



**Robert A. Wilson.** *The Eugenic Mind Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017. xiv. + 333 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-262-03720-4.

**Reviewed by** Michael Rembis (University at Buffalo (SUNY))

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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

*The Eugenic Mind Project* emerged from the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada project, which was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Community-University Research Alliance grant. The book's author, Robert A. Wilson, is now professor of philosophy at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. When he was a professor at the University of Alberta, Wilson served as principal investigator on the Living Archives project and oversaw the creation of EugenicsArchive.ca. He also is the director and executive producer of the documentary, *Surviving Eugenics*. Given this context, I was eager to read *The Eugenic Mind Project*, a book that leading disability studies scholar Lennard Davis describes (on the back cover) as "one of the best studies of eugenics to date."

*The Eugenic Mind Project* is Wilson's attempt to think through, or, quite literally in some chapters, puzzle through key concepts and questions related to eugenics: What is a eugenic trait? What is human betterment?—a question that Wilson argues has been "glossed over" in previous accounts of eugenics (p. 6). What gave rise to eugenic thinking, or as Wilson calls it, "The Eugenic Mind" (p. 24)? Why does it persist? As Wilson states early in the book, *The Eugenic Mind Project* is part of a "recent turn in the study of eugenics, a turn that brings eugenics home, both from a perceived dis-

tant past to the ongoing present, and from ideas and practices that primarily affect others to those that remain continuing issues for many of us in our daily lives" (p. 10).

After providing a brief collage of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century manifestations of, and apologies for, eugenics, primarily in the United States and Canada, Wilson moves to the past. In the book's second chapter, he explores the "short history" of eugenics, roughly the decades between 1865 and 1945 (p. 25). Wilson places the development of eugenics within the context of the creation of the "fragile sciences of human nature" during the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 26). Like other scholars of eugenics, Wilson sees the origins of the new science in a nascent acceptance of evolutionary theory, but perhaps more importantly in the development of psychology, anthropology, criminology, and sociology. He argues that eugenics spread across these disciplines, giving it a formidable "credibility" (p. 27). Although eugenics was never fully accepted, even among its most vocal proponents, Wilson does not acknowledge contestation among the numerous professionals, reformers, and others who expressed eugenic ideas.

Following previous scholars of eugenics, Wilson argues that it was both an emerging science and a social movement. According to Wilson, eu-

genics “carried with it an enthusiasm, both popular and scientific, for solving a wide-ranging series of social problems once and for all by controlling who reproduced, and who was reproduced, in future generations” (p. 27). Wilson argues that eugenics was “applied science” (p. 31). It was “not merely theoretical,” “not primarily mathematical,” and it was “not value-free science” (p. 31). Wilson offers a brief sketch of Francis Galton (1822-1911), the British founder of the field, and Galton’s definition of eugenics, and argues that what Wilson refers to as “The Eugenic Mind” can best be understood “in terms of this early Galtonian vision” (p. 30).

Taking a cue from both the Living Archives project and from nineteenth-century Marxists and twentieth-century feminists, Wilson describes his methodological approach as “standpoint eugenics,” which he describes as his aim to “explore eugenics from the standpoint of those who are survivors of its history” (p. 3). He states at the outset that the contributions of eugenics survivors to the Living Archives project were the “*sin qua non*” of his own thinking (p. xii). He dedicates the book to Leilani Muir (1944-2016), who successfully sued the Canadian province of Alberta in 1995-96, bringing legal redress and media attention to various eugenic abuses, including institutionalization and sterilization, that occurred over the course of the twentieth century.

Despite his dedication to survivors and his avowed use of standpoint theory, Wilson ultimately comes up short in his attempt at standpoint eugenics. Although at the end of his book he offers important insights into how we might think about the marginalization, both publicly and academically, of the voices and experiences of survivors of eugenics, Wilson does not make survivors and their stories and perspectives the focus of his study. Instead, he concerns himself with what he calls “The Eugenic Mind.” Wilson, who acknowledges his own past “ignorance” and the steep “learning curve” he encountered when he began work on *The Eugenic Mind Project*, seems either unwilling or unable ful-

