

***Framing The Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-mindedness in the American Eugenic Era* by Gerald O'Brien. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-8709-7.**

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Gerald O'Brien's, *Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-mindedness in the American Eugenic Era* (2013) explicates how metaphors are deployed to dehumanize the disabled. Specifically, it examines the history of eugenics in America fueled by dystopian fears by way of alarm movements which sought to control specific sub-groups. O'Brien highlights the eugenics movement launched by the practices of intelligence testing, unit-trait theory otherwise known as heredity transmission¹, the rediscovery of Mendel's laws of inheritance, the involvement within the eugenics movement of institutional administrators, and "perhaps most importantly," he writes, in the "flexibility of the 'moron designation'" (p. 164) which arbitrarily broadened the criteria under which those were diagnosed for segregation and control.

Rather than being another overview, O'Brien suggests his purpose is to "describe the various ways in which those in the movement 'framed' the concept of feeble-mindedness or morosity to justify the development of social control policies that would adversely impact the basic rights of a vast group of individuals that committed no crimes" (p. 1). He describes how metaphors of disease, war, atavism and objectification machinated the social practice of sterilization and institutionalization. Although we live in a different time of de-institutionalization and ethical reflection, we simultaneously experience continued segregation of disabled people in specialized programs, behavioural treatments and other remedial practices with the intent to normalize, pharmacological fixes to pacify the disabled body, and biogenetic research to identify and (arguably) eliminate disability. The metaphors we use to imagine the disabled body during the eugenics movement continue to be invoked today. O'Brien thus provokes the underlying question: Why does society find cause or blame against those who embody

¹ Today there are attempts to genetically locate such traits.

difference? More importantly, with this knowledge, why does this targeting continue? As such, I read O'Brien's work along with my own contemporary examples, with an emphasis on autism as a particularly popular and recent target.

O'Brien begins by mapping this history in an introduction, *Metaphors and the Dehumanization of Marginalized Groups*. He then divides his next six chapters by explicating specific use of metaphors: *The Moron a Diseased Entity*; *The Animal Metaphor: The Moron as Atavistic Subhuman*; *The War and Natural Catastrophe Metaphors: The Moron as an Enemy Force*; *The Religious and Altruistic Metaphors: The Moron as an Immoral Sinner and an Object of Protection* and; *The Object Metaphor: The Moron as a Poorly Functioning Human*, and then follows with a conclusion.

The book references others including Susan Sontag, who said that metaphor "...has served 'as the spawning ground of most kinds of understanding, including scientific understanding, and expressiveness'" (p. 18-9); Stephen Jay Gould stated that "a scholars choice of metaphor usually provides our best insight into the preferred modes of thought and surrounding social circumstances that so influence all human reasoning, even the scientific modes often viewed as fully objective in our mythology" (p. 19). O'Brien suggests the significance of metaphors used for those who want to exert their power and influence and who "attempt to legitimize their role as definers of the group or of the social problems targeted" (p. 21). Wolf Wolfensberger, for example, suggested that the animal metaphor was used to justify behavioural treatment including electric shock (p. 132).

Recent alarm movements have fashioned epidemics as we have seen in the dominant framing of autism; metaphors of combat, war, atavism and disease are used to describe the autistic subject, mostly recently evidenced in the militarized framing of the U.S. Combating Autism Act (changed to the Autism Cares Act under Obama in 2014). Such framing continues to justify degrading behavioural and electric shock treatment of

autistic persons and others with purported mental health issues². O'Brien's contribution is an example of how metaphor and representation have anchored the body as a fixed form – in this case as flawed, altered and Other – and as Levinas notes: "...in alterity we can find an enemy" (Levinas in Manning, 2013, p. 72).

O'Brien distinguishes American eugenics that focussed on segregation and prevention through sterilization, from the Nazi program which politicized breeding among the desired segment of the population and ultimately the T-4 program – "the assembly-line killing apparatus that would characterize the Holocaust" (p. 11). Rather than demonizing American society, he discerns that various regimens of control were executed with the best of intentions and a view to progress – not only for economic well-being, but with a view to making "environmental modifications [that] could improve the status of 'unfit' individuals" (p. 164). He states, "For a society that, at least on its face, embraced fair play and human rights, the process of heredity transmission was an important precursor for accepting an inherently pessimistic and non-egalitarian movement such as eugenics" (p. 164). This is an important point as we embrace the concept of diversity and subsequent accommodations for disability as a human right. However, the notion of genetic heritability in the identification of difference simultaneously threatens to anchor disability as subhuman and may potentially normalize a willingness to eradicate disability on the basis of good intentions and national interests.

War and disease metaphors were used to "err on the side of restricting rights" (p. 83), rather than placing innocent citizens in harm's way. Thus, morons were described as posing a threat to the nation (p. 85). In so doing, "a cadre of 'diagnosticians,' 'investigators,' or law-enforcement professionals who can presumably separate the threatening members of the group from the rest of the community will be created", and O'Brien suggests that "the rise in diagnostic or investigatory expertise naturally leads to

² See the Judge Rotenberg Center in Massachusetts which continues to deliver electric shock treatment as a behavioural strategy to modify autistic behaviour. See statement by The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network here: <http://autisticadvocacy.org/2014/08/prisoners-of-the-apparatus-the-judge-rotenberg-center/>

a rapid increase in the number of persons who fall within the target class, thus resulting in an exacerbation in the fear that such persons are indeed penetrating and contaminating the community”(p. 31). This industry of disability professionals continues to suggest a systemized mechanism of identification and control often masked in the language of therapy, support, education and care.

