

Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada

Project Director

Robert A. Wilson, University of Alberta

Project Coordinator

Moyra Lang, University of Alberta

Team Leaders

Erika Dyck, University of Saskatchewan

Nicola Fairbrother, Neighborhood Bridges

Natasha Nunn, SilverSky Solutions

Bruce Uditsky, Alberta Association for Community Living

Gregor Wolbring, University of Calgary

Rob Wilson, University of Alberta

Team Members

Michael Billinger, Joanne Faulkner, Christine Ferguson

Raymond Frogner, Glenn Griener, Kathryn Harvey

Anne Hughson, Heidi Janz, Amy Kaler

Lene Koch, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Paul Lombardo

Judy Lytton, Leilani Muir, Harvey Quamen

Geoffrey Reaume, Geoffrey Rockwell, Toni Samek

Dick Sobsey, Frank Stahnisch, Nick Supina III

John Sutton, Douglas Wahlsten, Paul Weindling

Kyle Whitfield

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Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada: Overview

The ideas and practices aimed at improving “human breeding” known as *eugenics* were influential across North America in the first half of the 20th-century. The Western Canadian chapter in the history of eugenics, however, remains under-studied. Undertaken by an alliance of 30 research scholars and community members, and about 30 university and community partnering organizations, *Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada* will create a range of academic and public resources—what we call living archives—for investigating this history. These resources will increase knowledge of past social practices and policies. They will also deepen discussions of current issues central to the eugenics movement, such as those concerning reproductive freedom, institutionalization, and the sorts of people there should be in the future.

As the province in which the vast majority of eugenic sterilizations in Canada were performed, Alberta occupies a particular place in this history. British Columbia was the only other province in Canada to pass involuntary sterilization legislation that was explicitly eugenic, and whereas in most other North American jurisdictions eugenics waned following the Second World War, Alberta’s eugenic sterilization program continued until the repeal of the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta in 1972. It was also against the Province of Alberta that team member Leilani Muir won a landmark legal case in 1996 for wrongful sterilization and confinement. This case has contributed to preserving a rich documentary basis for understanding the history of eugenics in Western Canada. For these reasons, *Living Archives* focuses on eugenic sterilization and associated institutionalization in Alberta against the backdrop of eugenic ideas and practices across the four Western Canadian provinces.

Basic facts about this history are known, but many details and their legacy for contemporary society are not understood. The typical grounds for eugenic sterilization were 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 eugenic practices were people with a variety of disabilities, especially (but not only) developmental disabilities. Yet many other marginalized groups—single mothers, First Nations and Métis people, eastern Europeans, and poor people—were also disproportionately represented amongst those subject to eugenic practices, such as sterilization. Precisely why is not known. An understanding of why, and of how eugenics operated as it did in Western Canada, is relevant to all Canadians who embrace human diversity and strive to build inclusive communities.

In addition to enhancing archival collections and improving their accessibility to scholars, we will also record oral histories, build an interactive digital interface that increases community engagement, and maximize the outreach of the project via in-person delivery, curriculum bundling, and public dialogues on relevant contemporary issues. *Living Archives* will:

- (a) create and develop innovative academic resources for scholars across academic fields, including history, sociology, philosophy, medicine, law, and education;
- (b) actively involve community organizations and vulnerable individuals whose stories have most often been left out of the Canadian collective memory; and
- (c) highlight the contemporary significance of a neglected part of Canadian history via curriculum bundling, public dialogues, and barrier-free digital accessibility.

