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The Biopolitics of Marriage and Motherhood: Understanding the Transformative Role of White Middle-Class Women in the American Eugenics Movement 1900-1930

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**The Biopolitics of Marriage and Motherhood: Understanding the
Transformative Role of White Middle-Class Women in the American
Eugenics Movement
1900-1930**

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine
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Abstract

Eugenics, the deplorable crusade to “strengthen” family and “save civilized America” from “race suicide” through the regulation of motherhood, emerged in the United States as a cohesive movement in the early twentieth century. The eugenics movement and the coinciding development of eugenic feminism have largely been studied. Where analysis is lacking, however, is the influential role of women who were unattached to the official, organized groups in early twentieth-century America. How did these women participate in the establishment of eugenic ideas as a popular social and cultural norm in the period from 1900 to 1930?

This thesis examines of how white middle-class women’s engagement and navigation of eugenic discourses in their daily lives helps us to understand their influential role in the American eugenics movement. These women gained power as citizens by acting ‘morally’ and reproducing ‘intelligently’ according to eugenic standards of race betterment. Analyzing eugenic engagement in five popular women’s journals, two major newspapers and at state fairs helps us imagine the role middle-class white women played in establishing a national engagement with the ideas and conversations of eugenics in America—bringing the discourses of eugenics into the vernacular of the everyday. The work of women who ascribed to gender roles constructed by eugenic biopower reinforced the notion that the female’s worth as a citizen in the United States was predicated by her performance as a eugenic producer and a guardian to America’s future generations. Many different types of white middle-class women from different levels of the movement made connections with each other to expand eugenic circuits of knowledge. Through these informal channels of communication, the biopolitics of eugenics became both normalized and popularized throughout the nation. The importance of white middle-class women’s biopower can be framed within the Foucauldian concept of the dispersed constellations of contested power. As the primary actors within Better Babies and Fitter Families contests, women helped to obscure the perceived division between what was public and what was private in American society as they exhibited their families and themselves to the world in order to establish their important, intimate value to the state as moral, fit and reproducing fertile bodies.

INTRODUCTION

Often defined as “the ‘science’ of better breeding,” eugenics was a powerful and popular idea that permeated the social conscience of white America in the early twentieth century.¹ In the first chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carroway sat at the well-set table of his gracious hosts, Tom and Daisy Buchanan, as the somewhat stiff, yet still pleasant, dinner conversation turned to the matter of the day—eugenics. The dialogue that transpired was one of my first uncomfortable introductions to the history of a eugenic discourse in the United States. This was the conversation that has stayed with me:

“Civilization’s is going to pieces,” broke out Tom violently. “I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard?”

“Why, no,” [Carroway] answered rather surprised by his tone.

“Well, it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; its been proved.”

“Tom’s getting very profound,” said Daisy with an expression of unthoughtful sadness. “He reads deep books with long words in them. What was that word we—“

“Well, these books are all scientific,” insisted Tom, glancing at her impatiently.

“This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us as the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things.”²

When the most recent version of the film *The Great Gatsby* was released in 2013, watching this scene unfold before my eyes struck me in a deeper, perhaps more intellectual way. As a senior in college, I had finally been exposed to American eugenics in an academic context. I now knew Henry Goddard was a famous psychologist and

¹ Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 3.

² F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 18.

staunch advocate for eugenics. Although Goddard himself never wrote a book such as Tom describes, Fitzgerald's thinly veiled reference to another American eugenicist's work, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* by Lothrop Stoddard is clear.³ What disturbed me most about this scene is not Tom's frantic concern for the slipping grasp of white society on their supreme power in America, for many white males of the 1920s shared a similar worry. It is Daisy's response, or non-response, rather, that struck a chord within me.

As a student of history, I often imagine myself inhabiting the historic reality of the past I am studying. I find it especially fascinating to learn about what people like me might have been thinking or doing within that alternate context. When studying the American eugenics movement it is difficult to visualize how I might engage with the eugenic discourses of the early twentieth century because the voices of white middle-class women are often not recorded within the mainstream histories of eugenics in the United States. When I read or watch the conversation that Fitzgerald contrives between Carroway and Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan, I find myself wanting to hear more from Daisy—does she agree with her husband and share his concern for the uncertain future of white supremacy? Has she thought about where she stands in the ranking of the races? Does she feel as though she has a responsibility to “watch out” for the dominant race's integrity and survival, as her husband suggests all people of the “white race” should? Did her “unthoughtful” expression accurately reflect what she truly felt? How Daisy, the fictional character that she was, might answer these questions, we will never know.

³ Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1921).

This thesis endeavors to bridge the gap within the existing scholarship of the American eugenics movement between the frequently analyzed powerful (male) leaders and misunderstood “powerless followers.” An examination of where and how white middle-class women consumed, navigated and engaged with eugenic discourses and practices brings to light the power they accrued as active participants in the eugenics movement. Through the application of Foucault’s concept of biopower as a lens of analysis to closely examine three units of study—women’s journals, newspapers, and eugenic contests at state fairs—it becomes clear that the actions and choices made by this specific group of women in terms of marriage, sex, and child-rearing were significant in determining the course of the eugenics movement in the United States. As America’s ‘best’ wives and mothers, white middle-class women made decisions for the nation about which men, as potential husbands and fathers, were well suited to take on the role of safeguarding the American race. Any perceived delineation between the private and the public was obscured as matters of eugenic marriage and childbirth became intrinsically tied to the perceived stability of the United States as a nation. It is this close biopolitical relationship between the white middle-class woman and her citizenship within the state that makes her position within the eugenics movement so crucial and worthy of recognition.

