

## SCIENCE LABS, DISABILITY CODES AND THE RACIST GAZE

*“Nonwhite races were routinely connected to people with disabilities, both of whom were depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks. As a consequence, the concept of disability intertwined with the concept of race, was also caught up in ideas of evolutionary progress”*

(Baynton, 2013, p. 19).

In *Disability and the Justification of Inequality in America*, disability scholar and historian Douglas C. Baynton makes a compelling argument that pejorative representations of disability are some of the more frequent signifiers called on to justify racist ideologies that endorse the unequal and abusive treatment of racial and ethnic groups. (2013, pp. 17-19).

Baynton and disability scholars argue that attention to

disability is largely absent in academic discussions surrounding

the marginalization of difference and they call for comprehensive interdisciplinary research projects that consider how racist discourses exploit disability, and in turn, how ableist ideologies situate race in their construction of the disabled body and mind. The following analysis enters into a conversation with Shawn Michelle Smith’s interrogation of late-nineteenth/early twentieth century racist coding techniques in scientific photography and my own examination of photographic entries in the 1904 archive *Types of Mental Defectives* (Barr & Maloney, figures 1-4) to explore intersectionalities in disability and race in late-nineteenth/early twentieth century scientific and institutional constructions of difference.

Smith argues that in his photographic archives, *Types of American Negroes* and *Health and Physique of the Negro* W.E.B. Du Bois intentionally mirrored techniques found in the “photographic archives of early race scientists” as a strategy “to reanimate the African American body, transposing it



Figure 1: 1904 Martin Barr, “Types of Mental Defectives”  
Plate II Idiots: Profound Excitable

from the realm of (racist) science to that of class and culture”(pp. 44-46). To illustrate the visual techniques employed by eugenicists and white racist biologists fixated on “inscribing assumptions about Negro inferiority onto bodies of color,” Smith points to a photographic archive of South Carolina slaves commissioned in 1850 by Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to provide evidentiary support for his notion that “different races constituted different species” (pp. 44- 46). Smith’s depiction of the organization and structure of the archive and its images, the “dehumanizing objectivity” of categorizing individuals into “fifteen daguerreotypes” and its graphic use of signifiers of inferiority is eerily reminiscent of the aesthetic and narrative framing of photographic evidence in the 1904 publication, *Types of Mental Defectives*.

In response to late nineteenth century legislative and social demands for the continued and permanent segregation of the feeble-minded and imbecile classes, Superintendent and Chief Physician at the Pennsylvania Training School for the Feeble-Minded, Martin Barr, and Girard English Professor E.F. Maloney began the work of categorizing mentally deficient classes through photographs and detailed written documentation. They published their findings in 1904 and the final 184-page archive includes 31 photographic plates containing 188 photographs taken of individuals in a variety of institutional settings (example plates: figures 1-3). While the photographs were presented as evidence to support the claim that *all* idiots, imbeciles and feeble minded classes should be kept separate from open society, Barr and Maloney’s complicated grading system simultaneously delineated how and where this segregation should occur. Similar to the scientific archives that Smith suggests are “calling on the photograph as evidence of African American inferiority,” (p. 44) Barr and Maloney’s photographic entries discriminated between “weak and feeble,” “backward,” “erratic,” “unmanageable,” “animalistic,” “filthy,” and “brutish” classes for the purposes of assigning the proper institutional environment for their permanent expulsion from society. The photographs and texts served as artifacts in eugenics discourses through the mid-1900s and eugenicists like Francis Galton and Harry Laughlin re-claimed their evidentiary status to promote their successful effort to legislate the compulsory sterilization of thousands of feeble-minded individuals in the United States. The archive designated five main typologies for individuals of all ages institutionalized as

