Longmore, P. K. & Umansky, L. (eds) The New Disability History. New York: New York University Press (2001).

11

Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers

Exploring Disability and Motherhood in the Lives of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille

Janice A. Brockley

By the time thirteen-year-old Raymond Repouille died, his father, Louis Repouille, had already tried to kill him twice. Raymond's mother, Florence Repouille, barely managed to save him each time. Both the New York City Children's Court and the family doctor knew about the previous murder attempts. When Louis Repouille, a white immigrant from the Dutch West Indies, finally succeeded in murdering his son in 1939, he did not expect punishment for his crime. He was right. Despite Florence Repouille's denunciations, he received two years of probation and served no time in prison. Repouille had been encouraged by another murder committed earlier in the year. Louis Greenfield, a Jewish immigrant from Austria, had killed his son Jerome, or Jerry. Greenfield had been acquitted entirely of his son's death. Raymond's and Jerry's murders present a fascinating puzzle: Why would these fathers correctly feel that they could kill their sons and receive only tolerance and even social approval? The answer to this question lies in the complicated emotions and ideas surrounding disability and motherhood in the 1930s. By exploring Raymond's and Jerry's deaths, we can gain insight into their lives and the social and cultural dilemmas that surrounded children with disabilities and their families.

A growing literature on disability studies demonstrates that society and culture shape the social meaning of the experience of disability. Historians and other scholars describe how cultural interpretations frame physical and mental conditions.[1] In the 1930s, intellectual disability triggered an array of

cultural associations ranging from perverted deviance to angelic innocence. Frequently, discussions of intellectual disability included images of horror and distortion manifested physically, especially for those with more severe disabilities. Popular discussions of intellectual disability constructed it in two ways: The body could be seen as physically incompetent, a reflection of the mind's vacancy, or it could become dangerously healthy, an exemplar of the dangers of the body without a mind to control it. The body thus became a reflection of the mind.

Physical disability, while stigmatized, was not as disturbing as intellectual disability. People like Raymond were clearly at the bottom of a hierarchy of stigma. In line with this hierarchy, those physical disabilities that appeared to have an intellectual component, such as cerebral palsy and epilepsy, were also some of the most stigmatized.[2]

In practice, physical and intellectual disabilities could be hard to separate: Whether a disability originated in the body or mind could be almost impossible to distinguish. With few ways to measure the brain directly, mental capacity had to be judged by action or communication. In Raymond's case, he had only limited ability to move his limbs, presumably because of the same brain damage that caused his intellectual disability. His intellectual capacity therefore had to be judged by his physical control and ability to communicate. Once the judgment of his intellectual capacity was made, however, it dominated perceptions of Raymond. He was primarily an "imbecile." Implicitly, his physical limitations were the result of his "imbecility." Intellectual disability took priority over physical disability. Nonetheless, Raymond's physical disabilities played a significant role in his life experience, shaping the care he received and perceptions of his life. His father and newspaper articles about his murder frequently referred to Raymond as "just a dead body lying around."[3] His immobility was an important proof of the totality of his disability and the invalidity of his life.

Scholars in disability studies point out not only that cultural assumptions shape our perceptions of disability but also that social arrangements actually shape what is considered a disability. The availability of services, the structures of buildings, the distribution of income, and many other factors all transform human variation into disability.[4] Scholars have had a harder time applying this model to people with severe intellectual disabilities. It is all too easy to see people with severe disabilities as automatically excluded from society. By carefully examining the lives of people like Raymond Repouille, however, we can begin to analyze how a lack of social support encouraged a perception of people with severe disabilities as burdens, incapable of having rewarding relationships. We can see how cultural stereotypes obscured Raymond's representation in newspapers, in the minds of social service workers, and in the courtroom. The same stereotypes facilitated his eventual death.

In 1939, two adolescent boys with disabilities were killed by their fathers in New York City: Raymond Repouille and Jerome Greenfield. Raymond was unable to use his limbs, was blind, and was severely retarded.[5] Jerome, or Jerry, Greenfield was first described as an "incurable imbecile who had fits."[6] Later descriptions fluctuated. It is almost impossible to get any clear sense of Jerry's disabilities because his father's skilled defense attorney and the newspapers used his body to dramatize a series of anecdotes about the dangers of intellectual disabilities. Some descriptions emphasized his physical debility: He was "partially paralyzed and to the end could not walk without help" and was subject to "painful convulsions."[7] The same newspapers, however, could also emphasize his dangerous physical ability and "his continued physical development," as a result of which "the child was becoming a menace and might attempt a sexual assault on his own mother."[8] Jerry's physical reality was permanently obscured behind the stories his body was used to tell.

