

# Eugenics, Race and Canada's First-Wave Feminists: Dis/Abling the Debates

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## Abstract

Using government reports produced by one of Ontario's pioneering women physicians and leading eugenic crusaders, Dr. Helen MacMurchy, this article interrogates the significance of disability as a central paradigm within first-wave feminism and its promotion of eugenic reforms. I examine how conceptualizations of race were reconstituted through the construct of disability to generate not only inter- but also intra-racial distinctions between differently classed white women. I argue that it was ultimately by leveraging a range of social categories—gender, class, race, and transgressive forms of sexuality—into a disabling paradigm that not only racialized women, but also poor white women were disempowered by eugenics.  
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## Résumé

En s'appuyant sur des rapports gouvernementaux produits par la D<sup>re</sup> Helen MacMurchy, l'une des femmes médecins pionnières et des principales militantes eugénistes de l'Ontario, cet article interroge la signification du handicap comme paradigme central au sein du féminisme de la première vague et de sa promotion des réformes eugéniques. J'examine comment les conceptualisations de la race ont été reconstituées par le biais du concept du handicap pour générer des distinctions non seulement interraciales mais aussi intraraciales entre différentes classes de femmes blanches. Je soutiens que ce fut en fin de compte en

rassemblant un éventail de catégories sociales—genre, classe, race et formes transgressives de sexualité—en un paradigme de handicap que non seulement les femmes racialisées, mais aussi les femmes blanches pauvres, ont été marginalisées par l'eugénisme.

it is of but little use to try to keep people who are mentally and physically unfit for citizenship out of the country if we pay no attention to keeping the Canadian national stock fit mentally and physically. It is necessary to refuse entrance to undesirable emigrants, but it is, if possible, more necessary, not to refuse to the Feeble-Minded that protection and care which alone can prevent them from wrecking their own lives and bringing into the world native-born Canadian citizens more Feeble-Minded and unfit in mind and body than they are themselves. What is the use of forbidding the immigration of the mentally and physically defective from abroad if we manufacture them at home?

Dr. Helen MacMurchy,  
*Sixth Report of the Feeble-Minded  
in Ontario, 1911.*<sup>1</sup> [1]

The question of race figures centrally in historiographical deliberations over the meaning and the mission of the early-twentieth-century women's movement. Transnational historian Jane Carey (2012) characterizes these debates as “[s]omething of a mini ‘history wars,’” with opinions sharply divided between valorizing assessments celebrating the achievements of feminist foremothers or harsh condemnations of their race- and class-bound imperial agenda, exemplified by first-wave feminism's global involvement in eugenics and the promotion of themselves as “mothers of the race” (735).<sup>2</sup> In Canada, attempts to bridge these historiographical schisms, by Janice Fiamengo (2002b) and Cecily Devereux (2005), have emphasized the need for more nuanced studies that assess the intricacies of early feminist thought and activism, including competing ideological formations around the question of race (Forestell 2005). Surprisingly absent in these debates, however, is the attention to the question of disability<sup>3</sup> and its centrality to the reformulation of race, gender, and class hierarchies through early-twentieth-century feminism and eugenics.

While studies of the early-twentieth-century women's movement focus to a considerable degree on the involvement of first-wave feminists in eugenics and the racist and the classist constructs advanced under the banner of eugenical reforms, few writers have interrogated the significance of disability as a central concept within feminist eugenic discourses. Yet, disabling paradigms stood at the heart of first wave-feminism and its promotion of eugenics, imbricated

around a set of white, Anglo, bourgeois, heteronormative, and gender ideals which demarcated who did and who did not constitute a physically and mentally “fit” Canadian subject. In many respects, the pertinent historical question is not solely about race per se, but how, under the aegis of eugenics, the concept of race was deployed and reconstituted, through a construct of disability, to disempower women across a range of social categories.

In what has now become a seminal paper within the field of disability studies, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” Catherine Kudlick (2003) makes a case for the inclusion of disability as an analytic category in historical studies. Drawing on Rosemarie Garland Thomson's (1997) arguments regarding the need for historical inquiries that examine disability as a cultural construct and critical category of investigation, Kudlick extends this analysis to emphasize the centrality of disability to political processes associated with the emergence of western liberal states and modern constructs of citizenship. According to Kudlick (2003), conceptualizations of disability are critical to understanding how western cultures “determine hierarchies and maintain social order, as well as how they define progress,” especially since such constructs often underlie (and thus facilitate) gender, class, and race discrimination through associations with disabling notions such as “abnormal” or “unfit” (765). To Kudlick, disability is not an individual characteristic, but an important analytic category essential to conceptualizing power, hierarchy, and attempts to regulate social order trans-historically in modern western liberal contexts.

