

BOOK REVIEW

Not Good Enough For Canada: Canadian Public Discourse around Issues of Inadmissibility for Potential Immigrants with Diseases and/or Disabilities 1902-2002, by Valentina Capurri. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. \$29.95 CDN., paper. ISBN: 978-1-4875-2323-7. Pages: 1-258.

Reviewed by Susan Marie Martin¹

Amidst the current debate over vaccination passports and international travel, an understanding of Canada's historical measures ensuring medical admissibility at its borders is very appropriate. Just ahead of the pandemic Valentina Capurri reviewed the political and public discourses underpinning these measures: spanning the period 1902 to 2002, she soundly unearths the breadth of Canada's efforts to establish the economic value and 'worthiness' of potential immigrants using these criterion. Across this project Capurri, a lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Ryerson University, demonstrates soundly how immigration and immigrants have been problematized via this specific lens.

In the opening pages, Capurri describes her first-hand experience with medical admissibility. She arrived in Canada in 2001 to start graduate studies, and a short time later she was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS. In 2004 she applied for permanent residency. She had a "fairly good medical history", and had established herself professionally. However, in 2007 she was informed that she was "a person whose health condition might reasonably be expected to cause excessive demand on health or social services" (5). She only received an exemption when sponsored by her Canadian partner. This is a topic, she discovered, that has been given little attention in the academy; *Not Good Enough for Canada* fills this void by addressing the construction of Canada via what she terms "an idea of nation-building that has at its centre the development of a morally and physically healthy population" (6).

The chapters organize her review of public documents by type to develop and analyze discourses around the issue at hand. Grounded in archival work, the study draws on parliamentary transcripts, those from the Federal and Supreme Courts, legislation, and newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail*. The data culled from newspapers is shared in two chapters covering 1902-1985, and 1985-2002, the dividing line being the passage of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Unfortunately the passage of time and the arrival of the *Charter* did not see the provision for medical admissibility reversed or, according to Capurri, modified in a substantial way, however it does provide what she calls a "powerful tool to contest the policy" in court (115).

¹ Susan Marie Martin is a historical sociologist and holds a Ph.D. in Applied Social Studies from University College Cork. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on the impact of gentrification on the urban poor. Her book, *The Shawlies: Cork's Women Street Traders in the 'Merchants City'* was published in 2017. Email: susan.martin@umail.ucc.ie

The roots of this form of discrimination are located at Canada's very foundation. According to Capurri, John A. Macdonald "believed that his dream of bringing the West into Confederation could only be achieved by promoting immigration of white, Anglo-Saxon, healthy individuals" (25). The inadmissible were defined as "lunatic, insane, and idiot", definitions replaced in the 1960s with "mentally retarded and handicapped", and later with "persons with mental and/or physical disabilities" (14). All that changes with time, it would seem, are the labels. In early days there were notions of moral shortcomings and social deviance associated with illness and disabilities; however, it becomes clear that the economic considerations around productivity and government savings that some assume first make their appearance with the neoliberal era were in play from Canada's early days.

Indeed, those in power a century ago were just as keen to prohibit admittance to those they believed could not help build the economy or would become a costly burden. In the words of one MP in 1906, "foreign elements" could threaten to "exploit and impoverish the country" (35). That same year a *Globe* editorial claimed that the state had an inalienable right "to adopt defensive measures against mental defectives sent from other countries", and reported the estimated savings to the state for those deported as \$2,000 (77). The law allowed deportation up to two years after arrival if a migrant became sick or injured. The Chief Medical Officer's report for the fiscal year 1908-9 included statistics on these deportations: Capurri located 15 for persons with rheumatism and 22 for persons with epilepsy, among others (36). If one member of a family was medically inadmissible, the entire family would be denied entry and could only stay if the family member in question was returned to his/her country of origin.

The impoverished and those deemed medically unfit were evaluated using similar screening processes, blurring further the lines between medical fitness and social fitness in the equation of economic viability. In 1909 the *Star* reported on an English study that purported to find pauperism was due to hereditary "defects". Participants in the study were described as being "characterized by some obvious vice or defect" the list of which included substance abuse, various medical conditions, criminal activity, and "deliberate moral obliquity, or general weaknesses of character" (78) as a final catchall. Negative sentiments didn't stop with editorials or earnest politicians. Illustrating the sweep of concern, Capurri included a call published in the *Globe* in 1925 from the Canadian Education Association, a group representing teachers, for a tightening on admissions to prevent "half-wit and subnormal mentalities to slip into the Dominion" (81). It is important to note that Capurri does give space to dissenting voices, when located.

It is commendable that Capurri includes many of the names and stories of those denied entry or deported, an inclusion that illustrates the human impact of policy and practices beyond numbers and statistics. The story of 14-month old Margaret McConachie is one example. In 1927 her father, a resident of Canada, brought Margaret, her mother and siblings to Canada from Scotland. Upon arrival Margaret was deemed "mentally defective", and she and her mother were forced to return to Scotland. Fast forward to 1989, and Miguel Silva, a 9-year old boy living with his family in Toronto, is denied landed immigrant status; born with Down's syndrome, he was ordered to return to Peru.

The stories of these two children are developed further, however there are many more that disappeared and remain unaccounted for. Flora McDowall, a young girl who arrived alone from Scotland, was rejected because she was overweight. It was noted that she had never secured employment previously as a domestic thus, in her current condition, she was considered unemployable and was returned to Scotland.

A fine piece of interdisciplinary research, *Not Good Enough For Canada* has a definite place on bookshelves in many departments across the academy, but will easily appeal to historians, and those whose work focuses on discriminatory practices towards those with disabilities and classed-based inequities. Capurri's work is an excellent 'how-to' text for those interested in archival methods, and building what Foucault refers to as an 'emancipation' of histories buried under subjugation. This is also a valuable resource for advocates of migrants, the disabled, and the poor. Beyond the issue of immigration, Capurri's investigation raises questions about how attitudes at the border generalize in wider society to those who are Canadian citizens and residents living with diseases and disabilities. *Not Good Enough for Canada* is an accessible read, and anyone with an interest in the issues explored and Canadian history will find it as a welcome addition to their home library.