The newspaper coverage of Raymond's and Jerry's deaths fit into a popular debate over mercy killing in newspapers and magazines in the mid- to late 1930s.[9] In these years, the euthanasia movement gained new prominence. It failed to achieve euthanasia legislation, but the cause seemed to have both professional and popular support.[10] Jerry's and Raymond's deaths, therefore, fit neatly into a contemporary popular debate.

The powerful narrative of mercy killing camouflaged the similarities between the killings of these disabled children and other types of child death and abuse and obscured the surrounding issues and events. Louis Greenfield and Louis Repouille told the police and reporters that they killed their intellectually and physically disabled sons out of mercy.[11] The newspapers reported that Jerry and Raymond were hopeless, without any potential for development or education. The public discussion of the cases took for granted that their parents had only three choices: to care for their sons without help, to confine them to a custodial institution, or to kill them.

Police interviews and newspaper articles open a window into the lives of two families of youths with severe disabilities. They reveal troubled relationships between parents and experts, divisions between parents, cultural discomfort over motherhood, and the effacement of some children from society. The

archival records also demonstrate the tangled and violent relationships within the Repouille family. At times, Raymond seemed almost incidental to his own murder. Newspapers and experts simplified these tangled issues into a dichotomy between the irrational mother who refused to release her child to an institution or to death and the rational father who killed to protect his family. These stories display the limits of assistance from outside experts, who were willing to extend only certain kinds of help, on their own terms. They also point out the difficult position of mothers, who were utterly essential to the functioning of the private nuclear family and deeply distrusted by experts at the same time. Given the devaluation of Jerry's and Raymond's lives, their mothers' devoted care appeared less reasonable to the courts and newspapers than their fathers' drastic actions.[12]

The Deaths of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille

In their cold-water flat near Harlem, Raymond Repouille's parents, Louis and Florence, followed the accounts of Jerry Greenfield's death with interest. The story received front-page coverage from the beginning. January 13, 1939, the morning after Jerry's death, the front page of the *Daily Mirror* announced that "Pity Drives Dad To Kill Sick Son" below a picture of the "agonized father" being booked at the police station.[13] Under the blaring headlines, the reporters described how Louis Greenfield, a forty-two-year-old milliner and Jewish immigrant from Austria, sent his wife, Anna, to work without him and killed their son with two handkerchiefs soaked in chloroform. Louis Repouille had already tried to kill his son and saw Jerry's murder as a justification of his actions. Repouille, a hospital elevator operator, later remembered that "the minute the case came out, I told . . . [Florence] he wouldn't get anything, he would get away with it."[14] Repouille was right. As the Greenfield story unfolded slowly over the following months in the newspapers, popular sympathy stayed firmly with the suffering father. The district attorney indicted Louis Greenfield for first-degree manslaughter, the lowest charge possible. His attorney, the famous and skillful Samuel Leibowitz, argued that Greenfield was not guilty because of "'defective reason'—after years of physical and mental torture caused by the suffering of the boy."[15] Medical and parental testimony described Jerry as a "'vegetative organism' who had to be watched every minute he was awake . . . [and who] had grown into a 'tremendous man' with uncontrolled instincts."[16] Amid "the sniffling and sobbing of spectators and several members of the jury," Greenfield testified that he had suffered for years until "God's will" guided him to kill Jerry.[17] The jury acquitted Greenfield. "I should never have been put on trial," Greenfield told reporters after the trial. "The lawmakers should have been put on trial. The people whose laws condemned my son to live and condemned my wife and myself to life with him. Jerry should have been put to death at birth."[18] Now that Jerry was dead, he and Anna were "planning to adopt a child, about two or three years old, to take his place just as soon as we establish our new home."[19] The trial ended, therefore, with the couple apparently joyfully planning to reconstitute their family.

The Greenfield killing had special meaning to Florence and Louis Repouille because of their family situation. Raymond was the eldest of their five children.[20] He was thirteen and what the newspapers described as "blind, crippled, and feeble-minded."[21] Florence had already managed to save her son twice from Repouille's murder attempts. On both occasions, Florence had called in neighbors and medical aid but not the police. About six months before Raymond's death, Repouille told Florence "he had chloroform in the house. He would give him a little bit and he would put him out of his sufferings."[22] Florence searched the apartment for the chloroform without success.

The family was under another source of stress at the time. Repouille had frequently visited charity organizations to complain about Florence's drinking and neglect of their children, charges that the social workers were unable to substantiate. In August 1939, Repouille complained again and asked for the children other than Raymond to be committed to an orphanage or some other form of public care. It is not clear why he thought this would be possible. The case went to the domestic relations court. The probation officer sent by the court could not find any evidence of misbehavior by Florence but did note Florence feared that Repouille would "kill the cripple child" and had tried to twice before, though not recently. The case file stated that Repouille apparently felt "that he was justified in attempting to kill his child because of the fact that it is a helpless cripple."[23] Florence also complained that Repouille abused her. To alleviate these problems, the court ordered the Repouilles to institutionalize Raymond, and Ethel McDougall, the court probation officer, planned to give Florence some advice on budgeting. Florence, however, resisted any attempt to

institutionalize Raymond and felt that the court was against her. She and Repouille fought over money, Florence's supposed drinking, and what should happen to Raymond. Tensions between husband and wife seemed to be reaching a crisis.