According to Kudlick (2003), Thomson (1997), and Douglas Baynton (2001), disabling discourses have been used across time and space to label women, as well as a host of other social groups—Jews, Blacks, homosexuals, anarchists, socialists, Indigenous peoples, and mixed-raced individuals, as “lesser than,” weaker, frailer, and more degenerate than those alleged as superior through oppositional positioning. Baynton (2001) argues that the “rhetorical tactics” used in the U.S. by those opposed to women's suffrage “was to point to the physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws of women,” particularly their frailty, their irrationality and, by the late-nineteenth century, women's less-evolved state compared to men (41). In this

context, the construct of a “menacing” feebleminded woman was critical for first-wave feminism so as to be able to locate themselves in a distinctly superior position—as “mothers of the race”—from which they could agitate for greater social, economic, and political rights for themselves (Baynton 2001; Carlson 2001). But the women held up by first-wave feminists as the maternal leaders of “the race” were not only white; they were also middle class and situated as mentally/physically “abled.” Hence, eugenic discourses around race were ultimately about delineating between different classes of white women, demarcating *intra*-racial distinctions through a construct of disability and notions of “fit” and “unfit.”

To illustrate this dynamic and the importance of disability as a category of analysis for debates on first-wave feminism, this article examines reports on the feebleminded in Ontario produced by one of the province’s pioneering women physicians and eugenic crusader, Dr. Helen MacMurchy. MacMurchy is best known for her work as head of the federal Division of Child Welfare in Ottawa from 1920 to 1934 (Strong-Boag 1979; McConnachie 1983; Dodd 1991). However, her role in spearheading the eugenics campaign in Ontario has received less detailed attention from historians. From the early 1900s, MacMurchy was an active and central figure in the province’s eugenics movement, initially working closely with the National Council of Women in urging the institutionalization of mentally defective women and, eventually, their sterilization. In 1905, she was appointed by the province’s premier to conduct a census on feebleminded women and girls in Ontario. Although MacMurchy’s position as Inspector of the Feeble-Minded was not formalized until 1914, she produced fourteen annual reports on the feebleminded from 1906 to 1919. As well, she published *The Almosts: A Study of the Feeble-Minded* in 1920 and *Sterilization? Birth Control? A Book for Family Welfare and Safety* in 1934. Writing profusely and often quite sensationally, MacMurchy’s publications functioned as an important venue for the promotion of the eugenical agenda in Ontario well before the creation of the *Canadian Journal of Mental Hygiene* in 1918.

What is remarkable about MacMurchy’s publications are the scant references to immigrants or racial groups.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as the quote at the beginning of this paper illustrates, her position on native-born versus im-

migrant feebleminded starkly contrasts with the racist discourses Canadian historians have shown typified eugenics and early-twentieth-century social reform movements, including first-wave feminism, in both central and western Canada (Chapman 1977; Bacchi 1983; McLaren 1986; Valverde 1991; Dowbiggin 1995; Menzies 1998). Beyond her periodic allusion to the “Canadian National Stock,” MacMurchy makes no explicit reference in her reports to Indigenous, African-Canadian, Asian, or South Asian groups when discussing the problem of mental defect or when arguing her case for wide ranging eugenic reforms. The first mention of immigration and the possibility of foreign mental defectives entering Canada appeared in her 1910 report, but her distress focused chiefly on the British home children being sent to Canada. Quite distinct from the hyperbole that characterized her discussions of the dangers posed by the excessive sexual and reproductive propensities of feebleminded women, MacMurchy’s 1914 report simply noted that “[g]reater care” needed to be taken around the admission of mentally-defective immigrants to Canada. Who she did target in her reports, however, were poor, Canadian-born, white women.

Despite an eventual mandate to study all feebleminded persons in Ontario, MacMurchy concentrated her publications to a fair degree on the issue of mentally defective women and girls.<sup>5</sup> Her focus on feebleminded women reflects the gendered thinking that underscored eugenics, whereby reproductive concern over hereditarian transmission and the excessive breeding of the “unfit” was conceptualized chiefly around women’s bodies and their procreative capacities (Tylor 1977; Noll 1994; Yukins 2003). To justify limiting the reproductive rights of feebleminded women, MacMurchy deployed a variety of moral, economic, and socio-political arguments to rationalize proposals for their institutionalization and custodial care. In the early 1900s, the reproductive control measures advocated by eugenicists centered on inhibiting opportunities for pregnancy through sex-segregated custodial institutionalization. While by the 1930s, MacMurchy along with other eugenicists would articulate strong support of eugenic sterilization as the most effective means to inhibit the reproduction of the mentally unfit, during the period in which she was writing her reports on the feebleminded in Ontario, confinement to a supervised, sex-segregated institutional setting was seen as the primary mechanism for

asserting reproductive control over those deemed mentally defective.

Of the estimated feebleminded population in 1906, MacMurchy claimed that 859 were female and 526 were male. A year later, in her 1907 report, feebleminded females were cited as numbering over 1000 in Ontario, while males increased only slightly to 582. MacMurchy repeatedly emphasized the most critical cases in need of immediate attention as “all feeble-minded women and girls,” and women were often presented in the reports as “the most urgent part of the Feeble-Minded problem.” Similarly, case studies used to embellish her arguments typically involved feebleminded women and girls rather than men. In the three reports that MacMurchy published from 1907 to 1909, she used forty-nine individual case studies to illustrate the lives and the conduct of the feebleminded. Forty-eight of these cases were of mentally defective women.