Foucault’s understanding of power, and more specifically ‘biopower’—power over the human body—will be used as a primary mode of analysis in this thesis. According to Foucault, power is not “located within a single space” or vested in a “single

authority.”⁴ He wrote that power consists, rather, within “multiple networks and relations of force that are always open to conflict and negotiation.”⁵ Foucault’s fragmented, scattered concept of power, that is not overt but rather underlying within a society, will be important to my understanding of where power within the eugenics movement existed in relation to white middle-class women. Rather than placing power and control within the hands of a few eugenic organizations and a select group of (white male) eugenicists, an understanding of Foucault’s concept of dispersed power elevates the importance of the intimate circuits of knowledge among white middle-class women that the eugenics movement relied upon for its success and popularity.

Foucault’s concept of biopower will frame how white middle-class women became a part of the dispersed web of power that laid the groundwork for the cultural endurance of eugenic ideas. Introduced in 1976 towards the end of volume one of *The History of Sexuality*,⁶ the first mention of biopower is seemingly impromptu and without much introduction: “[during the classical period] there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘biopower.’”⁷ The techniques of biopower Foucault mentioned emerged to regulate bodies through the “science of demography, the statistical analysis of wealth and the evaluation of the relationship between a territory’s resources and its inhabitants.”⁸ When the power of the sovereign shifted to the power of the state

⁴ David Macey, “Rethinking Biopolitics, Race and power in the Wake of Foucault” *Theory Culture & Society* 26, no 8 (2009): 196.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Macey, “Rethinking Biopolitics,” 187.

during the eighteenth century, Foucault detected the first political leaders that considered monitoring birth and death rates, life expectancy, and the health of a population. It is this type of regulatory power that eugenics embodied in the twentieth century. Biopower “brought *life* into the realm of politics as an object of explicit calculation,” where the life at stake was not that of a particular individual but rather referred to the ‘life’ of a population as a race, nationally and a species as a whole. This concept of imagining the whole population, the ‘body politic’ as one living organism allowed eugenicists to rationalize eradicating a part of the population as one would eradicate a disease from the body to save the life.⁹

Within the context of eugenics, which people were considered to be the diseased, destructive element within the population was largely a factor of race. When Foucault first introduced biopower, he also mentioned race, albeit within a larger overriding historical discussion of changing power structures. Foucault argued that a fundamental shift took place when the sovereign’s power “to *take* life or *let* live,” became complicated and to a certain extent replaced with “biopower” which could “*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.”¹⁰ Under this reasoning, eugenics became a state sanctioned biopolitics through which some members of the population were encouraged to multiply while others’ reproductive capabilities were limited, if not destroyed. In a lecture at the *Collège de France* entitled “Society must be defeated” Foucault elaborated on how biopower was different from the authority held by the sovereign; “In the biopower system...killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the

⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 143.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 136-138.

improvement of the species of race.”¹¹ This understanding of biopolitics justified the eugenic system which incentivized reproduction among the Anglo-Saxon ‘fit’ and the gradual elimination of the unfit through various measures of regulatory biopower.

A study of white middle-class women’s engagement with and negotiation of the biopolitics of eugenics that are explored in this thesis brings to light the agency and power these women garnered as members of a eugenic society. How women made decisions about their own appearance, what education they participated in, their choice of husband and priorities as mothers was vital to the success of the American eugenics movement and its incorporation into popular culture. When white middle-class women engaged with the biopolitical eugenic discourse, and made conscious regulatory choices concerning the politics of their own body, they became a powerful part of the potent social force that swept through America in the early twentieth century.

Historians in the past have typically entered the conversation of eugenics through the lens of legal or political histories, organizational or regional histories, or more recently by placing gender and sexuality at the center of analysis. With an international scope, tracing the histories of the eugenic ideology in both Britain and America, Daniel Kevles (1985) provides an introductory framework to the study of eugenics and the development of the movement (also see Black, 2003). Often times, the practices of negative eugenics—limiting the reproductive capabilities of certain members of society because they were deemed not “fit” to reproduce—is emphasized most heavily within the broader scholarship of the movement in America. Paul Lombardo (2008) dedicated an entire work to deconstructing the Supreme Court case in 1927, *Buck v Bell* which

¹¹ Macey, “Rethinking Biopolitics,” 189.

legalized the involuntary sterilization of peoples within an institution for the feeble-minded. In the case, Carrie Buck, a young woman from Charlottesville, Virginia living within an institution for the feeble-minded was the first woman to be legally, involuntarily sterilized. Carrie's mother had also been institutionalized and within the trial, Carrie's infant daughter, Vivian was deemed feeble-minded. Sterilization was 'necessary' in this case because, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, "three generations of imbeciles was enough."¹² Mark Largent (2008), Phillip Reilly (1991) and Stephen Murphy (2011) also centered their scholarship within the framework of feeble-mindedness and sterilization. A handful of scholars chose to focus their attentions on the Jim Crow south in order to better explain how eugenics became the 'science of segregation' (Dorr, 2008; Larson, 1995). While these works are foundational to understanding the eugenics movement generally, many of the histories that challenge the prevailing understanding of eugenics and lay bare lapses in the historiography center on a close examination of gender and sexuality within America at the time of the movement.