ly to engage with standpoint theory (p. xi). As he states several times throughout the book, he deploys “at least a standpoint-ish eugenics” (p. 98). At various points in the book, Wilson brings in the voices of eugenic survivors and other disabled people. For example, Ken Nelson says that when he was institutionalized in the Provincial Training School for Mental Defectives in Red Deer, Alberta, it almost felt as if he had committed a crime. Yet, toward the end of a book dedicated to providing an analysis of eugenics from the standpoint of its survivors, Wilson feels compelled to offer a “precisifying discussion” of his use of standpoint theory, and states that he wants to move “beyond the playfulness invoked by [his] earlier deferring appeals to a standpoint-ish eugenics” (pp. 195-96). That Wilson would enter playfully into a “standpoint-ish” study of the experiences of survivors of the atrocities of twentieth-century eugenics and that he would feel the need only at the end of a book-length study to “precisify” his use of standpoint theory will, no doubt, give readers pause. If, however, one can set aside the idea that this book is built upon a survivor standpoint and accept it for what it is, a study of “The Eugenic Mind” from the standpoint of a Western/Global North (by training) philosopher of the mind, then one will see that it makes a novel, but not wholly unproblematic contribution to the growing body of literature on disability and eugenics.

As the title of the book implies, Wilson’s central aim is to understand what he calls “The Eugenic Mind.” That all three words are capitalized is important. Wilson is not necessarily concerned with the legacies of a past eugenics, or the historicization of a new eugenics from the standpoint of its survivors, but rather with explaining the “*nature* of eugenic thinking, past and present” (emphasis added, p. 24). As a philosopher of the mind and cognition, Wilson is most concerned with thinking or puzzling through the formation and persistence of eugenic thought. For Wilson, survivors of eugenics were not necessarily victims of social circumstance, a devalued and marginal-

ized intersectional identity, capitalist class relations, medical hubris, or “bad science,” but rather the “targets” of *The Eugenic Mind* (pp. 48-49). The *Eugenic Mind*, is, in turn, a fundamental part of the human mind. Wilson’s main goal, his chief concern, is explaining how the human mind can conceive of something like eugenics. In the end, Wilson roots a notoriously persistent *Eugenic Mind* in the deep history of human evolution. For Wilson, it is not what humans think, but rather how they think that gives rise to eugenics and also explains its seemingly intractable persistence.

Wilson’s reasoning begins with the assumption that humans are not only social creatures but “prosocial” creatures. He argues that humans have a “specific social nature” that is part of our “primate heritage” (p. 122). This social nature shapes everything from our language(s) to the rules we create to regulate “how we should treat each other” to our sense of belonging, “often deeply,” to particular groups, including family, nation, “our people,” and “our species” (p. 7). Wilson argues that humans are not only “naturally sociable creatures” but also “prosocial creatures” in part because we help the most vulnerable among us (i.e., infants) to survive (p. 7). Ultimately, however, humans must make decisions about whom to include and whom to exclude. Humans ask: Who will most benefit the survival of the species? Wilson calls this “prosocial inclusion.” It is humans’ “prosocial” nature and more specifically “prosocial inclusion” that undergird ideas about human betterment or human improvement and ultimately eugenics.

Throughout the book, Wilson uses his “standpoint-ish” analysis of eugenics to further elaborate this idea of “prosociality” and its relationship with vulnerability and variation. Human variation, which Wilson argues is often read as cultural diversity, is critical to humanity and has become part of the “fragile sciences,” including anthropology and human geography (he does not cite any other disciplines.) Yet “cultural variation or diversity has not always been met with the warm em-

brace of prosocial inclusion” (p. 102). Humans discriminate. They engage in a “differential evaluation” of people (but not necessarily groups of people). The processes of both differential evaluation and prosocial inclusion, which for Wilson are both formed by and enacted through our “engaged individuality,” are actually quite constrained (pp. 102-03). According to Wilson, they are limited by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and disability. These boundaries affect whom we consider one of “us” and ultimately shape *The Eugenic Mind* (p. 33).

But which characteristics get included and which ones get excluded? And perhaps more important, *why* do certain characteristics get singled out for exclusion? In addressing these questions, Wilson is careful to make a distinction between ontology and epistemology. He states that “human variation is ubiquitous”; it is everywhere (ontology) (p. 105). But what we know (epistemology) is “negatively marked difference” or “marked variation” (p. 105). (Wilson makes no mention of positively marked difference.) In other words, variation is everywhere, yet what we see as variation is really negatively marked difference, or what Wilson calls “marked variation.” Having established the idea of marked variation, he then asks the question: “In the case of disablement and medicalized pathology, what makes it epistemically possible, in a world full of many distinctive forms of human variation, for us to mark some of that variation as subnormal?” (p. 105). In chapter 3, Wilson asks: What “really is” a eugenic trait (p. 59)? Or put another way: What becomes marked variation? Then, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Wilson treats the development of “attitudes and reactions” to marked variation, especially those that are not “celebratory,” as a puzzle to be solved (p. 103).