Like other early-twentieth-century eugenicists, MacMurchy generally presented feebleminded women as pre-eminently prone to sexual immorality, describing them as “vastly immoral,” “absolutely and hopelessly immoral,” or as having “vagrant immoral tendencies.” MacMurchy drew out close associations between feeblemindedness, prostitution, and the spread of venereal disease. Single mothers were also targeted. Surveys and case studies repeatedly underscored a connection between illegitimacy and feeblemindedness. Out of the two hundred cases of “illegitimate motherhood” at the Haven in 1910, MacMurchy maintained that nearly three-quarters involved feebleminded women. Examples of mentally defective women having eight to ten illegitimate children were often cited as “typical” cases. To demonstrate the hereditarian nature of illegitimacy, lineages were drawn out in quite extensive detail, in both text and charts, to illustrate how feebleminded women, often themselves born out of wedlock, begot numerous illegitimate children. In the 1911 report, MacMurchy impressed: “We have records—fresh records—obtained this year of grace 1911 of Feeble-Minded women in Ontario having eight and nine children, all illegitimate and all Feeble-Minded.”

MacMurchy presented her concerns with mentally defective women and their sexual/ reproductive proclivities as “dangerous to the community and to our national welfare.” In her reports, she frequently drew out the socio-economic repercussions of feebleminded

women’s unbridled sexual and reproductive propensities, presenting mentally defective women as a disruptive force in communities and dangerous to the welfare of the nation. MacMurchy argued that mentally defective women made up the bulk of the inmates populating public institutions such as refuges, havens, and houses of industry. Their “bad mothering” also contributed to their children’s descent into juvenile delinquency and their general poor health. As MacMurchy put it, mentally defective women “contribute a large degenerate element every year to...the Canadian National Stock.”

Outside of periodic allusions to the “Canadian National Stock,” MacMurchy’s reports contain few explicit references to immigrants or racialized feebleminded populations. These silences are noteworthy given the prevalence of racist discourses within the eugenics movement, as well as within the broader social reform movements of the period. As Mariana Valverde (2008) documents, racist views saturated the writings of leading reformers in this era, including established religious leaders, social gospel proponents, temperance and social purity activists, and feminist organizations such as the National Council of Women. Historians have similarly documented how calls for restrictive immigration policies were central in the “racial purity” platform championed by first-wave feminist luminaries, including Alberta’s “Famous Five”—Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Henrietta Muir Edward (Chapman 1977; McLaren 1990; Grekul, Krahn, and Odynak 2004).

According to Carolyn Strange and Jennifer Stephen (2010), immigrants absorbed the full brunt of Canada’s eugenic racism (524). These authors maintain that eugenicists were not concerned about Indigenous reproduction since nineteenth-century colonial policies had already established mechanisms designed to diminish the procreative capacities of First Nations populations. In their view, racism was so thoroughly entrenched in western imperial contexts by the early 1900s that eugenical ideas were simply not that necessary or important in maintaining already-established racialized social hierarchies. Rather, Strange and Stephen argue, the “race-based reproduction management,” established through colonization practices, in essence constituted “a prior logic for eugenic policies concerned to shore up the fitness of Canada’s Euro-Canadian majority” (525).

However, in the passages where MacMurchy does refer to “race” or the “Canadian National Stock,” more appears to be going on than the privileging of white Anglo-Saxons as a whole. As Valverde (2008) notes, there was an ambiguity that, at times, characterized references to race in eugenic discourses where the term “race” implied something beyond mere Anglo-Saxon-ness. She interprets this as a sign of the “slippery slope” thinking emblematic in racist discourses of the period, whereby Anglo-Saxons identified themselves both as a distinct race and as “the human race,” and increasingly as “the Canadian race,” as an emergent Canadian nationalism strove to extricate a unique identity from Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century (109-113). But as the following passage from MacMurchy’s 1908 report illustrates, the “human race” being privileged in this period was not only one that was white and Anglo-Saxon, but it was also one that was progressively demarcated *between* whites along the fault line of “fit/unfit,” suggesting that an intra-racial construct was being developed through eugenic discourses:

We cannot leave this problem to the working out of natural laws. We have, in the progress of civilization, secured the poor boon of life to the mentally unfit, whom nature would have removed, so that now those unfit threaten somewhat the interests of the race and we must now set our house in order and since we have secured the survival of the unfit, we must establish places fit for the unfit to live in and to make the most of themselves, so that life will be something good for them and that their lives shall not threaten others.