This more recent scholarship has contributed greatly to the substantial revisions within the standing body of eugenic scholarship. While some scholars have looked closely at how sexuality in particular was legislated in the early twentieth century others have examined the social histories of gender and sexuality in relation with the eugenics movement (Holloway, 2006; Kline, 2001). Still more scholars within the realm of gender and cultural studies have focused on the eugenic influence within the social movements for pronatalism, reform efforts for children's welfare and the campaign to increase the availability and legalization of birth control contraceptives specifically (Lovett, 2007;

¹² Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 28.

Ladd-Taylor, 1994; Schoen, 2005). Although not exclusively, the primary focus within these histories remains on the important female leaders—those who became famous as doctors, educators, and political or social activists within the movement—the individuals sometimes labeled in the literature as “eugenic feminists.” What role average white middle-class women played within the eugenics movement remains largely undiscussed.

This thesis will add a uniquely focused examination of how white middle-class women’s engagement and navigation of eugenic discourses in their daily lives helps us to understand this group of women’s influential role in the movement as they gained power as citizens by acting ‘morally’ and reproducing ‘intelligently’ according to eugenic standards of race betterment. The three different forums where white middle-class women were exposed to the biopower of eugenic discourses examined in this work are five popular women’s journals, two influential American newspapers, and at eugenic exhibitions held at state fairs across the nation. Chapter 1 will begin with a brief history of eugenics within the American historical context. This section will begin by fleshing out the most important concerns for the white middle-class about the changing roles of women and shifting racial demographics within America. Analysis of the key social concerns about race, gender, and middle-class supremacy that emerged between 1900 and 1930 will help to situate where white women in the middle class fit in this history of American eugenics.

Chapter 2 begins the analysis of white middle-class women’s consumption, negotiation and engagement with eugenics by examining five prominent and sought-after women’s journals. These popular journals became a prime medium through which eugenic biopolitics was learned, performed and shared among women. Resulting from the

dialogic nature of print media, these journals can be understood as a forum where white middle-class women's voices were both shared and heard. Due to this relationship between writers and readers, journals became important indicators of how white middle-class women navigated the biopolitical eugenic discourses on the topics of marriage, scientific motherhood, concerns of race suicide and calls for race betterment. Examining each journal article that speaks to these topics yields greater understanding of the role middle-class white women played in establishing a national engagement with the ideas and conversations of eugenics in America.

Chapter 3 continues the analysis of white women's relationship with print media but shifts the focus to two popular newspapers, *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. A close reading of the biopolitical eugenic discourses presented therein reveals that newspapers acted as a forum through which national ideas about race, gender and women's roles as mothers and wives were disseminated throughout America.

Newspapers also functioned as a public space where the micro-work of women who ascribed to gender roles constructed by eugenic biopower were celebrated. This process of selective recognition reinforced that the female's worth as a citizen in the United States was predicated upon her performance as a eugenic producer and a guardian to America's future generations.

Chapter 4 attends to a popular social event made mention of in both the women's journals and the newspapers. Better Babies and Fitter Families contests evaluated individuals' eugenic qualities at state fairs across the nation. These competitions were a racially homogenous, gendered space. Female reformers established the first Better Babies contest and female doctors and social reformers turned the baby competitions into

full-fledged evaluations of the eugenic fitness of entire families. Women from the Federal Children's Health Bureau and women from the American Eugenics Society were intricately involved in the funding and organization of these events. Utilizing intimacy as a lens of analysis reveals that these contests broadened the eugenic circuits of knowledge among white middle-class women and also further obscure the perceived division between what was public and what was private in American society. The many different types of middle-class white women from different parts of the eugenics movement made connections with each other to expand the circuits of knowledge through which the biopolitics of eugenics became both normalized and popularized throughout the nation. As the primary actors within the Fitter Families contests, women exhibited their families and themselves to the world in order to establish their important, intimate value to the state as moral, fit and reproducing fertile bodies.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Context: Gender, Race, and Fear

This chapter will begin to answer the “simple” questions, what is eugenics? Where did it come from? Whose idea was it, and why did Americans, white middle-class Americans especially, believe its work to be so important, *imperative* in fact, for the future of the nation? The thoughts, choices, and actions as they relate to the eugenics movement in America of white middle-class women are the focal point of this thesis. In an attempt to frame the world that surrounded these women, it will be important to identify the primary fears of white middle-class America in the early twentieth century, which can be boiled down to issues of race and gender. As both working- and middle-class women were seeking to redefine what it actually meant to be ‘a woman’ in America, Ellis Island was inundated with a record number of immigrants seeking to live out the ‘American dream.’ Cities’ populations grew exponentially due to immigration, rapid urbanization and the migration of African Americans from southern farms to northern cities. Violent “race wars” tore apart northern cities as angry groups of whites and blacks wandered the streets armed and ready for battle. Meanwhile, public lynching and mob violence targeting African Americans haunted the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow south.¹³ Within this rapidly changeling environment of political discord and social unrest Americans of all kinds were searching to find their place within society. An understanding of the historical context in which white middle-class women consumed, negotiated and engaged with eugenics practices and ideas illuminates the power of their involvement. With such knowledge, the importance of these women’s decisions to act as

¹³ Walter Lafeber, Richard Polenberg and Nancy Woloch. *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s* 6th ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 129.

the progenitors and caretakers of the American Race can be identified. White middle-class women are a forgotten link in understanding the popularization and endurance of the eugenics movement; to understand this link, we must begin with the history.

