

Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability. By Jay T. Dolmage (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018). Pp. 190. Cloth \$24.95

Almost two decades ago, the erudite disability historian Douglas Baynton proposed the use of disability as a category to analyze U.S. immigration history: “One of the fundamental imperatives in the initial formation of American immigration policy at the end of the nineteenth century was the exclusion of disabled people.”¹ In *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*, disability historian Jay T. Dolmage seeks to harness the methodology of disability studies in a comparative exploration of immigration policies across the United States and Canada during the early 20th century.

The first chapter, “Island: Ellis Island and the Inventions of Race and Disability,” discusses the intersectionality between racialization and disability embodied in the inspection of immigrants at Ellis Island. Using the word “heterotopia” borrowed from Michael Foucault, Dolmage examines “Ellis Island in the early twentieth century as a ‘special rhetorical space,’ a heterotopia for the invention of new categories of deviation.”² As seen in this chapter, both non-white and disabled immigrants synchronically underwent rhetorical construction as unfit groups during initial physical inspections. Furthermore, federal government officials discursively endowed them with physical and intellectual inferiority compared to their white and able-bodied counterparts.

In the following chapter, “Pier: Canada’s Pier 21 and the Memorialization of Immigration,” Dolmage switches from the American to the Canadian past, examining Pier 21 as an important discursive space in early twentieth century Canadian immigration history. At the Canadian “Ellis Land,” arriving immigrants underwent stringent inspection and faced the “medical gaze” of immigration officials. These officials directly and indirectly held the power to admit or reject immigrants with little to no oversight. As Dolmage addresses, “the agents—in essence—decided that only immigrants from certain countries could engage in the work needed to stay in Canada. Thus, immigrants from all other countries were disabled, rhetorically.”³ Resonating with Baynton’s examination of disability and national origin in the enforcement of United States immigration laws, Dolmage expands these conclusions to their counterparts in Canada. Despite the intense rejection practices of immigration officials, most white Canadians were even more stringent in their evaluation of “undesirable” bodies. Most white Canadians “effectively believed that a tightening border could be used to reject and remove a wide variety of ‘undesirable’ bodies, so long as some nebulous connection could be made to their country of origin.”⁴ Rhetorically posed as racialization of intellectual defects or unfitness to the Canadian climate, non-white identities constituted the foremost menace to the racial purity of the Canadian population. In the meantime, Canadian immigration agents

¹ Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 45

² Jay T. Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 11.

³ Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 58.

⁴ Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 60.

travelled to European countries to recruit desirable immigrants characterized by their white skin and strong physiques.

After discussing the Canadian immigration policy, Dolmage explores the visual implication of eugenics discourse in American immigration law in chapter three. “In early twentieth-century America, photography became a rhetorical tool of eugenicists and immigration restrictionists, and ideas about bodily fitness and defect drove the development of the technology.”⁵ Along with IQ tests and physical inspections, photographs served as a critical tool for verifying disability at Ellis Island. As seen in Dolmage’s detailed examination of the 1918 *Manual of the Mental Examination of Aliens* (the main inspection guidelines for immigration officials) images of undesirable immigrants were labelled with typical mental and intellectual disabilities. Following this manual, immigration officials rejected the entry of aliens who matched the typical model of disability. The implementation of photography rendered disability particularly prominent at Ellis Island as compared to other centers of immigration.

Dolmage’s final chapter illuminates the implementation of disability discourse in immigration policy. He examines his discovery of a “deformed idiot” photograph, which “can be understood not just as reproducing and perhaps sensationalizing the image of disability; we can also trace the exclusive intentions of Canadian immigration policy and practice, and the exclusive space of Pier 21, across this body.”⁶ Concerning immigration law enforcement, the deportation of foreign bodies was often justified by “recognizing” their defective appearance. Then Dolmage switches his focus from visual materials in the past to archive collections and its exhibition at present. Discussing the Canadian Museum of Immigration at its former location of Pier 21, Dolmage notes that the history of selective immigration is marginalized in museum exhibitions. This history contradicts the mainstream narration which emphasizes inclusion and acceptance in Canadian immigration history. In other words, in the official history-writing of immigration policy and immigrant experiences, the exclusion of disabled aliens has been removed purposely and administratively.

Disabled Upon Arrival is an exemplary academic work analyzing the intersectionality between disability and immigration policy in North American history. Dolmage not only views “disability” as his research subject but also as a critical category that can be employed to comprehend immigration policy along with its nativist and racial implications. Following disability historian Douglas Baynton, Dolmage succeeds in integrating a spatial dimension into the nuanced debates about the essence of North American immigration policy. By taking a comparative approach to the history of immigration policy in the United States and Canada, Dolmage reveals the identical underlying eugenic basis of immigration law enforcement. As he repeatedly emphasizes in the volume, immigration history is not only about immigration. He exposes the underlying ableist foundation of “whiteness” principles in immigration law enforcement. Overall, Dolmage’s discussion enriches our understanding of immigration and disability history in North America.

⁵ Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 73.

⁶ Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 104.

Shu Wan

University of Iowa