International scholarship on eugenics has begun to focus on the ambiguities associated with eugenic constructs of race and racial superiority, noting how the targets of eugenic discourses were often not racialized groups, but poor whites. Rafter (2004) argues that early-twentieth-century eugenic interventions in the northeastern U.S. targeted mainly American-born “white trash,” that is, poor, rural whites (232-257). Steven Noll (1991, 1995) advances similar findings for the eugenic campaigns in the American south where Blacks were essentially overlooked and excluded from the institutions that were developed to house white feeble-minded populations. In the South African context, both Sol Dubow (2010) and Susanne Klausen (1997, 2001,

2004) demonstrate that eugenics was entangled in the conflict between Afrikaners and the British. According to Dubow (2010), until the 1930s, the eugenic problematizing of race referred explicitly to battles between “Boer and Brit” (523-538). Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (2010) note as well that there is considerable evidence for various national contexts that eugenic interventions were primarily aimed at those who racially “belonged” and not ethnic or racialized populations. “To be sure,” they argue, “these were projects of racial nationalism and indeed racial purity—eugenics was never not about race—but the objects of intervention, the subjects understood to be ‘polluting,’ were often not racial outsiders, but marginalized insiders whose very existence threatened national and class ideals” (3-24). This suggests that discourses of race, linked to notions of disability, were deployed by eugenicists as means of reformulating social hierarchies between whites.

In “The (Dis)similarities of White Racial Identities: The Conceptual Framework of ‘Hegemonic Whiteness,’” Matthew Hughey (2010) offers a useful analytic framework for grappling with the ambiguities surrounding historical constructions of race, particularly the notion of “a race” as advanced within the context of eugenics. As he notes, in the United States, historical and sociological studies have begun to challenge views of “whiteness” as a distinct, uniform category of analysis, emphasizing instead a diversity of white experiences and subject positions. Hughey warns, however, that this is a potentially problematic trend “that over-emphasizes white heterogeneity at the expense of discussion of power, racism and discrimination” (1289). In response, he draws on Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” to advance the notion of “hegemonic whiteness” as an analytic tool that can acknowledge both inter- and intra-racial distinctions, while remaining cognizant of racist politics and the racial superiority historically invested in whiteness. As Hughey puts it:

I argue that meaningful racial identity for whites is produced *vis-à-vis* the reproduction of, and appeal to, racist, essentialist, and reactionary *inter-* and *intra-*racial distinctions: (1) through positioning those marked as ‘white’ as essentially different from and superior to those marked as ‘non-white,’ and (2) through marginalizing practices of being white that fail to exemplify dominant ideals. (1292)

Hughey's concept of "hegemonic whiteness" is useful for recognizing that racist discourses can operate in parallel dialectics of racialization, whereby not only are non-whites situated differently from whites, but some whites, those who Anna Stubblefield (2007) terms "tainted whites," are also relegated to subordinate and inferior positions within their own racial category. Ann Stoler (2001) argues that these intra-racial constructs conjoin race and class "lower-orders" in order to preserve an association of whiteness with respectability, civility, and privilege for bourgeois elites. Robin Brownlie (2006) crafts a somewhat similar argument regarding the interlacing of race and class constructs in their study of First Nations enfranchisement in Ontario in the interwar years. When examining the case file records of Indigenous men and women who applied to the Department of Indian Affairs for enfranchisement, Brownlie found that it was only Indigenous people whose behaviour approximated the "parameters of whiteness" who were successful in their applications. According to Brownlie, whiteness was "both a shorthand for full citizenship and a prerequisite for it" (47). To be considered "close to white," Indigenous men and women had to demonstrate self-discipline, sobriety, virtue, have education, and have the ability to earn an income and pay taxes—in other words, they had to be self-sufficient. Brownlie concludes by asserting the importance of recognizing whiteness as a "status" as opposed to simply a biological or cultural category.

If we apply the concept of "hegemonic whiteness" to MacMurphy's discussions of race and her references to the "Canadian National Stock," it helps to illuminate how she was de facto demarcating *amongst* whites who did and who did not constitute a proper Canadian citizen, and who was and who was not to be considered a physically and mentally "fit" subject worthy of the rights and entitlements of citizenship. I shall return to the question of citizenship later in this discussion, but it is important to consider here how MacMurphy was constituting social relations through a construct of race, albeit in a manner that deployed racial concepts not against non-whites, but whites who she and other eugenicists obviously regarded as lesser-than and inferior to what they defined as the "Canadian National Stock." Given the focus and the emphasis of MacMurphy's reports on feeble-minded women, this was clearly constructing some white women—poor, marginal, and

sexually non-conforming white women—as *not* the mothers of the race. It was also constructing them as disabled.

While MacMurphy's reports concentrated for the most part on archetypal eugenic concerns, namely women's unbridled sexuality and their reproductive propensities, one can also glimpse in her writings how eugenicists were troubled by an array of female behavioural and personality traits, which they suggested were indicative of mental defect. The case studies presented in MacMurphy's reports drew out a portrait of feeble-minded females as unkempt and slovenly with messy hair, shabby clothing, and a general "untidy appearance." They either talked "incessantly" or were sullen and brooding. Their homes were described as disorderly and dirty, often located in the "lowest city haunts." Feeble-minded mothers were portrayed as "neglecting" their children. If single, they rarely held steady employment, and when they did, they performed their work poorly. Most vexing, however, for MacMurphy, was the demeanor of many feeble-minded women. The examples she presented stressed their "quarrelsome" natures, "abusive" (complaining) manners, their "surliness," and their "irritable tempers." According to MacMurphy, most feeble-minded women were simply "hard and unattractive, impudent, insolent and useless." However, she argued, under constant supervision and direction in an institutional setting, a mentally defective woman could be "taught to read and write, to sing, to cook to sew, to knit. With good, simple food, regular bathing, physical exercise, regular habits, etc., she becomes strong, bright-eyed and attractive. She becomes quiet, obedient and well-behaved."

