

## Book Review | *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, by Jess Whatcott (Duke University Press, 2024)

Beans Velocci

University of Pennsylvania

[bvelocci@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:bvelocci@sas.upenn.edu)

In *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, Jess Whatcott makes a much-needed and timely contribution to the history of eugenics that foregrounds the urgent need for abolition of incarceration in all of its forms. Whatcott's argument is disarmingly clear: "detention itself is eugenics" (xiv). That is, even as eugenics is often regarded as an injustice of the past, spaces of institutionalization ranging from prisons to nursing homes serve the same purposes as their early twentieth-century forebears. Just as psychiatric hospitals, homes for the so-called feebleminded, and reformatories did a century ago, such spaces segregate populations deemed threatening or otherwise undesirable by white, middle-class actors, and in so doing, limit inmates' biological and social reproduction for the betterment of normative society. To make this argument, Whatcott traces eugenic confinement across multiple sites of detention in California as institutions first produced a "defective" class and eventually congealed into the carceral state that continues to shorten and degrade lives today.

With its prologue, the book begins with the rapid spread of COVID-19 through migrant detention centers to powerfully demonstrate the contemporary stakes of incarceration's impact on life chances. It is not, Whatcott suggests, a coincidence that state-run congregate living settings exposed the individuals warehoused within them to a deadly viral threat. Rather, these spaces are made to contain people who are already excised from the state's vision of an ideal future and whose death, whatever the timeline, is a necessary condition for that future to occur. An introduction laying out Whatcott's methodology and five subsequent chapters mobilize this insight to link eugenic past and present.

Velocci, Beans. 2025. Review of *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, by Jess Whatcott (Duke University Press, 2024). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 11 (2): 1–5.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312.

© Beans Velocci, 2025 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

The first two main chapters will be of particular interest to the readers of this journal, given their engagement with the materialization of categories and the politics of care, respectively. Chapter 1 rigorously examines the construction of “defective” as both an inchoate category often weaponized to justify incarceration and a form of embodied personhood brought into being by the very institutions that deployed that category. Whatcott makes some of their most stunning methodological moves here. Instead of taking for granted an extant population of “actually” disabled people in contrast to racialized or deviantly gendered individuals pathologized as “feeble-minded,” Whatcott argues that the state disabled all whom it categorized as defective and funneled into institutions, regardless of how they might be categorized today. Confinement had material effects as it marked bodyminds by trauma and tightly circumscribed action. When institutions performed sterilizations, they queered bodies by making them nonreproductive and therefore beyond the bounds of normative maleness and femaleness, even as sex-segregated institutions themselves produced and reinforced binary sex. Chapter 2 attends to the use of purported care and treatment as punishment. The specifics are familiar within history of eugenics and psychiatry—hydrotherapy, restraints, discipline via pharmaceuticals—though still harrowing. Whatcott does not directly engage with the feminist STS scholarship on care (e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa 2011), but the chapter’s linking of care and violence offers a clear example of how “care” alone is not a substitute for just relations.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer continued analysis of the California eugenics materials. Chapter 3 investigates the political economy of carceral eugenics, particularly the incredible amount of labor and financial investment to keep institutions running, and the role of these institutions in a broader transition from corporate capital to a Progressive administrative state. Chapter 4 reads reports of uncooperative inmate behavior against the grain to locate moments of resistance and what Whatcott terms “anti-eugenics cripistemologies” (136), and to resist imaginings of a utopian future that elide disability and queerness. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the ongoing confinement of disabled people and the eugenic undergirding of rehabilitation and reform efforts through the twentieth century. A succinct epilogue reiterates Whatcott’s ultimate goal: using this history of eugenics to inform carceral abolition in the present.

Whatcott makes two main interventions into the history of eugenics. First, they position eugenic confinement as a form of reproductive control. Foundational histories of eugenics (e.g., Kline 2001; Schoen 2005; Stern 2005) have often located the reproductive injustice of eugenics in sterilization procedures inflicted on institutionalized people such as tubal ligations, hysterectomies, and vasectomies. Whatcott draws our attention to the insidious reproductive violence of confining inmates to ostensibly single-sex institutions for long-to-indefinite periods of time; even without sterilization programs, reproduction is limited by

physical separation. As incarcerated people with children or other dependents are removed from their families, their ability to parent is again foreclosed by distance. In extending what qualifies as reproductive control, Whatcott underscores the vastness of carceral violence and creates an opportunity for renewed investigation of reproductive discipline beyond sterilization. Second, Whatcott's refusal to parse disability from race, race from gender, and gender from sexuality emphasizes the co-constitution of these various axes of oppression (Collins 2000) through eugenics.