Relevance and Importance: Canada and Beyond

As transformative scientific and medical technologies expand their reach in the 21st-century, traditional questions about how we should lead our lives, and what kind of society we want to leave future generations take on urgency. *Living Archives* considers such questions in ways that take us from the present to the future with an eye on the past. Through alliances with vulnerable individuals and major developmental disability and self-advocacy organizations, we will create *living archives*—including paper archives, digitalized finding aids, curriculum bundling, video narratives, and various forms of in-person delivery—dedicated to the history of eugenics in Western Canada. We will focus especially on the practice of eugenic sterilization and associated institutionalization in Alberta. These resources will facilitate the exploration of a difficult aspect of Canadian history. This history has special relevance for those today living with disability or the perception of disability. Integrating traditional archival work with community organizations that emphasize the value of inclusiveness, *Living Archives* achieves two important goals:

- Identify and develop resources on the history of eugenics in Western Canada that will be of lasting value both to scholars and to the general public;
- Engage scholars, community organizations and members of the public in discussions about aspects of the past that can inform current practices and policies, especially those involving the social uses of scientific and biomedical technologies.

In the longer term, *Living Archives* will establish Canadian leadership on issues concerning technology, human variation, and community, much as *Facing History and Ourselves* (www.facinghistory.org/) does with respect to race, as the *ACTUP Oral History Project* (www.actuporalhistory.org/) does with respect to AIDS awareness, and as the Montreal Life Stories project (www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca) does with respect to atrocity and genocide.

Background and Timeliness

The eugenics movement, which flourished between 1865 and 1945, looms large in thinking about technology, human variation, and community. In coining the term “eugenics”, Francis Galton characterized eugenics as “the science of improving stock ... which, especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable” (1883). The most popular association of eugenics is with Nazi Germany, but recent work on eugenics considers other contexts, such as Scandinavia and the United States (www.eugenicsarchive.org).

In 1928 Alberta introduced the Sexual Sterilization Act, placing Alberta within a growing number of North American jurisdictions, beginning with Indiana (1907) and California (1909), and later including British Columbia (1933). The surgical sterilization of “mental defectives” during this period served an ambitious political agenda, one that promoted a healthy citizenry while minimizing state expenditures. In Alberta, this policy remained in effect until 1972; in British Columbia, until 1973. Public awareness of Alberta’s history of eugenics arose through legal action brought by Leilani Muir against the Province of Alberta, with a decision in favour of the plaintiff in 1996. The subsequent National Film Board documentary, *The Sterilization of Leilani Muir*, and the many hundreds of legal actions launched in the wake of the Muir trial for

wrongful sterilization and confinement, settled by the Province out of court, also fostered concentrated yet passing awareness of the history of eugenics in Western Canada.

Living Archives is especially timely. Those still alive who felt the direct effects of eugenic laws and social policy are now mostly in their 60s and 70s. Such individuals have much to teach us all. Their experience will allow a more inclusive collective memory of the largely unmarked history of eugenics in Western Canada to be constructed. An understanding of the past here is of special relevance for ongoing discussions at the interface of reproductive choice, disability, human variation, and technology. Thus integral to the project is a communal space for the exploration of the relationships between the history documented and current policies and practices. Whether contemporary practices, such as recommended screening for Trisomy 21 (Down Syndrome) or selective abortion of “defective fetuses” constitute new forms of eugenics—*newgenics*, as it is sometimes put—remain topics of debate. *Living Archives* will inform and advance such debates in constructive and inclusive ways.

Project and Team Structure and Community Partnerships

Rob Wilson, an accomplished team builder with a robust history of initiating and managing innovative interdisciplinary projects, heads the leadership team of 6. Wilson currently directs Philosophy for Children Alberta www.ualberta.ca/~phil4c/ and is the founder of the What Sorts Network www.whatsorts.net, which links over 60 researchers. The leadership team of co-applicants is interdisciplinary and community-oriented. On the academic side, it includes:

- *Erika Dyck, University of Saskatchewan*: a historian holding a Tier II CRC with expertise in the history of Canadian psychiatry, mental health, and medical experimentation;
- *Gregor Wolbring, University of Calgary*, a biochemist by training, and a leader on future technologies, disability, and society.

