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Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada: Oral History & Technology as Public and Academic Resources

The notion of improving 'human breeding' known as eugenics was influential across North America in the early 20th century, resulting in numerous historical and present-day effects. However, in Western Canada the history of eugenics remains under-studied. The Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada (LAE) is a Community University Research Alliance (CURA) project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), aimed at creating a range of academic and public resources – known as living archives – for investigating this history. The five-year project comprises over 24 researches, community organization, and eugenic survivors. An integral part of LAE is working in respectful partnerships with community-based organizations and volunteers with valuable, lived experience of eugenic sterilization and institutionalization. Currently, the project is in its fourth year, with projected completion in February 2015.

The provinces of Alberta and British Columbia occupy a special place in eugenic history. Both were unique in Canada by passing involuntary sexual sterilization legislation that was explicitly eugenic – Alberta from 1928 to 1972, and British Columbia until 1973, although Alberta performed the largest number of sterilizations in Canada. Typical grounds for sterilization were the beliefs that a person’s undesirable physical or mental conditions were heritable, and that those persons would not make suitable parents. Central amongst those targeted by such practices were people with various disabilities, notably developmental (CURA Proposal 2009, Rob Wilson), although other marginalized groups were also disproportionately represented. Details of this history remain largely unknown, and LAE aims to bring these to light, while engaging discussion of contemporary issues, practices and policies affected by eugenics, including reproductive choice, disability, human variation, and technology (CURA Proposal 2009, Rob Wilson).

To accomplish these goals, the project seeks to enhance archival collections and improve their accessibility to scholars. In addition, curriculum packages are being created for high school teachers and students, and an interactive public website exploring eugenics in Western Canada is in development. We also host public dialogues on relevant contemporary issues.

However, LAE also uses the concept of living archives to extend the traditional notion of archives and archival research. In addition to use of archival collections, we are video-recording oral histories of eugenic survivors. LAE is especially timely as we conclude the first decade of the 21st century. The several hundred people still alive who experienced direct effects of eugenic laws and social policy are now in their 60s and 70s. Collective memories are fragile over time, and without a concerted effort to preserve the largely unmarked history of eugenics in Western
Canada, the historical knowledge they contain will be lost forever (CURA Proposal 2009, Rob Wilson).

Various qualitative research methodologies have been used to collect personal narratives from eugenics survivors and people with disabilities and/or their parents. The collection of personal narratives has employed ethnographical and phenomenological research methods. The interviewers and videographers have also used a grounded theory approach in employing Memoing: they record their thoughts and ideas immediately after conducting an interview as well as throughout the editing process. These notes are used to examine what worked and what might need improving. Traditional archival practices and research are also used to investigate eugenics in Western Canada.

To engage public forums, LAE is building a comprehensive, multi-layered website or portal for conducting research around eugenics in Western Canada. Prototypes of several Public Research Objects of Discovery (PRODs) have been created. PRODs are tools or “digital research boxes” that will be available on a public website to a broad user-community. These centre on different themes, providing opportunities for users to explore numerous aspects of eugenics history, through interactive, multimedia re-contextualizations of living archive material and information.

Some challenges facing this research project reflect the unique character of eugenics survivors themselves; others reflect the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways in which those with developmental and visible disabilities today are still regarded as subhuman. In addition, privacy and confidentiality legislation imposes another constraint on what stories can be told, and how they can be told.

This project is relevant not only to the 3.6 million Canadians with a disability, but also to all Canadians who embrace human diversity and strive to build inclusive communities. In particular, LAE is important for information professionals and researchers who have a distinctive responsibility to ensure the voices and stories of those individuals and communities typically under-represented or marginalized are heard and made publicly available.

This presentation uses visual aids to briefly explore the history of eugenics, while presenting some digital prototypes, project methodologies and challenges.

*Word count: 749 words*