MacMurphy obviously framed the issue of feeble-mindedness, especially the problem of feeble-minded women, within a paradigm that stigmatized particular forms of female behaviour that fell outside hegemonic bourgeois, Anglo-Celtic, heteronormative, patriarchal norms. Her critiques of women's sexual agency, poor and working-class women's divergent moral standards (with respect to sex and reproduction outside of marriage), their distinct forms of family formation (large, often female-headed, and lacking domestic "order"), their "unfeminine" deportment, and vulnerable women's heightened dependency on social services, cast behaviours associated with women's social and economic disadvantage as oppositional to bourgeois norms, as

simply “not normal.” In this sense, feminist readings of eugenics as a dialectic project, simultaneously constituting divergent class, race, and gender identities and status is correct (Gordon 2002; Petchesky 1990; Ladd-Taylor 1997). But it also framed these identities and socio-economic locations as *against* the social, the economic, and the political interests of “normal” bourgeois subjects.

In addition to pointing out the moral, the reproductive, and the social burdens that white feeble-minded women imposed on the state, MacMurchy also presented them as a serious economic threat. According to MacMurchy, Ontarians incurred a tremendous financial expense by maintaining the feeble-minded in the community, especially feeble-minded women and girls. In her 1908 report, she asserted: “it may be unhesitatingly affirmed that if provision were now made...for the care and protection of feeble-minded women and girls... [the] number [of feeble-minded] would never increase and might even decrease. Nothing could be more economical.” MacMurchy went to great lengths to point out that feeble-minded women cost taxpayers hundreds of dollars annually in free V.D. treatments offered through municipal public health services. With respect to the numbers of feeble-minded in charitable and correctional institutions, MacMurchy asserted: “the Feeble-Minded...make us PAY, PAY, PAY for their food, their shelter, their clothes, their folly, their crimes, their children.” To reinforce the costs of this for taxpayers and the state, MacMurchy cited a study conducted in Pennsylvania where it was estimated that two feeble-minded families had cost the state over a quarter of a million dollars in twenty-five years of social welfare maintenance. Almost every report discussed the “enormous sums” expended by churches, benevolent societies, and taxpayers in sustaining the feeble-minded in the community.

A broader politic is evident in MacMurchy’s writings in that, in addition to constructing particular classed, gendered, and racialized identities and normative ideals, MacMurchy’s sensationalist rhetoric was also designed to prompt significant constrictions to the legal rights of marginal populations through the construct of feeble-mindedness—that is to say, through the paradigm of disability. Specifically, MacMurchy and other eugenicists sought to curtail the autonomy, rights, and freedoms of those deemed mentally “unfit”

by motivating public and, thus, governmental support for new regulatory mechanisms that would give professionals the power to directly intervene in and control the lives of marginalized and troubling segments of the population. In this sense, MacMurchy’s work was centrally embroiled in a project of state formation, paralleling unprecedented interventionist policies developed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Ontario and elsewhere in areas such as child protection, social welfare, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and homosexuality.

Eugenic initiatives around mental defect were significantly onerous, however, as they established a governance framework that could potentially be applied to anyone, regardless of whether or not they transgressed formal state laws, as long as they could be officially deemed mentally defective through an IQ test and medical certification. Given the minimal and often substandard educational opportunities that marginalized men and women had in the early 1900s, a poor IQ rating was not difficult to obtain. Additionally, eugenic initiatives were a harsher mode of governance than other forms of state intervention as they could result in permanent institutionalization—a life-long institutional sentence that neither criminal justice nor social welfare regulators could impose on “troublesome” portions of the population (Radford and Park 1993). This was quite intentional. As MacMurchy put it, an “indeterminate sentence” was the “only solution” to the problem of feeble-mindedness in the community.

MacMurchy’s work as Inspector of the Feeble-Minded was essentially about providing a rationalization that would motivate popular support for substantial changes in Ontario’s legislative and policy contexts, and the governance of economically vulnerable populations. In this way, MacMurchy and other eugenicists were embroiled in a project of disablement, achieved through a reconfiguration of social and political citizenship—not only discursively through an oppositional positioning of the “fit” and the “unfit,” but also materially by explicitly calling for enhancements in the power and, thus, the ability of medical professionals to curb the autonomy and freedoms of those deemed “unfit” through certification as mentally defective. This disenfranchisement was most obviously achieved through institutionalization, but also through a range of other restrictions in civic rights such as legal con-

straints around marriage, restrictive immigration legislation, exclusionary labour practices, and limitations around access to equal education with the formation of segregated separate classes and schools for mentally defective children (Carey 2009). The project of disenfranchisement also eventually included the erosion of liberties with respect to reproduction and body autonomy rights through surgical sterilizations of men and women deemed feeble-minded.<sup>6</sup>