On October 12, 1939, Repouille stayed home from work. Around noon, Florence took Jeanette, the baby, for a walk, leaving her keys at home. She went around the corner and stood for a few minutes. Then "[a]ll of a sudden I said, 'My God, Louis is up to something.'"[24] When she got home, the apartment door was locked and Repouille did not answer when she knocked. She said, "Oh, my God, I betcha now he is going to kill that kid."[25] She ran downstairs to the neighbors for help. One neighbor called the police. The police broke into the apartment and took Raymond to the hospital, but they were too late. He was dead.

More than a year's delay followed between Raymond's death and his father's trial. At the trial in December 1941, Repouille, a less persuasive man than Greenfield, could not maintain the smooth, selfless image that the former had successfully presented. Though his attorney, Paul O'Dwyer, was a successful advocate for a variety of liberal causes in New York City, Repouille created many of his own problems.[26] His testimony contradicted his claim that his mind "went perfectly blank" when he killed Raymond. His admission that he had struck his wife on at least twenty occasions and the social worker's testimony that he had tried to institutionalize all of his children except the youngest further damaged his credibility. The jury convicted him of manslaughter in the second degree, but he received a suspended sentence of five to ten years. Repouille, however, was indignant that he had been found guilty. Six years later, he lost his appeal to become a citizen because of his conviction. However, the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals decided that when the period of the sentence had passed, he could reapply for citizenship without prejudice. "It is reasonably clear," Judge Learned Hand observed, "that the jury which tried Repouille did not feel any moral repulsion at his crime."[27] After all, Hand continued, Repouille committed the crime "to help him[self] in . . . [his other children's] nurture which was being compromised by the burden imposed upon him" by Raymond.[28] "[O]nly a minority of virtuous persons would deem the practice morally justifiable, while it remains in private hands," Hand stated, but

> there are great numbers of people of the most unimpeachable virtue, who think it morally justifiable to put an end to a life so inexorably destined to be a burden to others, and . . . condemned to a brutish existence, lower indeed than all but the lowest forms of sentient life.[29]

Hand compared Repouille's actions to the civil disobedience of the abolitionists protesting against slavery. In the end, he concluded that however morally justified Repouille's actions might be Repouille must wait until the end of his parole period before applying for citizenship. Hand's opinion, however, left no doubt where his sympathies remained.

"Perverse Tendencies" and "Vegetative Organisms": Describing Disability

The coverage of the "mercy killings" drew on a series of cultural images of disability. In the Greenfield trial, the images presented were carefully crafted. Leibowitz was a famous lawyer who had developed his skills and reputation defending infamous criminals and employed his talents as a showman and a lawyer to great effect. Repouille was never able to maintain a comparable facade. Although he was white, he was a poor immigrant from the Caribbean who lived in a largely African American neighborhood. He was often contradictory and shocking: He told newspaper reporters to take pictures of him with his dead son on his lap; he informed the police that previously he had threatened to kill Raymond to punish his wife but that the actual killing was different and committed solely out of mercy; and he admitted that he had attempted to institutionalize his "normal" children. Florence refused to defend her husband and freely told the police and reporters that his actions were unjustified. In light of all this, it may seem surprising that so many people believed Repouille's claim that he killed Raymond solely out of mercy.

Given the unconvincing narrative he presented and the constant contradictions made by his wife, why *did* so many people believe him? The answer lies in the cultural frames placed around disability in the 1930s. Parents, the courtroom witnesses and spectators, and the newspapers applied a wide range of meanings to Raymond's and Jerry's physical and intellectual impairments. Many of these images were contradictory: Jerry was both a pitiful imbecile who could not leave his apartment alone and a dangerous potential rapist and murderer. Such cultural constructions had a powerful life of their

own and did not even have to be called upon specifically: culturally trained spectators would supply them automatically. When the police interviewed McDougall, the Repouille family's social worker, they asked if she knew why Repouille had tried to kill his son:

A: It was always by inference, that he wanted to relieve the child of suffering.
Q: Did she [Florence] ever say that to you? Have you a single notation, anywhere that the child was suffering?
A: No.
Q: In other words, what you have just given me was something you were imagining yourself from all the facts in the case?
A: Inferences from the facts.[30]

The image of the suffering, disabled child was so potent that McDougall was unable to imagine an alternative explanation.