What is Eugenics?

With roots in the nineteenth century, the eugenics movement emerged as a major social force in the United States in the early twentieth century. British statistician and cousin to Charles Darwin, Sir Frances Galton coined the term ‘eugenics’ in 1883 by combining the Greek *eu* (good or well) with the root of *genesis* (to come into being, be born) and added the modifying suffix *ics*.¹⁴ In 1909 Galton published *Essays in Eugenics* in which he defined the term as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.”¹⁵ Galton thought of eugenics as a “virile creed full of hopefulness” that should appeal to our “noblest feelings.”¹⁶ Effectively, he suggested that the biopower of the state might, and in fact perhaps *should*, play a role in setting limits on those unfit for society or biologically harmful to the race.

Generally, the eugenics movement in America held that by rationalizing reproduction, the human species could be improved. Through the systematic control of breeding practices, promoting those that would increase the population of the “fit” and limiting the reproductive capabilities of the “unfit,” the best of American society could be

¹⁴ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

saved. A rediscovery of Gregory Mendel's laws of inheritance helped to foster and guide eugenics scientifically. At the end of the nineteenth century great progress had been made in agriculture as a result of planned breeding of plants and animals. Building from that agrarian science, early supporters of eugenics sought to make the same gains in hereditary perfection in the "human stock" thereby controlling their own evolution. If American society could find a way to make certain that those individuals with desirable characteristics would breed with one another in greater numbers (what would come to be called 'positive eugenics') while at the same time society could restrict the reproduction of those members with undesirable traits (termed 'negative eugenics,') the species would undoubtedly improve.¹⁷ The white middle-class became infatuated with the eugenic call for racial improvement in the early part of the twentieth century because they felt that their class power and dominance in society was slipping from their grasp. Grappling with rapid urbanization and industrialization, a rise in immigration and changing demographics in terms of birth and death rates, the American middle-class felt their position in society becoming unstable.

Creating the 'Other': White Middle-Class Fears

Eugenic ideology relied on a constructed and rationalized fear of the 'other.' The eugenic dichotomies of desirable versus undesirable, the ability of the fit compared to the unfit, and the "native stock" separate from and better than other 'bloodlines' of inheritance, infiltrated American language and society as scientific and objective. Not surprisingly, in the United States at the turn of the century, there were many groups of

¹⁷ Gerald O'Brien, *Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-mindedness in the American Eugenics Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 7.

potentially formidable ‘others,’ which caused the white middle-class majority to feel as though their supreme dominance had to be safeguarded, or it would be lost. By the 1900s, white middle-class American society began to locate the causes of social problems in the bodies of “lower” and “darker” people.¹⁸ Informed by racial, gendered, and class-based biases, Americans had to confront the “menaces” of the so-called “Negro problem” and “girl problem” as well as immigration and the newly defined condition of ‘feeble-mindedness.’ Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos and other non-whites, recent immigrants, the poor (women especially,) the “feeble-minded,” and even the middle-class “new woman” were all at times considered separate from and dangerous to the American race that needed protecting.

The term “American race” according to eugenicists, meant those people who were decedents of the intrepid pioneers who established the first colonies at Jamestown and Plymouth—the original, (supposedly) biologically superior and unblemished “old stock.”¹⁹ Eugenic breeding from the descendents and members of this national race would increase all those traits that made individuals more moral, better citizens. Those people who claimed to be of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic blood were deemed the most eugenic wellborn and well-bred members of society. A democracy’s reliance on the integrity of its citizenry ensured that eugenic breeding between the “best” people with a clear aim towards “race betterment” became an issue of national importance.

By claiming allegiance to the American race, the “best” citizens felt a sense of elevated superiority over all other Americans. This difference rendered the danger of

¹⁸ Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

racial and ethnic intermixing acutely harmful, a disease to the ‘body politic’ that had to be avoided. Eugenicists re-characterized the established understanding of the “melting pot” as “race suicide.” For eugenicists, the metaphor was undeniably a fallacy because, as they were among the fittest breed of humans, mixing with bad blood could only disadvantage their lives and the integrity and strength of the nation. Miscegenation, the ‘careless’ breeding across racial lines, led to a “weak amalgamation” not a “strong racial alloy.”²⁰ Biologists and anthropologists became interested in hereditary difference at the same time as white America became concerned with racial difference. The interbreeding or mixing of blood between two races was highly feared. The African American man was socially perceived by the white community as the most dangerous actor to the prospect of miscegenation. In the eyes of the white middle-class, African-American men appeared to be both strong and threatening. What was understood among the white middle-class to be the seemingly uncontrollable power of the African-American man’s virility and the destruction it could bring upon the purity of white womanhood was often cited as the “legitimate” reason behind the widespread practice of lynching the “negro rapists.”²¹ Middle-class America’s constructed fear of other races was not limited to African Americans but expanded to include a myriad of peoples and ethnicities that came to the United States throughout the early twentieth century in great numbers.