Two community leaders, each with distinguished careers in developmental disability, family life, and community inclusion, and another with technical management expertise, anchor team leadership in local communities:

- *Nicola Fairbrother*, Director, Neighborhood Bridges, and a leading advocate for those with developmental disabilities in Alberta.
- *Natasha Nunn*, Chief Executive Officer, SilverSky Solutions: a small, community-based tech firm committed to socially-responsible computing solutions.
- *Bruce Uditsky*, Chief Executive Officer, Alberta Association for Community Living: a leader in working with families around issues of parenting with disability.

Making up our overall research team are an additional 25 people with requisite expertise. The team’s operation is structured around 5 themes and related core activities:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Team Members</i>	<i>Core Activities</i>
<i>Traditional Archives +</i>	Erika Dyck	Geoffrey Reaume, Kathryn Harvey, Raymond Frogner, Frank Stahnisch, Geoffrey Rockwell, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Paul Lombardo, Paul Weindling, Toni Samek	Traditional academic research using paper-based archives on the history of eugenics, and improving the quality and access to such material
<i>Surviving a Eugenic Past</i>	Nicola Fairbrother	Judy Lytton, Leilani Muir, Glenn Griener, Kyle Whitfield, Joanne Faulkner, John Sutton, Nick Supina III, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Amy Kaler	Developing inclusive collective remembering about Canadian eugenics and its legacy; delivering video narratives & input into curriculum materials
<i>Reproductive Choice in an Ableist World</i>	Bruce Uditsky	Anne Hughson, Heidi Janz, Judy Lytton, Lene Koch, Amy Kaler, Leilani Muir, Christine Ferguson, Nick Supina III, Dick Sobsey	Recording individual narratives and promoting community dialogue on eugenics, inclusion, & social policies affecting people with disabilities
<i>Post-Eugenic Futures</i>	Gregor Wolbring	Anne Hughson, Geoffrey Reaume, Dick Sobsey, Heidi Janz, Amy Kaler, Doug Wahlsten, Harvey Quamen, Frank Stahnisch, Mike Billinger	Exploring issues at the interface of disability, technology, reproduction, and human enhancement
<i>Technical Team</i>	Natasha Nunn	Geoffrey Rockwell, Harvey Quamen, Michael Billinger, Glenn Griener, Kathryn Harvey, Kyle Whitfield, Raymond Frogner, Toni Samek	Constructing a digital platform for research and public outreach, and facilitating project management
<i>Eugenic Frames</i>	Rob Wilson	Molly Ladd-Taylor, Michael Billinger, Paul Weindling, Lene Koch, Paul Lombardo, Doug Wahlsten, Kyle Whitfield, ...	Providing resources for reflection on what eugenics is, past and present, and on the contextual location of eugenics in Western Canada in both Canada and the rest of the world

Throughout the history of eugenics, vulnerable individuals have been treated, in large part, in exclusionary ways—via institutionalization, family and community segregation, and sterilization. A project that focused primarily on extracting knowledge from the experiences of sterilization survivors would repeat that error. Our vision instead is one where vulnerable individuals, community organizations, and academic researchers work together to build resources dedicated to

an inclusive history of eugenics and sexual sterilization in Western Canada. The shared commitment to this common goal must be reflected in how we strive to achieve that goal. Community partnerships play a crucial role in *Living Archives*, and their development to date has been guided by this vision. We expect the list of community partners to grow as work on the project develops over the next few years, and *we invite interested government and community partners to contact us*. Foundational community partnerships are listed below.