The least-threatening popular and medical image of an intellectually disabled person, especially for an intellectually disabled male, was that of a permanent and innocent child. Without mature reason and intelligence to guide them, mental defectives would not be able to control their impulses and passions. Therefore, mental defectives should ideally be like Victorian children, innocent of sex, violence, and other negative adult emotions.[31] The stereotype of the mental defective as a neutered, angelic child remained powerful between the 1930s and 1950s and still has resonance today. Nevertheless, it did not appear in the coverage of these mercy killings—only its dangerous counterimage manifested itself.

One of the most potent charges leveled against Jerry challenged this safe, asexual image. The dark obverse of the child image was the primitive, violent, sexual child's mind in an adult body—male urges set free.[32] In this theory, mentally deficient males would never achieve adulthood and thus could not control their primal urges. They would be unable to attract sexual partners, but they would still have passion and desire. Consequently, they posed the threat of sexual deviancy, rape, or violent crime. This fear drew on broader ideas about *physical* disability as well. In popular culture, the disabled body either eliminated or perverted the sexual drive. Movie images of physical disability reinforced this stereotype. Disabled characters in films of the 1920s and 1930s alternated between the sweet, sexless innocent and the vindictive villain who sought to avenge his symbolic castration and lack of sexual potency.[33]

The denunciations of Jerry fit easily into this long line of popular representations of people with disabilities as a social threat. In this interpretation, Greenfield protected society by killing his son. The trial testimony and courtroom arguments worked to elaborate these fears. In these fantasies, Jerry's body, which at other moments was portrayed as weak and pitiful, became threateningly strong and menacing. Undoubtedly drawing on popular concern over sexual psychopaths who were unable "to repress or to sublimate their overly active sexual impulses," the biographer of Greenfield's attorney, Samuel Leibowitz, claimed that "nature had been cruel enough to develop fully the sex urge within him [Jerry], and that having no mind to control this urge, it was possible that it would lead him to assault, rape, or kill."[34] Dr. I. Newton Kugelmass, Jerry's physician, testified at the trial that he had urged the parents to sterilize Jerry to "protect the mother from unwarranted offenses and lessen the possibility of perverse tendencies which the boy had undoubtedly experienced."[35] *The Sun* and the *New York World Telegram* made the implied charge explicit and accused Jerry of threatening to assault his mother. What Kugelmass meant and how his comment related to Jerry's behavior is unclear. In an advice manual, Kugelmass suggested sterilization of all mental defectives.[36] He, like some other psychiatrists, may have seen sterilization as therapeutic surgery or a standard precaution, or he may have worried about a more common "perversion," namely, masturbation.[37] Regardless of what he meant, his comments were enough to trigger a set of cultural associations that needed no further elaboration or explanation to take flight. *Who* Jerry was and what he *had done* was hidden behind *what* he was and what he *might do*.

The other set of cultural frames focused on the problem of suffering.[38] The press, parents, and court testimony seldom described Raymond or Jerry as suffering physically. Despite the frequent use of the words *suffering* and *mercy*, few descriptions of physical pain were provided. Instead, the boys' fathers, the newspapers, and the courts portrayed Raymond and Jerry as "suffering" by virtue of their disabilities.

Because of their disabilities, society defined Raymond's and Jerry's lives as not worth living. The press and others frequently described Raymond in particular as virtually dead: "just a dead body lying around."[39] Raymond was so severely disabled that he did not qualify as a living person. Such rhetoric could be flexible: Leibowitz similarly described the infant Jerry as "[j]ust a lump of flesh in a crib."[40] This rhetoric rested on a set of assumptions about what constituted an acceptable life. More than any other group, "idiots," or

people with severe mental and physical disabilities, were stigmatized as inhuman. In this view, Raymond lacked the attributes of real life, namely, intelligence and consciousness. Implicitly, life was only worth living if a person could fulfill certain basic social goals. For those without these abilities, life itself became a form of suffering. Their fathers did not have to demonstrate that Raymond and Jerry wished to die or would have chosen to be killed. Their lives by definition were not worth living: hence their consent or wishes as individuals were irrelevant, presumably because they were considered incapable of generating or expressing them. The issue was not what Jerry and Raymond *wanted* but what was assumed to be best for them and for those around them.

Most of the discussions of suffering in the newspaper coverage did not focus on Jerry and Raymond. It quickly became clear that their families were the real victims. The families' suffering took a variety of forms: The most obvious was simply enduring Jerry's and Raymond's presence. Scholars argue that in the 1920s and 1930s, physical disability became a form of visual pornography.[41] The newspapers teased the readers with references to and descriptions of Raymond's and Jerry's bodies, but the press never published pictures of either Raymond or Jerry. The ultimate example of disability as obscenity appeared in an article in the *Daily Mirror*. The paper announced that Greenfield possessed more than one hundred pictures of Jerry that he would show to the jury. Leibowitz claimed, "There are not 12 American citizens to be found who, after seeing these pictures, would not declare the father's act justified."[42] The pornography of the disabled body transformed mementos of a child into a justification of his death.