²⁰ Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 13.

²¹ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 9. For more information on the antilynching crusade: Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

At the turn of the century, America experienced an enormous influx of immigrants, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe. Common perception held that these people were very different from their Northern European predecessors. Eugenacists believed that the estimated two million immigrants who entered the country between 1906 and 1910 were “wholly without Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency, and government.”²² The presence of these immigrants, it was feared, would weaken America’s “national stock” in terms of intelligence, strength and ability through miscegenation and lecherous breeding by inferior peoples.²³ Eugenic ideology that identified immigrants as “less than” and harmful ‘others’ helped to inform national immigration restrictions that sought to regulate, in the most eugenic fashion, the racial make up of the nation’s population. Immigrants were thought to be an impetus to the thirty-seven thousand strikes in two decades that marked the economic depression and labor unrest—and contributed to the increased anxieties among concerned white middle-class citizens who feared they were losing social authority and control of their society.²⁴

In an attempt to regain that control in other realms of society, American eugenacists targeted yet another unfit population for eugenic reform in the early twentieth century which they categorized as the ‘feebleminded.’ In the United States, early eugenic ideology was inextricably intertwined with the care and treatment of people who were diagnosed to be mentally unfit to function properly according to the moral standards of society. Arthur Estabrook, a well-known eugenicist, defined the term “feebleminded” to

²² Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 486.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 4.

included anyone “who is so weak mentally, that he or she is unable to maintain him or herself in the ordinary community at large.”²⁵ Those who were “consumptives, epileptics, incurable inebriates, and criminals” were often considered to be afflicted with a feeble mind. Feeble-mindedness was credited with causing “defectiveness, dependency and deviance” within society and was transmitted from parent to child through what was originally thought to be some combination of biological and environmental factors.²⁶ This conversation over assigning importance to any environmental factors in the process of heredity was a debate eugenicists engaged in from the beginning and remained a contested space throughout the movement. The feeble-minded “socially inadequate” group that included anyone “who by reason of any sort of defect or condition is unable to maintain themselves according to the accepted rules of society” were targeted due to what was understood to be a hereditary affliction by eugenicists as a group whose reproductive capabilities had to be limited.²⁷ Limiting reproduction was the realm of the negative eugenic practices, and happened in different ways. Restrictive marriage laws were one of the early solutions soon followed by the practice of segregating the feeble-minded in institutions away from the rest of society. Within those institutions, the feeble-minded were separated again by sex so they could not reproduce with one another, or in some cases sterilized with or without their legal consent.²⁸ It was believed that a perceived expanding population of feeble-minded paupers, drunkards, criminals, and whores in the early twentieth century threatened the sanctity and purity of the white

²⁵ Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*, 5.

²⁶ Stephen Murphy, *Voices of Pineland: Eugenics, Social Reform and the Legacy of “Feeble-mindedness” in Maine* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub, 2011), 10.

²⁷ Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*, 5.

²⁸ Murphy, *Voices of Pineland*, 3.

Christian race. Eugenic research supposedly revealed the “hyper fecundity” and sexual aggressiveness of feeble-minded women, which prompted many eugenic policies to directly target both the white and non-white working-class, socially ‘dangerous’ women.

There was a correlation at this time between being a poor woman and being classified by American society as feeble-minded. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, one of the most pertinent social problems America grappled with, and eugenicists wished to address head on, was the “woman question.”²⁹ New economic opportunities in cities drew adolescent young women away from their families and into urban areas where they could work in retail and industry. These working-class women functioned in society beyond the confines of the domestic sphere defined by middle-class social standards. The presence of single women in cities engendered a great deal of anxiety among the middle-class, particularly in regards to the sexuality of the working class women.³⁰ These “women adrift” who may have regularly attended dance halls and other new venues for social interaction were sometimes also labeled “charity girls” for exhibiting sexual behavior that was more relaxed than women’s practices in the past and current middle-class standards. Traditional assumptions that female sexuality was passive and demure was inverted through eugenic reasoning as many poor, feeble-minded women were considered promiscuous and aggressive. The Purity Crusade reform movement of the late nineteenth century promoted chastity among both men and women and sought to address these fears of declining sexual mores. The Purity Crusade’s anti-prostitution movement coincided directly with the increasing eugenic fixation on the menace of the

²⁹ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 10.

³⁰ Ibid.

feeble-minded female; the statement was generally assumed that most prostitutes were in fact, mentally defective.³¹ The “girl problem” presented by working-class women was just one of the threats females in early twentieth century posed to a eugenic American society.

Not only were working-class women redefining “womanhood,” America in the early twentieth century saw a dramatic shift in white middle-class women’s roles and engagement within society in the public sphere. The rapidly urbanized and industrialized economy provided most white middle-class women with new opportunities for increased individualism. Although still excluded from formal civic engagement, the common perception of the time that women were morally superior to men, gave white upper- and middle-class women the authority to be leaders in reform movements that would lay the groundwork for the emerging welfare state. Through the expansion of women’s “natural” ability to care for others beyond the home to the nation, white middle-class women sought to create a maternal commonwealth. Women played important roles in urban society working in settlement houses to assist the working-class poor with issues of public health and child care, as well as public sanitation, labor and education reform. The post-war era saw the passing of the nineteenth amendment and a rise in educational and professional opportunities for women. The white middle-class women who went to college and got jobs and gained more independence came to be called the “New Woman.”³²

³¹ Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*, 16.