When eugenics advocates, such as MacMurchy, spoke of the feeble-minded, they were carving out a new category of disability.<sup>7</sup> This project entailed a reformulation of taxonomies traditionally associated with intellectual impairments, building out and upon the long-established and formally recognized medico-legal classifications of “idiot” and “imbecile.” “Idiots” referred to persons not able to fully develop speech and who were generally considered as having a mental age below three. Most mental health professionals identified this disorder as congenital; that is, a condition present from birth or acquired in the early stages of childhood development. The diagnosis of “imbecile” was used to distinguish acquired conditions, produced through an injury or disease of the brain subsequent to birth. It was believed that both idiots and imbeciles manifested some form of physical stigmata and, thus, were detectable through simple observation (Berrios et al. 1995, 212-258). Feeble-mindedness, on the other hand, was conceptualized by eugenic experts as a different class of intellectual disability all together, with a higher level of intelligence than that of an idiot or imbecile, and generally undistinguishable in appearance from “normal” individuals (Winston, Butzer, and Ferris 2004). According to MacMurchy (1920), the feeble-minded were the “almost” normal (McDonagh 2001). American psychologist, Henry H. Goddard, described them as a group of “invisible,” “high-grade defectives” who “the public is entirely ignorant of” (Gelb 1989, 375-376).

A central impediment in pursuing eugenical reforms, especially the custodial confinement of the feeble-minded, was the fact that only individuals certifiable as insane, idiots, or imbeciles could be legally confined to mental institutions (Simmons 1982, 71). MacMurchy flagged this problem as early as 1907, when she pointed out in her second report that, since the feeble-minded could not be legally certified as either insane or idiots, they could not be confined to mental asylums in Ontar-

io. Hence, in order to gain greater political support for legislative reforms that would ensure their institutionalization, eugenicists, such as MacMurchy and Goddard, devoted considerable space in their publications to explaining and defining what feeble-mindedness was, constructing it as a new form of mental “defect.” Like most eugenic representations in this era, they situated the mentally defective oppositionally in terms of what they were not. “We know what feeble-mindedness is,” Goddard asserted in 1914, “and we have come to suspect all persons who are incapable of adapting themselves to their environment and living up to conventions of society or acting sensibly, of being feeble-minded (Gould 1981, 161).

Class and gender figured prominently as a subtext in eugenic definitions of feeble-mindedness. A passage from MacMurchy’s 1906 report where she was trying to explain to readers what exactly feeble-mindedness was, illustrates this point quite well:

It would seem as if they possessed certain brain cells in a state of quiescence, capable of some development or of some degeneration. Thus, time spent in teaching them to read, write, and cipher is largely wasted, but they can do farm-work, household work, washing, cleaning, knitting, sewing, weaving, sometimes lace-making. They can make clothes under supervision and with some help. Cleaning and polishing operations they are often expert at. What they cannot do is to manage their own affairs. Far less take any share in directing others, as all normal persons do. They lack the power of restraint and inhibition. The feeble-minded are difficult to define, but not difficult to recognize. They are below those of normal, though small, intellect, but above actual imbeciles and idiots. They are able to act and may speak fairly well, though usually more or less foolishly. They can partly, or even wholly, earn their living under supervision, but they are not capable of protecting and taking care of themselves out in the world at large. They lack prudence and self-control. They have not proper will or judgment.

Clearly, the feeble-minded were not active, self-determining, conforming, rational subjects. They could be productive, but only in menial ways and only under the supervision of supposedly more capable citizens who knew how to manage and provide direction to those subordinate to them. Whether MacMur-



chy was conscious or not of the gendered and classed message communicated through this definition is not clear. But in her attempt to delineate feeble-mindedness, MacMurchy made it abundantly evident that being feeble-minded was much like being a woman, especially a working-class domestic servant. By commingling gender and mental defect, and leveraging in class as indicators of what *did not* constitute “Canadian National Stock,” the task of arguing for constraints to the civic rights of the feeble-minded was no doubt made easier. It is in this symbiotic or dialectic interlocking of gender-class-race-disability that eugenics advocates were able to carry forward, but also significantly transform through processes of medicalization and disablement, older nineteenth-century notions of worthy/ deserving and unworthy/undeserving subjects, allocating who should have privilege, status, and power and who should not.

Eugenic representations of mental defect constructed these distinctions on the basis of both corporeal and non-corporeal “markers”—appearances, behavioural traits, and attitudes. “Good” mentally and physically able subjects, those “fit” for civic inclusion—the “normal,” according to MacMurchy—were educated individuals who demonstrated prudence, restraint, good judgment, a robust moral will, and a strong degree of self-control. They were persons able to work without supervision and adept in directing and managing others. The “good” subject could look after their own financial, domestic, and social affairs and did not need help from others. They were autonomous, self-sufficient, and, most importantly, economically independent. In other words, they were the modern, rational, liberal subject who conformed to dominant Anglo-bourgeois and masculine ideals regarding conduct. That this construct posed problems for women, especially economically dependent, married middle-class women, does not appear to have been considered.