Articles also dwelt on the suffering of the families in enduring the youths' need for care and their drain on financial resources. The coverage of their murders emphasized the unusual financial and social burdens Raymond and Jerry posed in a way that ignored both the general realities of life for working-class families and the lack of "normal" community resources for disabled children. The press and the courts naturalized Greenfield's and Repouille's desperation, transforming their anguish into the automatic result of their sons' disabilities. The description of Repouille as "frantic with poverty and despair" seemed to blame Raymond and overlooked the realities of life for an immigrant family living on the wages of an elevator operator in Depression-era New York City. Similarly, the coverage of the Greenfield case described a family steadily deteriorating under an intolerable burden. Jerry may well have been a major financial burden. The last ten years of his life, however, occurred during the Great Depression, when many small-business men suffered. The national financial crisis undoubtedly helped shape the difficulties that confronted both families. The press coverage also ignored the impact of a lack of community resources to assist either family. No newspaper, commentator, or witness ever pointed out that a daily school program or household help might have eased Anna's and Florence's burdens without requiring institutionalization of their sons. In these constructions, the parents more than their children obtained "mercy" through the "mercy killings." The villains were Raymond and Jerry, not the social situation that surrounded them.

None of this implies a public consensus on the use of euthanasia. In 1939, opinions remained divided.[43] Some commentators specifically feared that the Repouille and Greenfield cases might lead to growing public tolerance of euthanasia.[44] The cases do demonstrate a widespread willingness to accept that certain types of existence inevitably created suffering not just for the individual but also for the people around him or her. In the stories of "mercy killings," euthanasia functioned as just another method of removing the disabled person from view. For many commentators and spectators of the cases, institutions might well have been a preferred solution. The opponent of euthanasia who protested that an "idiot child may have fond parents who want him alive, even if it were in a distant institution" was not necessarily in conflict with Repouille's and Greenfield's sympathizers.[45] The public support for Repouille and Greenfield expressed not a consensus that euthanasia was desirable but a belief that families had to be protected from the burden of disability.

Dangerous Mothers

Intimate emotional relationships, however, opened the possibility of an alternative construction of disability. Florence's testimony to the police about Raymond demonstrated how someone could see him as both severely disabled and fully human. She did not deny the severity of his disabilities and conceded that he could not speak or see or move around. Nor did she expect him to live a "normal" life span. She emphasized, however, the ways in which Raymond interacted with her and his environment: He had all the attributes of personhood.[46] He could, after all, "understand quite a bit."[47] He liked ice

cream and fruit. Sometimes she would play games with him. Most of all, Florence felt that Raymond loved her and could not survive for long in an institution. "He was attached to me," she explained. "He couldn't see me but he knew I was next to him."[48] For Florence, Raymond was a complete and beloved person in a way that accepted his disabilities. Her description also emphasized the ways in which he was a participant in their mutual relationship, rather than the passive recipient of instinctual mother love.

Raymond and Jerry could not easily represent themselves. Raymond could not speak, and Jerry was unintelligible to anyone but his parents. The two people who knew them most intimately and had the best right to speak for them were their mothers. Ironically, that close emotional connection was used to discredit the two mothers in the courtroom, in the newspapers, and in the minds of experts, including their social worker and physician. The people who had the greatest opportunity to know Raymond and Jerry were the people who had the least opportunity to describe them.

Florence and Anna were undermined by popular and professional suspicions of motherhood. Advice manuals and psychologists since the 1920s had been warning that all mothers ran the risk of spoiling their children for independence and adult relationships.[49] What was a problem for mothers of "normal" children was an overwhelming danger for mothers of disabled children. The apparently innate dependence and vulnerability of children with disabilities made it even more likely that mothers would succumb to the impulse to keep their children perpetual infants. This did not mean that women should leave the home. Private nuclear families required the full-time labor of a wife and mother.[50] Families with disabled children could be even more demanding of maternal labor. Anna "watch[ed] him [Jerry] all day, help[ed] him dress, . . . took him for walks and attend[ed] to the simplest matters of his personal hygiene.[51] Florence said that she could not leave Raymond alone to have the surgery she needed, but her reasonable fear of Repouille's murderous impulses might have been a large part of her reluctance. These women's labor made it possible for their sons to stay out of institutions. Writers on handicapped children, however, were very suspicious of maternal motives, warning against spoiling children and keeping them dependent. In this view, a mother's efforts to keep her child at home might reflect her own emotional gratification from her child's dependence.[52] The *New York Herald Tribune* referred to Jerry as the "burden his mother insisted on carrying"—a description that summed up much of the criticism.[53]

Like other mothers, Anna and Florence were operating in a vacuum of social support. In reality, public institutions could not begin to take all the people who were intellectually disabled in the United States. Most facilities were overcrowded, with long waiting lists. Limited funding and the realities of institutional life made these facilities grim places to live, especially for the most disabled residents, those like Raymond and Jerry. Both Raymond and Jerry had spent short periods in institutions before being removed by their parents because of their ill health, apparent neglect, and unhappiness. Neither young man was eligible for any kind of public education. Blaming mothers for their "excessive devotion" obscured the real social problems that made that devotion necessary. In these cases, "excessive devotion" translated into an unwillingness to accept the neglect and abuse of a public institution, the only help offered by the community.