Somewhere along the evolutionary path, humans began excluding other humans from their various processes of prosocial inclusion by creating notions of “subnormalcy” and engaging in the “subhumanization” of “others” (p. 109). Precisely

why this occurred is a critical question for Wilson. As he states: “Where do the ideas of normalcy and subnormalcy that mark disablement and medical pathologization come from” (p. 109)? In considering this question, he contemplates the work of three prominent disability studies scholars. In chapter 5, Wilson takes up the arguments of Lennard Davis, Shelley Tremain, and Nicholas Rose, all of whom he characterizes as disability studies scholars who have been influenced by Michel Foucault (1926-84). Wilson spends the most time on the work of Lennard Davis. He is most interested in Davis’s assertion that disability is socially constructed and that it has a relatively short history that dates only to the mid-nineteenth century. Wilson asserts that despite the different foci of the three philosophers, which he characterizes as the body (Davis), medicalization (Tremain), and psychological normalization (Rose), “there is a common idea at play here. That idea is that normalcy itself is a kind of social construction rather than something to be found in the world. Its emergence is tied to specific regimes of power, or what Foucauldians typically call power/knowledge, that discipline bodies and minds in particular ways” (p. 111). After briefly summarizing Davis’s argument about the social construction of disability, Wilson declares, “while the appeal to biopolitics at the heart of the social constructivist answer tells us something important about eugenics, it is more limited as a response to [the question of the origins of *The Eugenic Mind*] and the puzzle of marked variation” (p. 113). Wilson is not satisfied with Davis. He devotes the remainder of the chapter to the assertion that the idea that “normalcy and even normativity itself originates in some kind of 19th-century biopolitical nexus” is not plausible (pp. 112-13).

Wilson offers a more careful critique of Davis’s claims but his most salient point is that what Wilson calls *The Eugenic Mind* both predates and persists after the specific moment in the second half of the nineteenth century when Davis asserts disability and eugenics became knowable.

According to Wilson, “some kind of cluster of normative and normalizing notions” existed in Aristotle’s Greece and they still exist in the twenty-first century; therefore, Davis’s idea of the social construction of normality in the nineteenth century is not adequate. Wilson characterizes Davis’s appeal to biopolitics and social constructionism as “shallow” because it cannot account for the longevity and the resilience of *The Eugenic Mind* (pp. 115, 117).

Wilson wants to suggest that what we humans experience as marked variation, as subnormalcy, or as the subhumanization of disability and medical pathology is “something” that is “psychological in nature, something concerning how we function as psychological creatures in socially constructed worlds” (p. 117). The world can change, but the way we humans think does not change, or at least it changes very slowly in evolutionary time. Wilson argues that the type of “sociality” that humans exhibit requires “sophisticated internal cognitive processing” and that this processing has developed through “key evolutionary changes in our lineage that facilitate distinctive forms of socially coordinated behavior” (p. 124). When “we” experience marked variation, which Wilson defines as disability or medicalized pathology, it, according to Wilson, is “permanent, phenomenologically direct and unmediated.... It is much like the emotional experience of fear and disgust” (p. 106). We can learn to “dampen or control” our response to marked variation, but we can never be fully rid of it. As problematic as this may seem to disability historians and disability studies scholars, in Wilson’s mind, this seemingly permanent and visceral response to disability is both evidence of and an explanation for the development and persistence of humans’ *Eugenic Mind*.

Wilson takes an essentializing or reifying position. He argues that the sociality that he describes is “a ubiquitous feature of the biological world, especially the mobile biological world containing creatures with some self-governing capacity to

move from location to location” (p. 128). According to Wilson, cognition “goes beyond” both perception and behavioral reflexes and involves “*representation crunching*” and computation (italics in original, p. 129). Humans have, through deep time, that is, through the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, developed “a kind of externally mediated, cognitively driven normativity” that “constitutes an important feature of human social life” (p. 130). Normativity for Wilson is defined as “a distinction between a correct, proper, or appropriate way for a process, event, or outcome to turn out, and an incorrect, improper, or inappropriate such way” (p. 130). He goes on to argue that “one thing that this cognitively mediated normativity does is allow us to distinguish not simply between individual people but between *kinds* or *sorts* of people” (italics in original, p. 130). This process of human sorting, which for Wilson seems to be driven by evolutionary demands, is both continuous and ubiquitous. It occurs internally in our minds, and externally, in the way we structure the world around us. Wilson argues that this process of sorting leads to the creation of “we knowledge,” or the creation of “us” and “them” (p. 131). He calls this social cognition, or the socio-cognitive approach to understanding *The Eugenic Mind*. In a final blow to Davis and the social constructivists, Wilson concludes that “while both frameworks [social constructivist and socio-cognitive] contribute to our understanding of the persistence of eugenics, I have argued that the socio-cognitive framework provides an explanatorily richer and deeper account of that persistence, and of the marked variation that underlies it” (p. 141).