Veronica Strong-Boag (1979) argues that first-wave maternal feminists and pioneering women physicians, such as MacMurchy, often focused their work and reform efforts on marginal women for both strategic and somewhat sympathetic reasons. The concept of care for women by women provided a pivotal ideological paradigm through which maternal feminism could rationally carve out new professional careers in areas such as medicine and social work, justifying it as

an expansion of women’s traditional domestic roles and skills. Strong-Boag maintains that the feminism branched by early female physicians, such as MacMurchy, was “constrained” by their class and race locations as members of Canada’s middle-class professional elite, but that they nevertheless evinced a fairly sympathetic view on the plight of their disadvantaged sisters that led them to gravitate to services for women and children (123). It is difficult, however, to locate much empathy or sympathy for poor women in MacMurchy’s reports. According to MacMurchy, feeble-minded women were the “most undesirable and troublesome members of society.”

In *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism*, Devereux (2005) attempts to capture the shifting complexities of first-wave feminist thought in the ever-changing ideological context and politics of early-twentieth-century eugenics. In this task, she concludes that feminism and eugenics “shared an ideological basis in the context of imperialism. Both were concerned with liberating women “to serve and save the race” and with creating “an enlightened culture of motherhood” devoted to the imperial mission of ruling the world...it reproduced an idea of empowered maternalism that was embedded in racial and social hierarchies” (41). According to Devereux, eugenics provided a window of opportunity for early-twentieth-century white, middle-class women to demonstrate their abilities and their public value. But they could only successfully do this within the ideological constraints of eugenic imperialism. As Devereux notes, early-twentieth-century eugenic discourses

provided feminists with an unassailable subject position with a national imperative and feminists took it. The eugenic solution was contingent upon the social recognition of a particular ability in white, middle-class women: it was *because* middle-class women were mothers of the race that they were called upon to do so much. (43)

Devereux points out that, while the aims of eugenicists and maternal feminism collided in the paradigm of “mother of the race,” feminists also colluded in this construct. According to Devereux, first-wave feminists expanded and advanced this notion much farther than what leading male eugenicists sometimes wanted. “Perversely,” she argues, “the discourse of eugenics actually

facilitated a much greater expansion of women's work in the public sphere than it had arguably undertaken to promote. First-wave maternal feminism, for its part, was engaged in a much more aggressive nationalist and imperialist push for political power as a means to "efficiency" than it is usually credited with undertaking." (43).

While this aggressive push for power was carried out around axes of gender, race, and class, it also centered to a considerable degree on a construct of disability. To be sure, first-wave feminists, such as MacMurchy, promoted a class- and race-based rhetoric of motherhood and what constituted "good" and "bad" mothering, but they did this within a disabling paradigm concerned with distinguishing the "fit" from the "unfit." In doing so, MacMurchy and other first-wave feminists deftly leveraged a range of social categories—gender, class, race, and transgressive forms of sexuality—into binary groupings of normal/abnormal, fit/unfit. Their power and success, thus, lay precisely in the comingling of categories that the construct of disability allowed and reinforced. That the dialectic of eugenics ultimately reified new proscriptions and models of motherhood, womanhood, and citizenship that constrained both the colonized and the colonizers, as some women's historians have argued (Stoler 2001), is perhaps less pivotal than the fact that eugenics facilitated and entrenched new modes of surveillance and governance, initially to regulate poor white women labelled disabled, but extended and applied after the Second World War, to broader groups of women with "normal" IQs, including Indigenous women, women of colour, poor and working-class women, immigrant women, lesbian women, and middle-class women. This trajectory, as Stoler (2001) notes, disrupts notions of "a unidirectional historical framing" of developments as emanating from a privileged core to the peripheral margins (848). Rather, it suggests that women across social categories have a vested interest in what happens at the peripheries.

Through the efforts of eugenicists and first-wave feminists, such as MacMurchy, a conceptual foundation was laid, via a construct of disability (as a form of social, moral, civic, and productive/reproductive "unfitness"), that would eventually be extended in the latter half of the twentieth century and applied to a wider range of women beyond those labelled feebleminded. Studies by Canadian and American women's historians have

demonstrated how eugenics informed social welfare policies across the twentieth century, with supportive maternal welfare measures geared to "fit," white, middle-class mothers, while "unfit" mothering increasingly informed justifications for constrained social spending on racialized and economically vulnerable mothers and their children (Ladd-Taylor 1994). In the postwar period, in North America, eugenics continued to fuel punitive antinatalist policies disproportionately aimed at Indigenous, Hispanic, and African-American single mothers such as involuntary sterilizations, one-child welfare benefit caps, and forced use of Norplant contraceptives (Thomas 1998; Smith 2005). Karen Stote's (2012) important research on the coercive sterilizations of First Nations women in Canada demonstrates that dysgenic reproductive policies directed at Indigenous women actually accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, facilitated through funding from the federal Indian Health Service. After the Second World War, international agencies financed, as well, global population control initiatives geared to curbing the reproductive capacities of poor women of colour in the global South (Dowbiggin 2008; Bashford 2008; Mooney 2010). Women with disabilities continue to this day to experience considerable eugenically-informed social and medical coercion around reproduction, including pressure to voluntarily undergo sterilization or have an abortion when they do become pregnant (Finger 1990; Kallianes and Rubinfeld 1997; Tilley et al. 2012).