³² LaFeber, Polenberg and Woloch. *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s* 6th ed., 142.

The “New Woman” chose college and careers over marriage and motherhood stepping beyond the nineteenth century “cult of true womanhood” which confined middle-class women within the home as nurturing mothers and demanding “rights and privileges customarily accorded only to white middle-class men.”³³ The “New Woman” was not as interested in producing children as she was in getting an education and having a voice in the public sphere. Within the context of eugenic biopolitics, women realized their citizenship through bringing well-bred offspring into the world. At the turn of the century, this was happening less and less among ‘eugenic,’ fit women. The changing demographics that resulted from the New Woman’s attitude about family and children was of utmost concern to eugenicists who sought to see the “best” of society reproduce on a massive scale.

Due in part to the white women of the middle-class embracing New Woman ideology, the birth rate among the white middle-class was in rapid decline. In 1840, the average middle-class American family had six children, but by 1900 the average dropped to three. President Theodore Roosevelt explicitly gendered this reality when he responded to this drop in birthrate with this statement, “white middle-class womanhood has willfully abandoned its fertility.”³⁴ The President’s concern over the shrinking population of white middle-class families paled in comparison with the devastating future that eugenicists saw if the trend should continue. Positive eugenics, the work of encouraging the best to marry the best, and for that super couple to have an abundance of “better babies,” depended upon white middle-class women’s choices in their personal lives. The biopower

³³ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

women had over their sexuality, whether they reproduced too much or not enough, emphasizes the importance of eugenic expectations for gender performance.

Within the biopolitics of American society, women's sexuality and reproductive capabilities were paramount to the 'health' of the race. The future of white middle-class America resided within the reproductive power of middle-class white women. Such women were responsible for marrying a well-bred man, having many children, and raising them in accordance with the scientific practices of motherhood. If she failed to do so, according to eugenic ideology, she forfeited her rights of citizenship and aided in the demise of white America. For eugenicists the degeneration of the race—and therefore American society—was in the hands of 'moronic,' hypersexual, feeble-minded and non-white women. Their culpability in the nation's potential demise meant that regulating their relationships, their place within society, and their ability to reproduce was imperative. The strong belief in the power of heredity drove the eugenicists' preoccupation and constant worry over women's reproductive choices and capabilities. When trying to calculate how eugenics took hold so strongly in early twentieth-century America, newly found reverence for the authority of science among American citizens became an important part of the equation. With all of the formidable 'others' that threatened the power of the white middle-class, it can be understood how eugenics seemed to be armed with all the right weapons to combat the degeneration of American society. However, it would be unwise to assume that fear was the only impetus for eugenics taking hold so quickly and with such force in the United States. The second crucial part of the equation was the general acceptance, if not veneration for scientific knowledge.

Rationalizing Scientific Authority

Therefore when discussing the success of the eugenics movement, credit must be partially awarded to the general trend towards accepting scientific thinking as objective, rational, authoritative, and therefore unquestionably powerful within American society. Scientific answers to social problems were in vogue in the early twentieth century. Biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and eugenicists all sought to respond to the challenges present in America's changing population with the rational methodology of scientific reasoning. One of the foundational scientific frameworks that eugenicists throughout the early twentieth century called upon was a pedigree study performed by Richard Dugdale mapping out six generations of the supposedly "degenerate" family he named "the Jukes."³⁵

In 1885, Dugdale published *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*.³⁶ Dugdale was a very active member of the New York intellectual culture and took on many leadership roles. He assumed the position that sparked his study 1868 when he was asked to be a member of the Executive Committee on the New York Prison Association. Dugdale was asked to assist Dr. Elisha Harris, the secretary for the committee, in a study of criminal heredity by performing a state-wide inspection of county jails. Dr. Harris thought that he had stumbled on a "criminally prone familial line" that he traced back to a woman infamously dubbed thereafter "Margaret, mother of

³⁵ Philip Reilly, *The Surgical Solution: A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 9.

³⁶ Ibid.

criminals.”³⁷ In his study, Dugdale completed a detailed account of each prisoner’s heredity, family history, education, medical history, and “moral and intellectual capacity.”³⁸ Dugdale had no university training in medicine, psychology or any science beyond courses he had taken at Cooper Union in business and sociology, yet the authority of his scientific study spoke for itself. He relentlessly chased after clues to how this family had interacted with the state’s criminal justice system and rudimentary social welfare system. Ultimately he found a stunning 709 related persons, 540 of which were by blood, and 169 by marriage or cohabitation, who could now be related back to a poor Dutch farmer named Max.³⁹ Dugdale claimed that the Jukes had an “uncanny propensity” to be at attendance in almshouses, brothels and prisons throughout the state of New York.⁴⁰ Seemingly proving a link between degeneracy and heredity, this study came to inspire many more eugenic pedigree studies that sculpted popular understanding of eugenics and inheritance.

In his report, Dugdale did not include references to Galton and would not consider himself a eugenicist. In presenting his findings, the budding sociologist chose to create a ledger listing the monetary costs and thus the financial burden the Jukes posed upon the communities where they lived. Expenses that came from bills for jails, almshouses, all the stolen or destroyed property, and medical or legal costs paid by the state were added up and totaled more than 1.3 million over seven years “without reckoning the cash paid

³⁷ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* 1st ed. (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006), 145.

