

Book Review | *Laboratory of Deficiency: Sterilization and Confinement in California, 1900–1950s*, by Natalie Lira (University of California Press, 2022)

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Only a few years prior to 2020, many among the public had been shocked to learn that refugee men, women, and children were being held in unsanitary and overcrowded cages and subjected to family separation, casualties of the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policies. Likened to "dog kennels," these cages signified as well as enabled the dehumanization of already vulnerable immigrants in rhetorical, material, and corporeal terms.

Natalie Lira sheds much-needed light on an earlier history of this same process of dehumanization in *Laboratory of Deficiency: Sterilization and Confinement in California, 1900–1950s*. The author examines the forced confinement and sterilization targeting Mexican-origin youth during the early twentieth century. Lira's focus is southern California's Pacific Colony. Allegedly intended as a treatment facility for people with developmental disabilities, Pacific Colony was used as a carceral institution where young people deemed criminals, troublemakers, or potential burdens to the state could be consigned, often against their will and that of their families. Officials incarcerated youth at Pacific Colony by using a medical diagnosis of "feeblemindedness," a conveniently pliant term with racist, ableist, and classist implications—and aims. Feeblemindedness was presumably a hereditary condition marked by a low IQ and leading to poverty, criminal behavior, and sexual licentiousness. Eugenists following Francis Galton and Charles Davenport linked feeblemindedness to non-whites, disabled people, and poor people; they also claimed that allowing such populations to procreate would lead to a general decline in the integrity of the species. Therefore, they argued that sterilization of undesirables proved necessary for the greater good. Lira writes, "As a medical diagnosis that combined

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social location and supposed mental capacity, 'feeble-minded' became a 'conduit' through which previous forms of discrimination and inequality were upgraded and legitimized" (183). A total of 1,846 men and women were sterilized at Pacific Colony between 1929 and 1961, approximately 20,000 throughout California in total (27, 183). Sterilization was usually a condition of release from the facility, making Pacific Colony the apotheosis of eugenicists' social engineering goals.

Lira begins by describing her research methods and methodology with care. Using a framework combining scholarship in reproductive justice and critical disability studies, the author meticulously examines a "sprawling archive" of primary and secondary documents, providing insight into the experiences of individuals committed to Pacific Colony and tracing the medical, political, and discursive networks that sustained the institution (21). Lira describes the book's argument as twofold: through empirical data analysis, *Laboratory of Deficiency* proves that Mexican-origin youth were systematically targeted by California's justice and medical systems, while epistemically, the book outlines how "feeble-mindedness" was used to establish racial inferiority and mental defect as inherent qualities of Mexican-origin people (3). "Scientific" discourses characterized Mexican-origin people as potential criminals and degenerates whether or not individuals were actually guilty of any crime, justifying their detainment and sterilization. At the same time, the seeming urgency of the problem meant that institutions like Pacific Colony remained funded even during times of crisis such as the Great Depression, though the facility was overcrowded and residents did not always receive adequate food or care while the staff certainly did. Consequently, Lira shows how racist rhetoric ensured the flow of cultural and financial capital into Pacific Colony based on claims that it prevented future crime, and how state officials, medical professionals, and even affluent white feminists used their support of Pacific Colony to bolster their social and professional positions.

Chapter one begins with the story of "Sofia" and "Margarita," sisters who were sent to Pacific Colony in 1937 and 1938, respectively. State officials justified their incarceration by claiming that they were innately deficient: they had scored low on IQ tests, their brother was a ward of the court, their mother was deemed "illiterate and dull," and Margarita had had a child out of wedlock (25). Both were sterilized on the same day. Starting with how the feeble-minded classification was used against the sisters, Lira proceeds to show how the term authorized white supremacy as the "natural" order of things, connecting the function of Pacific Colony to other carceral institutions such as slavery, federal boarding schools, and prisons. Lira explains how nineteenth-century efforts of groups such as the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons informed campaigns by Lewis M. Terman—father of the Stanford-Binet IQ Test—and white suffragists belonging to the Women's Legislative Council of California, leading to the construction of Pacific Colony. Given eugenicist attitudes claiming that inferior populations should not be

allowed to breed and were only good for menial labor, Pacific Colony opened in its permanent location in 1927, based around the idea that those confined there would provide free labor. Within a decade, the facility relied on the labor of nearly half of its detainees to function (67).