According to Wilson, *The Eugenic Mind* has enabled eugenics to persist in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Proponents of more recent iterations of eugenics can be dismissive of the “epistemic basis and execution” of the old eugenics but still maintain the idea of “human improvement or betterment” through the elimination of “defective” humans, or what Wilson would call marked variation (p. 141). The critical differ-

ence between old and new is choice. Advocates for the new eugenics claim that it is not coercive or state-directed, and that it targets people at the individual level and not kinds of people. Yet, as Wilson points out, this is precisely what Galton stated about the old eugenics at the end of the nineteenth century.

In what might be the best chapter in the book, chapter 7, Wilson highlights critiques of the new eugenics from disability rights activists and disability studies scholars. In this chapter, he focuses on what he calls the expressivist objection to eugenics, which is the idea that eliminating disability through measures such as prenatal screening and selective abortion sends (or expresses) the message that “we” do not value people living with disabilities. This chapter, more than any other, relies on the work and testimony of (mostly elite, white) disabled people. In addition to issues more directly related to reproduction, Wilson briefly mentions opposition to *Autism Speaks* as an example of an alternative standpoint to the devaluing of disability. He notes the silencing of oppositional voices by organizations such as *Autism Speaks* and spends a good chunk of the chapter rehearsing Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s celebratory understanding of disability and the generative potential of a disability standpoint. Not as theoretically or philosophically driven as other chapters, chapter 7 is instead rich with insights from disabled activists and scholars. It is the closest Wilson comes to a survivor standpoint.

On the whole, *The Eugenic Mind Project* is a measured success. Wilson uses his experience with the *Living Archives* project to ask important questions and make significant assertions concerning the persistence of eugenics over time and the importance of centering marginalized voices and experiences. Yet while he makes new theoretical and philosophical interventions into the vast and increasing body of literature on eugenics, his use of standpoint theory remains underdeveloped. In addition to his “playful” engagement with “stand-

point-ish” eugenics, some readers may be off put by Wilson’s at times seemingly casual engagement with important disability studies literature and scholars. He refers to Sharon Snyder as Laura Snyder, for example. Other readers may find his lack of citations troubling. He offers only a few “summative and self-contained” notes for each chapter at the end of the book. While useful for providing suggestions for further reading, the notes are not helpful in referencing specific arguments and passages in the book. Readers looking for a more narrative-driven or linear approach to the study of eugenics might find the bullet-point organization of the chapters frustrating. Important concepts, terms, and analyses are given no more than a page or two and the focus can shift rather quickly and sometimes dramatically at any point in a chapter. Many of the main arguments are repeated throughout the book.

Finally, readers may find Wilson’s discussion of the “engaged individuality” of some of the survivors of eugenics disconcerting. While disability scholars must recognize the rich lives and complex identities of our disabled subjects, we must be careful not to overstate or overvalue their normativity. Claiming that disabled people’s lives and experiences and their voices have value because they are “just like us” only further marginalizes those disabled people who cannot live up to the unattainable standards of compulsory ablebodiedness. At the beginning of *The Eugenic Mind Project*, Wilson writes about meeting Leilani Muir and of how that changed him and his work (a common disability trope). He goes out of his way to state that Muir was “normal” and that she was not “different” (p. 13). Wilson insists that Leilani Muir and other eugenics survivors that he met through his studies were complex human beings with what he called a certain type of “engaged individuality” (p. 18). While this is true (of course they are) and it must be acknowledged, it is also incumbent upon disability studies scholars to recognize that the value of disabled people is not contingent upon their normality, nor is it dependent upon their “engaged

individuality.” A reader may come away from these passages with the impression that the institutionalization and sterilization of eugenic survivors who expressed a certain level of “engaged individuality” was somehow more offensive or tragic than if those survivors were not as complex or “engaged”—if they were not so much like “us” (p. 18). I am sure Wilson would agree that all human life should be valued, regardless of its “marked variation.”

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