³⁸ Reilly, *The Surgical Solution*, 9.

³⁹ Bruinius, *Better for All the World*, 145.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

for ‘whisky’ or other hidden expenses.”⁴¹ This finding inspired an economically driven argument for eugenic reform that was used in future eugenic propaganda and educational exhibits. A close analysis of Dugdale’s theory on heredity reveals that he embraced the idea of “soft” hereditarianism, meaning he attributed the degeneracy of the Jukes family to the role of both heredity *and* the environment. In his work, Dugdale advocated for the importance of healthy living conditions and opportunities as a means to improve human development. By the 1900s, Dugdale’s environmentalist message had been forgotten or ignored and his study was twisted into the prototype of a rigid hereditary view from which countless social studies would draw evidence in the future.

For eugenicists who believed that abnormal or deviant behavior (crime, alcoholism, prostitution) was biologically determined, *The Jukes* provided a powerful piece of evidence. Many a study was conducted in the decades to follow, carried out by some of the most important leaders in the American eugenics movement. Charles Davenport was the director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory which was the base for the Eugenics Record Office (1910-1940) and served as a repository for family pedigree studies conducted nationwide. Henry Goddard and Davenport along with his colleagues at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory led the way in this crusade to gather eugenic family data.

Goddard, Davenport, and the other scientists and statisticians who carried out pedigree studies systematically ignored the environmental argument that Dugdale had provided. Whereas Dugdale was not a professed eugenicist, Goddard and his colleagues

⁴¹ Bruinius, *Better for All the World*, 145.

at the Cold Spring Harbor Lab used these heredity studies as proof of the dire necessity to segregate, institutionalize, and in some cases sterilize the feeble-minded degenerates of society. From Indiana, *The Tribe of Ishmael* (1888) were deemed “Indian gypsies” plagued with five generations of illegitimacy, and *The Hill Folk* (1912) of Massachusetts were considered a clan descended from a “shiftless” father riddled with alcoholism and doomed to produce only “the grossly defective” offspring. In the same year Goddard, the staunch eugenicist that he was, published his own study *The Kallikaks: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, which clearly, forcefully, and exclusively emphasized the power of inheritance and the irrelevance of the environment upon heredity. According to his study, nothing in the environment—no amount of education, training, or nurturing—could alter the “destructive potential stored within a feeble mind.”⁴² His study focused on an “upstanding gentleman” who had children with both a “feeble-minded tavern girl” and a “prominent Quaker woman.” From the barmaid, Goddard determined, came generations of feeble-minded degenerates while the second union proceeded to yield “hundreds of upstanding citizens.”⁴³ Goddard felt that his study conveyed well the power of heredity. His evidence now proved that “fit” bloodlines were maintained through good breeding practices and destroyed by dysgenic breeding. The name Goddard dubbed the clan he observed came from a combination of the two Greek words for good and bad, signifying and emphasizing the inevitable destruction of a worthy blood line from one sexual transgression.⁴⁴

⁴² Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 25.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The hereditary focus of the propagation of degeneracy in American society and the potential for race suicide manifested in a series of efforts to make social and legal changes. By restricting the reproduction of certain classified ‘feeble-minded’ or otherwise unfit persons, while continuing to promote the procreation of the fit, race suicide could be avoided. However, while scientists like Galton and Davenport were in the lab or out in the field collecting statistical data supporting eugenic theories, it was the doctors who worked in institutions for charity or corrections that gave the impetus to move eugenic theory into practice. There were the social workers who worked with the ERO to collect eugenic data from families for statistical analysis. There were the educators in the schools of social work, of medicine, and of law who would be influential in the future legalization of compulsory sterilization of inmates at institutions for the feeble-minded. Many important players within American society were involved in the eugenic mitigation of the ‘other’ that threatened society.

The Movement in America

The Eugenics Record Office which was directed by Charles Davenport and his protégée Henry Laughlin have already been mentioned, but there were other important eugenic organizations in the early twentieth century that had significant roles in the popularizing and institutionalizing eugenic ideology. The “Eugenic Education Society” was founded in Britain in 1908 and sparked pockets of eugenic interest across Great Britain, Australia and the United States. In America, local eugenics groups, including the Galton Society, met regularly at the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, the Race Betterment Foundation, in Battle Creek Michigan, and eugenics education

societies in Chicago, St. Louis, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Utah, and California. Many of the promoters, including Davenport, Alexander Graham Bell, and agricultural scientist, Luther Burbank, wanted to see these local chapters become a unified movement organized at the national level which culminated in the formation of the American Eugenics Society (AES) in 1923. Rapidly after its founding, the AES spawned twenty-eight state committees and a Southern-California branch.⁴⁵ American eugenicists knew that before a eugenic revolution could occur, the public had to be taught how to live “eugenic-minded.”⁴⁶ The most active leader of the AES was a well known Yale economics and public health activist, Irving Fisher. For the AES to fund educational events and lectures, they needed considerable donations from the richest families of the time: John D. Rockefeller, George Eastman and Fisher himself contributed considerably.⁴⁷ Albert E. Wiggam, a journalist and lecturer, traveled the country giving talks promoting eugenic propaganda. He became famous for the way he “melded eugenic science with statesmanship, morality, and religion.”⁴⁸ Important urban socialites, such as Madison Grant, wrote books to help persuade the public where they shared their eugenic ideology. Grant’s *Passing of the Great Race* was first published in 1916 but enjoyed great success through the 1920s.⁴⁹

Eugenics also spread internationally. “Race hygiene,” a coded word for eugenics, was popular by the turn of the century in Sweden, Norway, Russia, Switzerland,

⁴⁵ David Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of human Heredity* (New York, NY:Alfred A Knoph, 1985), 59.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 75.