Community Partner	Primary Role and Coordinative Activity
Field Law	Safeguarding crucial historical documents; provide legal advice and assistance as appropriate to moving such documents to existing archival repositories.
Alberta Association for Community Living	Facilitating involvement of parents and children with developmental disabilities impacted by eugenic practices and knowledgeable professionals, in the development of curricular materials, workshops, training for tertiary students, and community networks.
Canadian Association for Community Living	Focusing discussions of disability and ethical, philosophical, & legal dimensions of personhood in ways that promote more inclusive communities; providing national leadership and coordination with the AACL on issues linking past to present and future.
Neighborhood Bridges	Connecting with volunteers with lived experience of institutionalization and sterilization; providing a safe community space for often painful discussions; working with traditional disability organizations; promoting community dialogue.
Maa and Paa Theatre	An innovative small theatre group specializing in bringing Western Canadian history alive, Maa and Paa will develop theatric works for public audiences.
SilverSky Solutions	A local, community-focused web-development company offering expertise in technology for innovative, online user-experiences and accessibility.
Edmonton Public Library	Serving the public with barrier-free access to materials, computer stations, meeting spaces, and public events; providing public library leadership in Alberta.
American Assoc. of People with Disabilities	As the largest cross-disability organization in North America, and with special interests in social justice, AAPD will facilitate cross-border communication and dissemination within North America, and will allow our work to be situated in the broader North American context.
Provincial Archives of Alberta	The official repository of government records of enduring value and the site of a strong collection of privately created archival records documenting Alberta's history, the PAA will play a key role in archiving.
Legal Archives Society of Alberta	The major non-profit organization for legal archiving in Alberta, LASA is a likely repository providing archival expertise for relevant legal documentation.

Project Outcomes and Student Training

This project has 8 deliverables, most being the chief responsibility of 1-2 project sub-teams:

1. The <i>development of a comprehensive, multi-layered website / portal</i> for conducting research into the history of eugenics in Western Canada. This process has four critical components: identifying current resources, clarifying and improving legal access to existing records, improving the quality and accessibility of public documents through digitization, and creating new materials through interaction with community partners. [Traditional Archives +, Technical Team]
2. The <i>establishment of ethical criteria and protocols followed by recording the oral histories of vulnerable individual community members</i> directly affected by the history of eugenics and sterilization and their broader involvement in the project. [Reproductive Choice in an Ableist World, Surviving a Eugenic Past]
3. The <i>creation of high school and university curriculum units</i> focused on the history of eugenics and sterilization in Western Canada, and past and present views of disability and human variation, drawing on the work of all sub-teams. [Project Director, Project Coordinator]
4. The <i>organization of public dialogues, workshops, and conferences</i> that serve to disseminate other project deliverables and take up contemporary issues clustered under the heading “newgenics”. [Reproductive Choice in an Ableist World, Post-Eugenic Futures]
5. The <i>production and dissemination of web-cam narratives</i> introduces a self-replicating, “viral” element to our project & enhances community outreach into the developmental disability community [Surviving a Eugenic Past]
6. The <i>design and implementation of small workshops, seminars, and supporting material</i> that use the history of eugenics in Western Canada as a backdrop for ongoing issues related to developmental disability and human diversity; included here will be in-school teacher professional development sessions and service-provider staff training. [Post-Eugenic Futures, Traditional Archives +]
7. The <i>construction of a public, electronic interface</i> , including digital finding aids, to optimize the public impact of the project. [Technical Team]
8. The <i>delivery of standard academic works on the history of eugenics</i> , drawing on the resources provided by both traditional and living archives formats. [All academic team members]

Approximately one-quarter of our SSHRC funds will be used in training at least 10 undergraduate and (more intensively) 4-6 graduate students per year as part of the project. In addition, with cash and in kind contributions from the universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Saskatchewan, we will fund at least that many undergraduate and graduate students again, integrating the funded training of 20 undergraduate and 8-12 graduate students per year into the project. Living Archives will run summer intern programs in 2011 and 2012. *Students interested in participating in the*

project should contact any member of the leadership team directly, or the project manager via the addresses below.

Contact and Further Information

Moyra Lang MLIS

Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada

Department of Philosophy

2-40 Assiniboia Hall

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

Canada T6G 2E7

Telephone 1-780-248-1211

E-mail: livingarchiveseugenics@gmail.com.

Further information on the project and related past group activities are available at <http://eugenicsarchive.ca> .