be?” (www.whatsorts.ofpeople.wordpress.com), and contains over one thousand posts searchable by category and tags. The third venue, “Eugenics Exposed,” is a closed Facebook group that arose from the activism of people parenting in the context of disability and has become instrumental in helping to inform and organize parents both about the eugenic past and ongoing practices that devalue the lives of vulnerable individuals, especially children.

- 5 For the introduction of the term “eugenics,” see Sir Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: J.M. Dent, 1883); for Galton’s earliest thought on heritability in this vein, see his two-part “Hereditary Talent and Character,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 12 (1865): 157–66, 318–27.
- 6 For recent coverage of the eugenics movement across national contexts, see Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For encyclopaedia-style entries on the movement with a focus on North America, see Ruth C. Engs, *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005). And for a sense of the range of academic work on eugenics, see David Cullen, “Back to the Future: Eugenics – A Bibliographical Essay,” *Public Historian* 29, 3 (2007): 163–75.
- 7 This focus on the feeble-minded was not universal, however, and there is more to be said about the kinds of people targeted by eugenic policies in various contexts, such as nationalism. See, for example, Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). On mental deficiency and feeble-mindedness in the context of the United Kingdom, see Mathew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c. 1870–1959* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 8 See Strange and Stephen, “Eugenics in Canada”; and McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*. See also Helen MacMurchy, *The Almosts: A Study of the Feeble-Minded* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1920.)
- 9 See Paul Lombardo, “Eugenics Laws Restricting Immigration,” 2001, an essay in the Eugenics Archive, at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay9text.html>. See also the essays in Lombardo’s collection, *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
- 10 The most reliable statistical analyses here can be found in Jana Grekul, Harvey Krahn, and David Odynak, “Sterilizing the ‘Feeble-Minded’: Eugenics in Alberta, Canada, 1929–1972,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, 4 (2004): 358–84.
- 11 The repeal generated a handful of analyses of and reflections on the history of eugenics in Alberta. See, for example, Timothy J. Christian, “The Mentally Ill and Human Rights in Alberta: A Study of the Alberta Sexual Sterilization Act” (Faculty of Law, University of Alberta, 1974); Bernard M. Dickens, “Eugenic Recognition in Canadian Law,” *Osgood Hall Law Journal* 13 (1975), 547–77; and Terry L. Chapman, “The Early Eugenics Movement in Western Canada,” *Alberta History* 25 (1977): 9–17.

- 12 See *Muir v. The Queen in Right of Alberta* (1996), 132 D.L.R. (4th) 695–762. This case is the focus of *The Sterilization of Leilani Muir* (National Film Board).
- 13 *Muir v. The Queen*, clause [3] of the summary. The Veit judgment has provided both scholars and the public with important information about both Leilani’s circumstances and general practices in Alberta. See also Deborah C. Park and John P. Radford, “From the Case Files: Reconstructing a History of Involuntary Sterilization,” *Disability and Society* 13 (1998), 317–42; and D. Wahlsten, “Leilani Muir vs. the Philosopher King: Eugenics on Trial in Alberta,” *Genetica* 99 (1997): 185–98. For Leilani’s extensive autobiographical reflections, see her memoir, *A Whisper Past: Childless after Eugenic Sterilization in Alberta* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press); see also <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/our-stories> for a shorter video narrative of Leilani’s own story.
- 14 As should also be clear, I am here very much focused on eugenic sterilization in Canada performed under the authorization of explicitly eugenic legislation. For discussion of some types of sterilizations performed beyond such authority, see Karen Stote, “An Act of Genocide: Eugenics, Indian Policy, and the Sterilization of Aboriginal Women in Canada” (PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, 2012).
- 15 See the project website www.eugenicsarchive.ca. The full video narratives from which the excerpts are taken in “Stories Being Told” below can be found at <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/our-stories>.
- 16 The Collective Memory Project: Responses to Eugenics in Alberta, exhibition, Faculty of Extension Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, 23 October – 23 November 2011. See also photos of the event at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/uaextension/sets/72157627990812162/>; Anne Pasek’s chapbook for the exhibition; and the coverage of the event in the twenty-minute highlight video, *Alberta Eugenics Awareness Week 2011*, available on Vimeo at <http://vimeo.com/39613954> and on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaKQelfiZq4> as well as at the project website.
- 17 On *Perambulate*, see <http://www.nlac.ca/feature/kay.htm>; for Leilani Muir’s own reflection on the October 2012 event, see <http://leilanimuir.ca/266>.
- 18 See <http://www.aacl.org/> for the Alberta Association for Community Living (AACL), and <http://www.neighborhoodbridges.ca/> for Neighborhood Bridges. On the history of the sterilization of people with cognitive and other developmental disabilities, see Ellen Brantlinger, *Sterilization of People with Mental Disabilities: Issues, Perspectives, and Cases* (Westport, CT: Auburn House, 1995).

- 19 On the voices of those have lived through institutionalization in Alberta, see *Hear My Voice: Stories Told by Albertans with Developmental Disabilities Who Were Once Institutionalized* (Edmonton: AACL, 2006). For a recorded community dialogue on parenting with disability, see “In Pursuit of Human Perfection, Defining Who Is Worthy of Life, University of Alberta,” 23 October 2008, <http://whatsorts.net/events/events-PursuingPerfection.htm>, which was jointly sponsored by the What Sorts Network and the AACL as part of the national series “A Matter of Diversity,” held in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Canadian Association for Community Living. This is also available as a series of twelve short videos at the YouTube eugenicsarchive channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUOJCCZS1yI&list=PL0ED50290AE0B6C52.
- 20 On the Canadian recommendation, see A. Summers, S. Langlois, P. Wyatt, and R.D. Wilson, “Prenatal Screening for Fetal Aneuploidy: SOGC Clinical Practice Guidelines, No. 187,” *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada* 29 (2007): 146–61.
- 21 Part of what is truly disturbing here is that males with Down Syndrome are already reproductively sterile, and they were known to be during this time. Another part of what is so disturbing lies in the discretion of the Eugenics Board to, in effect, grant permission for tissue removal for medical experimentation, clearly exceeding the authority it had been given by the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta. See Madam Justice Veit’s judgment in *Muir v. The Queen*, 695–762; and *Sterilization of Leilani Muir*.