Research has begun to highlight how supportive eugenical measures geared to "fit" mothers should also not necessarily be read as a boon. As both Canadian and American historians illustrate, positive eugenics led to a "tyranny" of new pediatric, gender, and familial norms, heightened medical/psychological surveillance, and a broad range of expert interventions aimed at white, middle-class women and the promotion of "fit" families (Gleason 1999; Adams 1997; Stern 2002, 2005; Iacovetta 2006; Stephen 2007). In *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*, Wendy Kline (2001) argues that early-twentieth-century eugenics put in place a new "reproductive morality" that reconstructed motherhood "as a privilege, not a right" (126). According to Kline, the reproductive morality reified within eugenics "was little more than a nineteenth-century notion of gender dressed in the garb of science." The "baby boom of the

1950s,” she concludes, “represented the triumph eugenics had been looking for” (156).

These studies provide a useful framework for critically re-evaluating eugenics and first-wave feminism as centrally embroiled in constitutive processes that significantly re-formed social relations, across the axes of gender, class, and race through a construct of disability that in due course proved to be exceedingly malleable. Their labours set in place new modes of governance that had significant effect for all women over the full twentieth century, but that had particularly attendant and harsh consequences for indigent, racialized, and disabled women. In “Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Antinatalist Response,” Susan Thomas (1998) notes:

To be a woman, poor and fertile in the United States in the 1990s is to be blamed by politicians and social reformers for an increase in poverty and alleged immorality in society. Poor women, it is said or implied, are bearing children for the purpose of obtaining or supplementing a welfare check. They are sexually out of control and are the cause of their own poverty. The proof of their degeneracy and immorality is evidence by their entrapment in a spreading ‘culture of single motherhood’: excessive sexuality, expressed in nonmarital pregnancy and childbirth; changing family patterns, represented by woman-headed families; and welfare ‘dependencies,’ incorrectly believed to encourage nonmarital births and family breakdown... Nonmarital childbearing among the poor is thought to produce troubled children who will likely rebound to the public ill, either as criminals, school dropouts, or as budgetary liabilities such as welfare dependents. To lawmakers across the political spectrum, controlling indigent women’s fertility is the first step in moral and behavioral rehabilitation, and ensuring that poor women do not reproduce has become one of the most popular welfare reform proposals of the 1990s. (419-420)

Thomas’ reflections on public policies and popular sentiments at the close of the twentieth century highlight the enduring and the profound impact that eugenics had for marginalized women. That first-wave feminism was both enmeshed in and ensnared by this project, there is no doubt. MacMurchy’s words dissonantly resonate in Thomas’ comments. But it was primarily around and through a *disabling paradigm* that drew fluidly on

hegemonic raced, classed, heteronormative, and gender ideals, that women were ultimately disempowered across a range of social categories over the course of the twentieth century. This suggests that we need to place disability and processes of disablement more critically at the center of analyses and deliberations over the meaning, the mission, and the ultimate impact of first-wave feminism and early-twentieth-century eugenics.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, “Sixth Report of the Feeble-Minded in Ontario, 1911,” *Ontario Sessional Papers*, 1912, 11. MacMurchy’s reports were published annually in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario’s *Ontario Sessional Papers* from 1907 to 1920. All quotes and details attributed to MacMurchy in this paper are drawn from these reports unless otherwise noted. Page references are available from the author.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the ‘mothers of the race’ concept as it was used in Canada, see Valverde (1992).

<sup>3</sup> My work is based on an understanding of disability as a social construct (distinct from impairment) that shifts spatially and temporally and that is socially produced through hegemonic ideologies, material conditions, and social relations within particular contexts. For a similar definition of disability, see Wendell (1996, 45).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that MacMurchy did not express racist and anti-immigrant views in other contexts or publications. See Reitmanova (2008).

<sup>5</sup> In her reports, MacMurchy also concentrated to a considerable degree on feebleminded youths in the Ontario school system, using this information to build a case for separate classes for mentally defective children or their removal to custodial care in institutions. However, in this article, I am focusing on the content in her reports that centered on urging the institutionalization of feebleminded women and girls, which was considerable in its own right.

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Alberta and British Columbia, Ontario never passed involuntary sterilization legislation. However, there is evidence that eugenic sterilizations did occur in the province. See de la Cour (2013, 63-77).

<sup>7</sup> The official diagnostic classification for feeblemindedness became ‘Moron.’

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