*Menace to the Future* offers numerous conceptual innovations, and a forceful case for disability and queer analyses and an orientation toward justice in scholarship on eugenics. I fully concur with Whatcott regarding the eugenic legacies that have shaped and remain active in contemporary carceral settings. At the same time, the book would have been strengthened by more direct engagement with the historiography of eugenics and other long-standing conversations about looking for "resistance" in the historical record. The book's focus on continuity over time risks producing a static and monolithic "eugenics" that masks historical contingencies and specificities of the present. This occasional flattening is reflected in the book's language. Whatcott not infrequently refers to eugenics as a "discourse" (14), "ideology" (135), and "philosophy" (109); for a book that so carefully attends to daily practices and experiences within institutions, *Menace to the Future* begs future engagement with eugenics itself as constituted through historically-specific practices and infrastructures. Existing work on the role of eugenic science in determining institutional life, such as quests for data collection (Bix 1997; Porter 2018), prison experiments (Blue 2009), contraceptive development (Briggs 2003), and the carceral state (e.g., Benjamin 2019 and Hatch 2019) could add considerably to an account of eugenics as primarily a mode of thought and state-building. I would be curious to read Whatcott's take on differences between an older model of explicit, institutionally-supported eugenic science directly translated into state policy, and contemporary scientific/clinical research and state policy that insist on their own race-neutrality despite copious evidence to the contrary, and what that means for abolition in the present.

The book's treatment of resistance among incarcerated people in Chapter 4 opens another door for continued conversation. Whatcott ascribes the term "anti-eugenics" to historical actors in an effort to demonstrate these individuals' assertion of "a right to live" and ongoing challenges to their own devaluation (134). I very much appreciated Whatcott's use of institutional documents at cross-purposes to their creation. However, I sometimes wondered if these attributions of resistance might unintentionally render one-dimensional the very people to whom Whatcott seeks to be accountable as political ancestors refusing a demand for respectability and queer/crip extinction. Scholarship on resistance and agency among historians of slavery (e.g., Camp 2005; Johnson 2003; decades of critiques of and responses to Genovese [1976]) might be a fruitful site for collaborative

thinking across subfields. Walter Johnson, for example, has argued that in the context of the plantation, all behaviors “cannot simply be reformatted as resistance in a liberatory gesture which paradoxically reduces even the most intimate actions of human beings to (resistant) features of the system that enslaved them,” potentially erasing “the way in which enslaved people theorized their own actions” (2003, 112, 118). In *Menace to the Future*, inmates are primarily resisters: sharing answers to an IQ test “challenged the notion that status [and therefore housing, classroom, and training placements] should be determined on the basis of IQ testing” (138); attempted arson was “a practice of both anticarcerality and anti-eugenics” (139); masturbation was “an act of defiance against the gendered norms of sexual propriety” (141). But when all acts are considered “anti-eugenics,” other potential interiorities may be hidden: a desire for better housing in terrible conditions, or raw anger, or a combination of boredom and horniness. Insights from scholars like Johnson may help historians of eugenics grapple with the balance of recognizing violence without proof of resistance.

Overall, *Menace to the Future* raises fundamental questions for both historical methodology and contemporary activism. It is an important contribution to the study of carceral eugenics in both past and present. Whatcott’s focus on disability, queerness, and abolition challenges scholars and organizers alike to face head-on the ongoing emergency of eugenic continuity over time. I look forward to the queer, crip future that Whatcott has brought into possibility as scholars answer their call for histories of eugenics that center disability and as abolitionists utilize the power of the historical narrative they’ve woven.

## References

Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity.

Bix, Amy Sue. 1997. “Experiences and Voices of Eugenics Field-Workers: ‘Women’s Work’ in Biology.” *Social Studies of Science* 27 (4): 625–68.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/285560>.

Blue, Ethan. 2009. “The Strange Career of Leo Stanley: Remaking Manhood and Medicine at San Quentin State Penitentiary, 1913–1951.” *Pacific Historical Review* 78, (2): 210–41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2009.78.2.210>.

Briggs, Laura. 2003. *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. University of California Press.

Camp, Stephanie. 2005. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. University of North Carolina Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th ed. Routledge.

Genovese, Eugene D. 1976. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Vintage Books.

Hatch, Anthony Ryan. 2019. *Silent Cells: The Secret Drugging of Captive America*. University of Minnesota Press.

Johnson, Walter. 2003. "On Agency." *Journal of Social History* 37 (1): 113–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2003.0143>.

Kline, Wendy. 2001. *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*. University of California Press.

Porter, Theodore. 2018. *Genetics in the Madhouse: The Unknown History of Human Heredity*. Princeton University Press.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2011. "Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things." *Social Studies of Science* 41 (1): 85–106.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301>.

Schoen, Johanna. 2005. *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*. University of North Carolina Press.

Stern, Alexandra Minna. 2005. *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. University of California Press.

Whatcott, Jess. 2024. *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*. Duke University Press.

## Author Bio

**Beans Velocci** is an assistant professor in the Department of History and Sociology of Science and the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.