The social work system shared this critique of motherhood and disability. When Repouille turned to the city's social welfare system to bring his wife under control, the domestic relations court had two visions of the family to choose between: Repouille's unsubstantiated portrayal of Florence as a drunken and neglectful mother versus Florence's description of Repouille as a violent man who abused her and wanted to kill Raymond. The court ignored Repouille's violence and found no evidence of neglect or drinking by Florence. Instead, the probation officer decided that the "main difficulty in this case seems to be Raymond the crippled boy," who absorbed all of Florence's attention and disrupted the home.[54] The court blamed Repouille's admitted violence on its targets, Raymond and Florence. Their intimacy and inadequacies caused him to abuse them.

The court's interpretation was not inevitable. Repouille's and Florence's testimony allow us to construct an alternative narrative that focuses on Repouille himself as a deeply frustrated man with social ambitions. He wanted to become an American citizen and resented Florence's revelation of their immigrant status to the police and social workers. While Greenfield's part ownership of his business might stand for the moderate success of an immigrant, Repouille was still struggling. He worked steadily and turned over his wages to his wife but was able to afford only a cold-water flat on the outskirts of Harlem. Florence remembered that he had resented her pregnancy with Raymond, their first child, because it meant that she had to give up her well-paying job. According to Florence, her husband's violence began after she quit work and they had Raymond and their other children, which undoubtedly strained the family's resources. Florence's statement to the police suggests that Repouille's resentment of Raymond began well before the revelation of his disability and even

before his birth. Raymond and Florence presented obvious targets for his frustration and violence.

Social service agencies, however, seemed unable to respond to such issues. Historian Linda Gordon describes a similar pattern in her study of family violence in Boston in this period. Social workers would ignore the husband's violence while attempting to "fix" the more available wife.[55] In this case, Raymond, also a victim of violence, became the primary focus of social intervention. Yet Florence, too, remained a target of both her husband and the social workers, through Raymond. While her husband threatened to kill Raymond, the social workers demanded that he be put away. As Ethel McDougall, the social worker, explained:

> Mrs. Repouille . . . had claimed that if Raymond was taken away from her she would break up her home and place all the other children—we felt she did not mean this, but that after Raymond was placed, she would realize that the other children had a claim upon her affection and care and she would then make a better adjustment as a mother.[56]

Not surprisingly, Florence felt that "the court wasn't on her side, was against her."[57]

The focus on Raymond and Florence's relationship is unaccounted for by the children's court records or the social workers' statements. After examining the records, it is difficult to see how Florence was failing as a mother. The social worker cited problems of cleanliness and money management, but she said that the apartment rooms "were not dirty; were cleaned up as much as possible; the paint was dirty and because of that gave the appearance of being upset."[58] The case record noted that social workers found no evidence that Florence drank or neglected any of her children. The Catholic charity worker who had earlier visited "felt that there was a possibility of fantasy on the man's part."[59] Raymond was not a major financial drain. The social worker, Florence, and Repouille all reported that the pair constantly fought about money but the only recent expenses for Raymond were for ice cream and fruit. The children's court judge, however, stated that the other children needed to be protected from Raymond and from Florence's "excessive love" for him.[60] Since the social worker and court made no specific accusations against Florence, it appears that, to them, Florence's love for Raymond was by its very nature excessive and dangerous to the family.

Raymond was thus blamed for the Repouille family's problems. The flaw in this judgment revealed itself when the family remained troubled after his removal. Less than a month after Raymond's murder, Florence went to the police to complain that her husband was threatening to beat her and that he had gone to the children's court to see if he could have the other children put away. She also said that she was "afraid to go to sleep at night with Mr. Repouille around."[61]