mentally defective— *idiot, idio-imbecile, imbecile, moral-imbecile* and *backward or mentally feeble*— categories were broken down further by moral and behavioral characteristics for the purposes of recommending what kind of institutional setting was appropriate for each typology. The text provided ‘diagnostic’ records that corresponded with the individuals depicted in the photographs and each entry supplied ‘evidence’ of their trainability, which ultimately determined if they were to be committed to *Asylum Care, Colony Life Under Protection, Perpetual Guardianship* or, in rare instances, *Trained for a Place in the World* (Barr & Maloney, 1920, pp. 1-3 *figure 4*). Much as Smith argues that Agassiz’s photography of “daguerreotypes demonstrate[d] how quickly photography became harnessed to the sciences of biological racism,” (p. 46) Barr and Maloney also offered their photographs as definitive evidence that the imbecile class was biologically untrainable, backward, animalistic and unfit for social inclusion. Like Agassiz’s slave subjects, there are “extreme differences in power between the photographer and the subject,” (Smith, p. 47) as no permission was required for Barr and Maloney to capture their subject images, in fact, in several of the photographs a ‘handler’ is seen forcing individuals into the frame with a firm grasp around the neck (*figure 1*). Nearly all of the Barr/Maloney photographs follow the frontal and hard profile poses described by Smith, with subjects standing erect in front of a stark gray or black background, most dressed in the uniform of their institution of commitment, a few naked, with forward and expressionless stares (note: figure 2, Case A provides the one glaring exception in all 188 photographs.)

The accompanying written entries sometimes identified individuals by name and always noted physical characteristics, family work, and social histories that tended to inscribe class delineations rather than actual diagnostic codes of developmental difference onto the

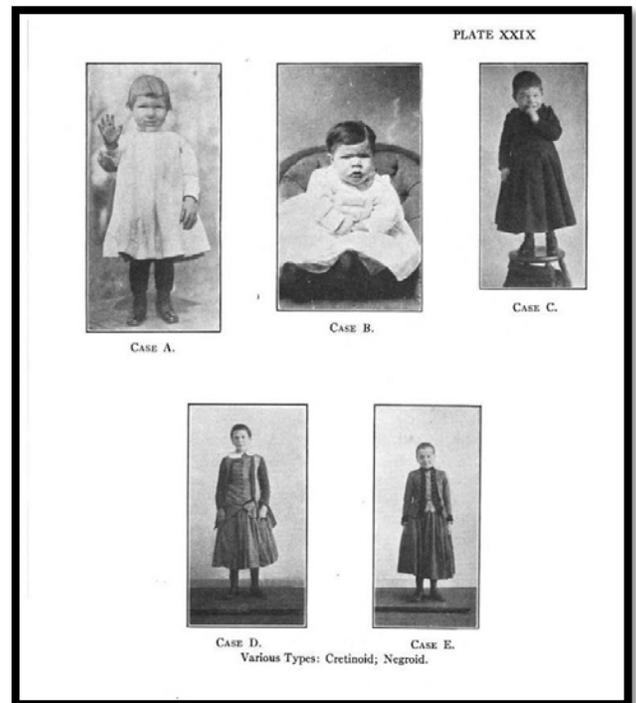


Figure 2: 1904 Martin Barr, “Types of Mental Defectives” Plate XXIX Various Types: Cretinoid; Negroid

subjects. Smith makes the astute observation that biological scientists and eugenicists interested in marking the black race as inferior were “apparently intrigued by the seeming objectivity of the photograph, and yet frustrated by the actual difficulty of standardizing such images” (p. 49) and similar incongruities are evident throughout the 186 pages of Barr and Maloney’s work. For instance, the description of ‘Various Types: Cretinoid; Negroid (*figure 2*) contains a confusing imprint of race in the sub-category of idio-imbecile classified as follows; “The Negroid type is an example of the ethnological or physiognmoical classification... there would be no possibility of negro blood in its production” (p. 163). Figure 2, Plate XXIX, Case E is the only photographic evidence depicting the “negroid” type that appears in the entire text. The documentation of the young woman’s characteristic features is unusually brief in comparison to other entries and defines her as “a perfect example of the negroid type, with wooly