Today this is experienced with the purported increase in autism and other mental “illnesses” as the DSM V has broadened its criteria. We count the numbers in order to assess the need for services. Autism registries are normalized as a safety precaution (for autistic people) with police. Early identification programs are touted as a good way to help autistic children reach their “potential.” When vaccines were blamed for causing autism, autistic people were referred to as “walking bio-hazards” (Klar-Wolfond in Lawson, 2007) to which only charitable and research contributions could cure. War is waged on manufactured epidemics with militarized strategies. “Epidemic is a powerful concept. It implies danger and incites fear” said Roy Grinker on the purported increase in autism (Grinker, 2007, p. 5). Hence, O’Brien’s historical work not only engages with contemporary imaginings of the Other, it illustrates how they continue to be enacted. As such, I read O’Brien’s work as a contribution to the history of prejudice as a continuum.

However, I am also cautious around the metaphor of continuum which is popular alongside the notion of neurodiversity, and I believe O’Brien would also question its purpose. O’Brien leads us towards this kind of questioning in his discussion of the future use of metaphors with advancing technologies. While we advocate on the basis of polymorphic embodiments and networks as a continuum of being and experience, the concept continues to tempt scientific determinism in biogenetics. Ruth Hubbard and Elijah Wald state that “[s]cientists make a...leap when they suggest that genetic research can help to explain human behaviours (Hubbard and Wald, 1999, p. 93). Maja Homer-Nadeson (2005), among others, questions how social problems become constructions that motivate a targeting of genetic difference: “[The gene has] become reified in science and the popular imagination as the ultimate causal agent for human behaviour in terms of sociality (Homer-Nadeson, 2005, p. 7). Thus, science – and the

metaphors we use to research and imagine the body – together can be manipulated to promote the notion of objective evidence and truth on the nature of the human, and their differences. Of course, difference can be accepted or stigmatized here in this binary interaction, which O'Brien does not address specifically.

Currently, the autism spectrum continues to be situated in the notion of hierarchy or the Great Chain of Being (O'Brien, p. 56) which differentiates the high functioning from the purported "low" functioning individual, and these traits are targeted for genetic identification while these "behaviors... are only connected by the fact they have been stigmatized by some segments of our society" (Hubbard and Wald, 1999, p. 93). While those advocating for difference as a continuum of human experience or ability (and as natural) may do so with a view to equal rights and access, I question its success on this premise alone. As Donna Haraway notes, "[t]he frame ... is set by the extent and importance of rearrangements in the world-wide social relations tied to science and technology...we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system", and she names these as dichotomies that have shifted from "comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks" (Haraway, 1991, p. 161). Thus, distinguishing between the continuum as a rhizome – *ever-flowing, transformative, and relational* – versus a spectrum that denotes hierarchy is not easy, but essential, although I am hesitant to place these as ideas in opposition to each other. In this, O'Brien's work premised on the injustices encountered from the Great Chain of Being invites more work on the social construction of disability and current metaphors we employ for re-imagining experience, being and identity in this quest for belonging.

O'Brien concludes with the most salient question posed by Burton Blatt that I introduced at the beginning of this review:

[E]ven while we loathe our meanness of spirit and narrow, bigoted views of what a human being can be, we are driven to starve ourselves with opportunities to enlarge variance in our lives. We shun those who are incompetent, infirm, palsied,

different. We avoid those people as we try to avoid death itself; yet we know that to avoid them is to deny ourselves not only moral nourishment but the excitement and color that ultimately make life that much more worthwhile. **Why do we do it?** (Blatt in O'Brien, p. 159, *Bold Mine*).

It is perhaps too easy to suggest that this treatment is based on economic circumstances alone. This may be the most over-arching example we tend to use. Here, we can recall the work on the history of disability by Henri Stiker (1997) who suggested that it is perhaps better and more radical to study historical inclusion. Why only remain fixated on our propensity to prejudice when it is possible to rethink the ways in which we have continued to include? To this, O'Brien makes an interesting observation:

"It is both ironic and instructive that during the Great Depression, when economic justifications for control would have seemed to be the most applicable, the menace of the feeble-minded was actually diminishing in the United States. This highlights the fact that, while marginalized populations, especially those that can be framed as social parasites, may be more vulnerable to control measures during tough economic times, one cannot assume a simplistic causal relationship between the public response to such 'burdensome' populations and the state of the economy" (p. 149).

He continues to suggest that, "it might be argued that the conditions for large-scale control of such persons remained so long as their identity was largely fashioned by others whose interests were inimical to their own" (p. 152).

O'Brien succeeds in illustrating that history is not linear, but rather a time-loop of re-dressed metaphors activated for self-interest groups as well as economic and political ends. Quoting Wolf Wolfensberger: "[w]hen we review history and literature, it becomes apparent that regardless of time or place, certain roles are particularly apt to be thrust upon deviant persons. The way in which these roles transcend time, distance and culture is remarkable" (p. 20).

While I acknowledge and applaud works that identify these important metaphors that are used to justify exclusion and elimination, my one comment and curiosity, as noted above, is a history of inclusion for the sake of imagining the society that many of us desire – to move beyond positivist and eugenic thinking. O'Brien perhaps leaves us here with more work to do. While he remains concerned in the likelihood of "expanding

use of metaphors and similar forms of rhetorical understanding in conjunction with these current and future technological advancements” (p. 171), we also have a pressing need to discuss why (and how) disability and difference continues to live on.

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Website:

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network statement on The Judge Rotenberg Center: The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network here: <http://autisticadvocacy.org/2014/08/prisoners-of-the-apparatus-the-judge-rotenberg-center/>.