Conclusion

The Repouille and Greenfield trials could have followed a different pattern. The murder of James Fitzpatrick by his stepfather, Lawrence Rougeau, four days after Raymond's murder presents an alternate model.[62] Rougeau, apparently inspired by the earlier killings, claimed he feared that his stepson was beginning to show the initial signs of insanity, like his mother, who had recently been committed. The newspapers and police, however, rejected Rougeau's attempt to define James as a mercy victim. They described a blond, blue-eyed child who was "familiar to neighbors as a lively, 'normal' child."[63] One paper even published a picture of the attractive little boy, which they had not done for Raymond or Jerry. The coverage of Rougeau was unsympathetic and sarcastic. One paper remarked that he "seemed rather surprised today because nobody seemed to approve of his drowning of his stepson."[64] Rougeau's legal treatment was strikingly different as well. He plead guilty to second-degree murder. The district attorney informed the judge that such a plea would "insure such medical treatment for the defendant as he may require and remove the defendant from society, where he was a menace to himself and others."[65] In contrast, Repouille and Greenfield were charged with manslaughter, despite the months they spent planning the deaths of their sons. Neither man went to prison or was forced to have psychological treatment. Something was unmistakably different in the first two cases from the third. In the words of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the Greenfield case "inspired only universal pity for the harassed father," and the Repouille killing, though troubling for several reasons, had "undertones of the deepest tragedy." The Rougeau murder, by contrast, was a story "of unmitigated sordidness, which would seem to present none of

the justification and evoke none of the compassion which were factors in the other two."[66]

The discussions of Jerry's and Raymond's murders separated out a single disruptive element—the disabled child. The implication was that the child's limitations created the tragedies that followed. Jerry's and Raymond's disabilities obscured all the complexities that contributed to their deaths. Family violence, poverty, inadequate social services—all became reflections and inevitable results of disability, rather than independent factors in the young men's murders. If the disabled child was the problem, there was no reason to look at the social structures in which the families lived. In this way, arguments for mercy killing and euthanasia that claimed to be social reforms simply left the responsibility in the hands of the family to choose between private care and drastic action, equating individual remedy with social change. Even for those who did not accept the validity of euthanasia or mercy killing, the accounts of the mercy-killing cases presented moral dramas in which a severely disabled child destroyed a family, leaving no apparent solution but death. Onlookers might describe the event as a tragic crime or a justified act, but either way, the disability served as the only possible explanation. The story of Raymond's death suggests that murdering a disabled child might not always be so different from other forms of child abuse. The similarities, however, were hidden behind the discourse of disability, which stated that "mercy killings" were essentially about disability. The implicit moral of these dramas was not necessarily that euthanasia was acceptable but that disability made it impossible for some people to share "normal" families and "normal" lives.

NOTES

1. Charles E. Rosenberg, "Introduction: Framing Disease: Illness, Society, and History," in Charles E Rosenberg and Janet Golden, eds., *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), xiii–xxvi.

2. For examples, see Ellen Dwyer, "Stories of Epilepsy, 1880–1930," in Rosenberg and Golden, eds., *Framing Disease*, 248–72; Philip M. Ferguson, *Abandoned to Their Fate: Social Policy and Practice toward Severely Retarded People in America, 1820–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); and Steven Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst: Institutions for the Mentally Retarded in the South, 1900–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 109.

3. "Nature of Petition: Neglected Children" (carbon copy of Children's Court Case File, in future cited as C.F.), Louis Repouille Case File, Municipal Archives of the City of New York, 4.

4. Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 11.

5. I use the term *severely disabled* to indicate that Jerry and Raymond and others like them were put in a separate category and treated differently from individuals who were considered to be less disabled. In the course of this essay, I use the terms that many people find offensive, such as *mental defective*. I use these terms to indicate the historical categories and attitudes.

6. "Bronx man Kills Imbecile Son, 17," *New York World Telegram*, 12 January 1939.

7. "Mercy Slayer Says he Acted on 'God's Will,'" *New York Herald Tribune* (hereafter *NYHT*), 11 May 1939; "'Better Off Dead,'" *Time*, 23 January 1939.

8. "Mercy Killing Jurors Weep," *New York Sun*, 11 May 1939.

9. Martin Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 160–61.

10. Stephen Kuepper, "Euthanasia in America, 1890–1960: The Controversy, the Movement, and the Law" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1981), 95–140; Pernick, *Black Stork*, 161–62, 163–67.

11. Louis Greenfield and Louis Repouille will be referred to by their last names because they share the same first name. All other family members will be called by their first names to distinguish them from Louis Greenfield and Louis Repouille.

12. My analysis of mercy killing was strongly influenced by "'Lives Not Worth Living,'" in Jenny Morris, *Pride against Prejudice: A Personal Politics of Disability* (London: Women's Press, 1991), 39–63; and Nat Hentoff, "The Awful Privacy of Baby Doe," in Alan Gartner and Tom Joe, eds., *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 161–75.

13. "Pity Drives Dad to Kill Sick Son," (New York) *Daily Mirror* (hereafter *DM*), 13 January 1949. See also the *new York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), *New York Sun*, *Brooklyn Eagle*, (hereafter *BE*), *Daily Mirror*, *Daily News*, and *New York Herald Tribune* between January and May 1939. Only direct quotations will be cited.