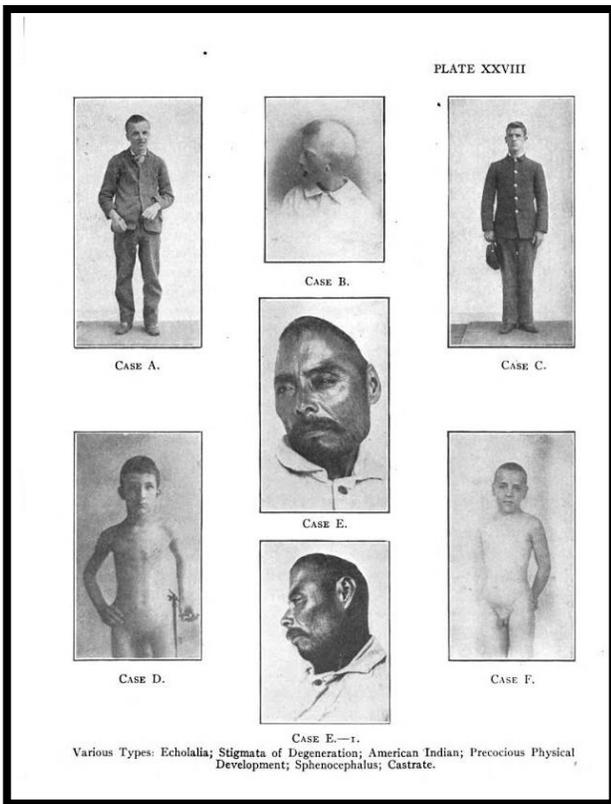


Figure 3: 1904 Martin Barr, “Types of Mental Defectives” Plate XXVIII Various Types: Echolalia; Stigmata; **American Indian**; Precocious Physical Development; Sphenocephalus; Castrate.

hair, thick lips, yellowish eyes, bluish nails, and negroid — not dark — complexion. Yet there is, beyond a peradventure, not the slightest trace of negro blood in either family” (p. 167). It is unclear why this reference to her physical features is framed in the context of race, why the authors place such importance on her lack of negro blood or how these signifiers relate to her designated imbecility. A similar confusion appears in *figure 3* Case C, American Indian with the descriptive focus again falling on physical traits they attribute to the subjects ethnicity without linking those specific qualities to his categorization as a high grade-imbecile. The text description argues; “The American Indian is a rare form of the ethnic classification of mental defect... slender, erect with high cheek-bones, prominent and sharp-pointed chin, tawny complexion, straight coarse black

hair, and forehead prematurely wrinkled (pp. 157-158). Readers could interpret this entry as a claim that all American Indian's fall into Barr/Maloney's all encompassing 'Various' category of high grade imbecile, and again this is the only entry referencing the American Indian classification.

*Types of Mental Defectives* is a rich archive for a future exploration of how powerful science and biology ideologies in the early twentieth century marked people with developmental disabilities and for attempting to understand how practitioners considered race, ethnicity and gender in their diagnostic determinations. An additionally intriguing point for future study is an exploration of W.E.B Du Bois methods for countering negative connotations regarding the intellectual, social and class development of African American's and whether his critically imperative photographic archives unintentionally supported essentializing notions regarding the intellectually and developmentally different classes.

EDUCATIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF MENTAL DEFECTIVES	
	IDIOT
Asylum Care	{ Apathetic Unimprovable. Profound Excitable Apathetic Slightly improvable. Superficial Excitable Improvable in self-help only.
	IDIO-IMBECILE
	{ Improvable in self-help and helpfulness. Trainable in very limited degree to assist others.
	IMBECILE
Long Apprenticeship and Colony Life under Protection	{ Mentally deficient. Low-grade—Trainable in industrial and simplest manual occupations. Middle-grade—Trainable in manual arts and simplest men- tal acquirments. High-grade—Trainable in manual and intellectual arts.
	MORAL-IMBECILE
	{ Mentally and morally deficient. Low-grade—Trainable in industrial occupations. Tem- perament bestial. Middle-grade—Trainable in industrial and manual occupa- tions. A plotter of mischief. High-grade—Trainable in manual and intellectual arts: with genius for evil.
Custodial Life and Perpetual Guardianship	
	BACKWARD or MENTALLY FEEBLE
Trained for a Place in the World.	{ Mental processes normal, but slow and requiring special training and environment to prevent deterioration. Defect imminent under slightest provocation, such as excitement, overstimulation or illness.

Figure 4, Educational Classification of Mental Defectives page 1.

## Works Cited

Barr, M. W., & Maloney, E. (1920). *Types of Mental Defectives*. Philadelphia: P. Blakiston's Son & Co.

Baynton, D. C. (2013). Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History . In *The Disability Studies Reader* (pp. 17-33). New York: Routledge.

Smith, S. M. (2004). *Photography on the Color Line W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.