

BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP

from LOST PRIVILEGE COMPANY

PREFACE

The poems of Lost Privilege Company appear under the signature of the Blunt Research Group, an anonymous, contemporary collective of poets, activists, and scholars of diverse origin.

The poems (about forty in all) are composed entirely from phrases drawn from individual case files of the earliest youth prisons in California between 1910 and 1925. The histories contained in these files were gathered and archived by the now defunct Eugenics Records Office, an American organization that helped to shape the international eugenics movement through activities carried out in these juvenile reformatories (primarily at the Whittier State School, founded in 1891). Eugenics “researchers” and fieldworkers used these prisons—and the utopian fantasies of early California development—as a laboratory to develop diagnostic procedures intended to identify certain “ungovernable” teens as mental “defectives” and to construct genealogies of “degenerate” families. These diagnoses were used to determine whether the “propositus” (the teen “ward” in the case file) should be recommended for compulsory sterilization—to prevent him or her from “procreating”—a policy legalized by the California legislature in 1909 and pursued with great vigor until the early 1940s. Over 20,000 people were sterilized in California during this period, and some of the teens in these poems were referred to the sterilization “mills” of the Sonoma State Home and the Pacific Colony.

The development of eugenics touched the very core of the California myth: the founding of Venice Beach, for example, by Abbot Kinney in 1905 was motivated in part by fashionable ideas about eugenics. And, in a very different context, the diagnostic models and sterilization policies developed in California were enthusiastically received by eugenics “researchers” in Europe. The social engineers of Nazi Germany drew directly on the California model. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler alludes enthusiastically to the eugenics policies implemented in California and, before long, the Nazi symbology of “degenerates” destined for confinement and extermination included the categories of the *Asozial* (the asocial) and the *Arbeitsshu* (the work-shy)—terms reinforced

by the eugenics vocabulary of the California experiment. The pseudo-science behind the earliest Nazi Concentration Camps (at Breitenau, for example, in 1933) can thus be traced, in part, to the teen prisons of the California dream. Replicating its forgotten California affinities, the modern Breitenau facility eventually turned into a reformatory for teenage girls in the 1960s. Ulrike Meinhof, before she went underground as one of the founders of the Red Army Faction, produced a radio documentary in 1969 on the teen inmates of the Breitenau school.

Venice Beach, it turns out, was once the other shore of National Socialism. And the sterilization mill of the Pacific Colony was not far removed from the celebrity enclave of the Malibu Colony: in name and geographical proximity, but also in the disparate fantasies of asylum and social rarefaction haunting those places.

Youths of all races were confined at the Whittier School, but most of the case files supplying the basis for these poems document the lives of Chicano or African-American youths, aged 13–17 years, in addition to recording the eugenics vocabulary used to condemn and curtail their ways of life. Voices of diverse protagonists have thus been retrieved from these files: the direct speech of teen “wards,” of their friends and families—and the comments of the eugenic “fieldworkers” conducting the interviews. Text in italics always indicates the voices of the “wards,” while text without quotation marks or italics conveys the words of the fieldworkers. Text in quotation marks conveys the voices of the wards, or of their families and friends, cited indirectly by the fieldworkers. The names are real.

As partial transcriptions, the texts presented here can be read as experiments in *investigative poetics*: an approach rooted in the methods of documentary sampling—a form of close listening—which makes no effort (in contrast to other models of appropriation) to avoid strong feelings. Originally compiled to justify the elimination of certain populations, the case files can now function—contrary to their original purpose—as a veiled resource of fugitive expression, practice, and knowledge.

The ensemble of poems is entitled “Lost Privilege Company”: the name of the isolation ward at the Whittier State School where youthful offenders could be sentenced under harsh conditions for misconduct. Suicides in 1939 and 1940 by two Hispanic teens in the isolation ward brought unprecedented public scrutiny of the prison’s history and methods.

Jesus

refused to talk
and was sent to “thaw out”

sent to Lost Privilege Company
for mauling and kissing another boy used

to teach younger boys to steal

degenerate
one would almost call him

playing bandit

Tony

although of the
bestial type

what little mind he has seems to run
in perverted lines

one of the most stupid boys
on the place defective

should be transferred as soon as possible to Sonoma.

The boy's mother would be a good worker
in a moron colony

"Is it much further away?"

Pedro

shows nomadic trait

slept in old barn on pile of straw nights

wants to do everything but
what looks like work.

Acted as "look out" for older boys
often in Lost Privilege Company for misconduct.

Shows displeasure at correction
by making unnecessary noises

at work

indolent in the extreme.

When it was suggested that wards were likely to have to drill on Saturday
unless they improved Pedro said loudly enough for the whole battalion
to hear

Ish gibble!

Removed to Lost Privilege Company

wrote four page letter
to the Superintendent stating that he was not guilty, that

it could *not* have been him

Helen

He declared “she wanted to leave home
just like other girls do

and I was glad to have her go”

(the visit was made at night
to see the father personally).

Use of the “Oregon Boot”
to inhibit runaways.

Tendency to take the world as a joke
unable to keep her

“a minute after supper”

Julius

writes obnoxious notes
to white boys in his company
all sorts of vile acts depraved

and this very condition somewhat
of a “drawing card” among the boys

fit subject for an alienist.

Does show a characteristic towards nomadism
and a tendency to “get even”

a masturbator. Profane and obscene.

Early learned to steal and keep a cave
down by the bay robbed a number
of glass bottles partly filled with pennies.

It goes like this had heard
of Jack Johnson really spoilt
and made a pet when young

no place to get it
I crooked it off'n him

Emmanuel

a cold-blooded schemer
“he would undo everything I did”

July 4th he wrote a postal card from Catalina Island
saying he was “having a vacation”

the next day
they found a fifteen page letter
showing that he had been studying a code
of some sort

if the boy can be reached

shoe pinched his own foot

Stella Schreiber, cousin, living at 1021 Grand View Ave. Los Angeles

Nathaniel

Highest intelligence quotient ever found
at Whittier State School
“trying to find his windpipe (with a razor)”

“dogged” the game if things did not go
to suit him

at one time he “doped” apples

with cayenne pepper
instead of cinnamon

at present has wandered somewhere north

from Arizona

(The visit to the family home was made
at night, no pictures were obtainable.)

Fred

*Won't you forgive me for what
I have done today?*

*I have never had anyone love me, or anyone
who gave a _____ about me.*

*You can send me to Lost Privilege Company
for saying that word*

*but it is the truth you have wrecked
all my wrong tendencies*