14. "Louis Repouille Statement," part I (hereafter L.R.I.), Louis Repouille Case File, 17.

15. "Father on Trial as 'Mercy Killer,'" *NYT*, 9 May 1939.

16. "3 Broken Lived Related by Wife of Mercy Killer," *NYHT*, 10 May 1939.

17. "Mercy Slayer Says He Acted on 'God's Will,'" *NYHT*, 11 May 1939.

18. "Mercy Killer, Freed by Jury, to Rest, Then Adopt a Child," *BE*, 12 May 1939.

19. Ibid.

20. See the Louis Repouille Case File and the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Sun*, *New York World Telegram*, *Daily News*, and *Daily Mirror* between October 1939 and December 1947. Only direct quotations will be cited.

21. "Boy Cripple, 13, Is Put to Death By His Father," *NYHT*, 13 October 1939.

22. "Florence Repouille Statement," part I (hereafter F.R.I.), Louis Repouille Case File, 77.

23. C.F., 2.

24. F.R.I., 82.

25. Ibid.

26. Paul O'Dwyer, *Counsel for the Defense: The Autobiography of Paul O'Dwyer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

27. *Repouille v. United States*, 165 F. 2d 152 (2d Cir. 1947).

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. "Statement of Ethel McDougall," part I (hereafter E.M.I.), Louis Repouille Case File, 7.

31. For examples of this image, see Alexander Johnson, "Children Who Never Grow Up," *Survey* (1 December 1922): 310-16; and Edgar A. Doll, "Children Who Never Grow Up," *Hygeia* 12 (June 1934): 534.

32. For discussions of passionate masculinity in this period, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Racism in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 92-109; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 252-58; and Peter N. Stearns, "Men, Boys and Anger in American Society, 1860-1940," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 75-91.

33. Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 105-6.

34. Quentin Reynolds, *Courtroom: The Story of Samuel S. Leibowitz* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1950), 172; Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 91, 83-106.

35. "Boy Slain by Father Menace, Doctor Says," *NYT*, 10 May 1939.

36. I. Newton Kugelmass, *The Management of Mental Deficiency in Children* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1954).

37. Joel T. Branslow discussed the use of vasectomy to treat mental illness in "In the Name of Therapeutics: The Practice of Sterilization in a California State Hospital," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 51 (1996): 29-51, and in *Mental Ills and Bodily Cures: Psychiatric Treatment in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 54-70.

38. See Pernick, *Black Stork*, 89-97; and Kuepper, "Euthanasia in America," 95-127.

39. C.F., 4.

40. "3 Broken Lives."

41. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 275-78; Pernick, *Black Stork*, 121-25; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 75-78.

42. "'Mercy Killer' Bases Defense on Pictures," *DM*, 19 January 1939.

43. Kuepper, "Euthanasia in America," 95-168; and Pernick, *Black Stork*.

44. "Mercy Killings in New York" (clipping), Louis Repouille Case File; "Euthanasia and the Law," *NYHT*, 16 October 1939.

45. Leo Kanner, "Exoneration of the Feebleminded," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 9 (1942): 21.

46. My discussion of Florence and Raymond's relationship was shaped by Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor, "Relationships with Severely Disabled People: The Social Construction of Humanness," *Social Problems* 36 (1989): 135-48.

47. F.R.I., 32.

48. Ibid., 85.

49. Christina Hardyment, *Perfect Parents: Baby-Care Advice Past and Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 189-92; Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 165-71.

50. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

51. "3 Broken Lives."

52. For examples, see John Ruhräh, "The Parent and the Handicapped Child," *Hygeia* 12 (October 1934): 902; and Ethel Horsefield, "Suggestion for Training the Mentally Retarded by Parents in the Home," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 46 (1941-42): 533-37.

53. "3 Broken Lives."

54. C.F., 3.

55. Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880–1960* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 281-82. See also David Peterson del Mar, *What Trouble I Have Seen: A History of Violence against Wives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 115-34.

56. E.M.I., 19.

57. Florence, quoted by McDougall, E.M.I., 16.

58. E.M.I., 13

59. Ibid., 6.

60. C.F., 4.

61. "Mrs. Repouille," 1 November 1939, Louis Repouille Case File.

62. On October 16, 1939, Rougeau's story was covered by the following newspapers: *The Sun*, *New York Times*, *Daily News*, and *Daily Mirror*.

63. "Stepfather Slays Boy, 5, by Drowning," *NYT*, 16 October 1939.

64. "Lays Killing of Son to Fear of Insanity" (clipping), n.d., Laurence Rougeau Case File, New York Municipal Archives.

65. "Recommendation," by Thomas E. Dewey, District Attorney, Lawrence Rougeau Case File.

66. "Euthanasia and the Law."