Lira presents the next two chapters as counterparts, allowing the reader to compare the treatment of women and men in the carceral-medical complex that she details. Chapter two shows how easily a family could be destroyed by a feeble-mindedness diagnosis: like her aunt, mother, and siblings before her, "Valentina" was institutionalized and subsequently sterilized. Since the Mexican-American War, Anglo settlers had framed Mexican-origin women as immoral creatures prone to overbreeding, thereby threatening the birthright of white Americans. In the early twentieth century, social reformers sought to train them in "white middle-class American home and hygiene practices," as a means to civilize them and train them to raise other people's children (79). Many Mexican-origin women did not subscribe to the same modesty customs as white affluent women, and their parents were too busy working to watch over them or did not care to surveil their sexual activities. Therefore, young women like Valentina were often designated "sex delinquents," and on over half of all sterilization records for women with Spanish surnames, sexual delinquency was one of the reasons cited (92).

In contrast, Mexican-origin men and boys were typically framed as "defective delinquents," or (potential) criminals. During the Second World War, they were often disparaged as unpatriotic or anti-American criminals; they were also sent to Pacific Colony at higher rates than women (111–14). Such was the case with "Raul," whose family protested his sterilization, only for them to be also designated feeble-minded and ignored. Biased IQ tests bolstered these impressions, suggesting that low scores indicated future criminality regardless of a person's behavior (119). While acknowledging that social factors played a role in the choices people made, researchers such as Willis W. Clark nevertheless highlighted heredity, blaming the deviant behavior of white youths on "youthful rebellion" and that of Black and Mexican-origin youths on "general racial inferiority" (122–23).

However, despite the seemingly inexorable mechanism ensuring their confinement and sterilization, many of the Pacific Colony residents did fight back against their captors. In the fourth and final chapter, Lira shares the story of "Teresa," who was committed to Pacific Colony after giving birth to a child outside of marriage. Opposing clinical staff's every attempt to render her compliant, Teresa fought back on the day of her sterilization and prevented the procedure from being performed. Although acts of defiance "were not recognized as protest, were often unsuccessful, and were sometimes met with violent punishments," Lira writes, they allowed young men and women at Pacific Colony

to show that they were “more than just sterilized bodies” (149). The author describes the inhumane abuse and general conditions the youths experienced at the facility, from pulling a heavy slab of concrete for hours to being fed food contaminated with sticks and rocks (157–58). As is to be expected, many ran away, and administrators collaborated with law enforcement to describe them in terms of racialized criminality, encouraging local citizens to help ensure their return to Pacific Colony. Nevertheless, even those who ran away might find themselves paroled in absentia if proof of amended behavior—and overcrowding—swayed administrators, exposing the convenient, contrived design of the “feble-mindedness” label.

Lira’s is a well-researched book that provides a sweeping history of United Statesian racialization of Mexican-origin people while reminding readers of the real persons who lived these cruelties. Drawing on notable scholars such as Dorothy Roberts, Loretta Ross, Sami Schalk, Nirmala Eruvelles, and Miroslava Chávez-García, *Laboratory of Deficiency* deepens our understanding of the “expansive matrix of reproductive oppression,” proving a necessary read for those working in reproductive justice and critical disability studies, and critical race studies and Latinx/e studies more broadly (182). Lira’s timely book shows how expedient taxonomies based in race, dis/ability, class, and gender are used to distinguish “fully human” beings from “inferior” and unwanted Others, and how a complex network of actors and institutions function to give those taxonomies seeming veracity. Sadly, abuses like those perpetrated at Irwin and the ongoing violence and loathing directed at refugees seeking asylum in the United States demonstrate that the eugenicist apparatus described by Lira continues to fulfill its function.

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