Germany, Poland, France, and Italy. By the 1920s, the movement spread further to Japan and Latin America. The first international Eugenics Congress was held in London in 1912. The second and third International Eugenics Congresses were both held in New York City at Henry Osborn's American Museum of Natural History in 1921 and 1932 respectively.⁵⁰ The larger organizations were led by prominent middle- and upper-class white male eugenicists who were seen as wielding great power within American society. Prominent eugenicists such as Davenport, Laughlin, Grant, Osborne, and Fisher, tend to dominate many studies of the movement's history in America.

Women were also a significant part of the eugenic movement, though often less recognized. What came to be known as eugenic feminism—the advancement of social policies aimed at improving the hereditary quality of the human race through empowering and emancipating women, developed its own realm of study. Three important eugenic feminists that are often cited are Victoria Woodhull, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Margaret Sanger.⁵¹ Victoria Woodhull, who may have been one of the most controversial feminists at the turn of the century, was best known for her unorthodox advocacy of “free love” which was an ideology that condemned traditional marriage and sought a more liberated sexual life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, well known today for her feminist fiction, blossomed in her eugenic thinking when she wrote for *The Forerunner* about the eugenic salvation that would come with broader access to birth control and

⁵⁰ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 76, 169.

⁵¹ Mary Ziegler, “Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, The Women's Movement, And the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900-1935,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 31 (2008): 212.

opportunities for women to have professional employment and higher education.⁵² Lastly, Margret Sanger, famous today as the leading birth control advocate, had an extensive involvement with the movement but she did not actively seek out alliances with leading eugenicists until she grew disillusioned with other socialist and feminist advocates.

Sanger believed the use of birth control to be both moral and eugenically beneficial:

All our problems are the result of overbreeding among the working class, and if morality is to mean anything to us, we must regard all changes which tend toward the uplift and survival of the human race as moral. Knowledge of birth control is essentially moral. Its general, though prudent, practice must lead to a higher individuality and ultimately to a cleaner race.⁵³

Birth control, she also thought, was a necessary measure to ensure women's independence and equality and thus had feminist advantages. These three women are often the only female leaders mentioned as playing a role in the eugenics movement. Whether they were directly promoting eugenic thought or subverting its ideologies to attain other feminist goals, because these three women engaged with the nationally recognized movement, they have secured a place for their names within the annals of American history. As I will argue in this thesis, many other unnamed white middle-class women had firm ideas about eugenics and were confronted by its discourses in multiple ways in their lives—but their voices and actions remain silent and hidden.

Like Daisy's interrupted thought at the dinner-party table, an understanding of white middle-class women's importance within the eugenics movement has been largely ignored. As members of the white middle-class, these women internalized the fear of immigration, and deeply felt that African Americans and other non-white or

⁵² Ziegler, "Eugenic Feminism," 226.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 229.

‘feeble-minded’ Americans could potentially “corrupt” the better bloodlines within America. These women lived in a society that was anxious about how it would function if white middle-class women no longer remained within the home. These issues of race and gender found a solution within the ideology of eugenics. Negative eugenics was capable of eliminating the un-American, the socially unfit, and the diseased while positive eugenics would insure the long-lived prosperity of the United States through the procreation of its best citizens. This second aspect of eugenics was dependent on white middle-class women’s involvement. A better understanding of how women negotiated and engaged with the biopower of eugenic ideas and practices is imperative because it speaks to how white middle-class women became intimately tied to matters of the state through their own personal employment of eugenic power.

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing the Eugenics Lifestyle

The production and popularity of women's journals expanded greatly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most popular journals and magazines targeted primarily a white middle-class female audience. While some of these publications grew out of the fashion industry and contained sewing patterns and advice on appearance and presentation accordingly, other important journals discussed the basic aspects of what was important for a girl or woman to know in order to best live a feminine lifestyle. This second type of women's journals often articulated the intricacies of homemaking, cooking, cleaning and child rearing.⁵⁴ When the eugenics movement and the ideas of improving the future of America through better breeding emerged in the United States, women's magazines became a prime medium through which eugenic biopolitics was learned, performed, and shared among white mothers, wives, and daughters. Women, as readers, consumers and producers of these journals, engaged in the discourses of eugenic womanhood both privately and within a larger community of readers.

Carolyn Kitch, a scholar who explores the ways history and memory manifest in American magazines, suggests that journalism is a form of both "cultural production" and "communal practice."⁵⁵ She offers that print media is a "ritual of communication" that strives to maintain society and the "creation, representation, and celebration of shared

⁵⁴ Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck ed. *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), xiii.

⁵⁵ Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: the Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 4.

even if illusionary beliefs.”⁵⁶ Within this framework for understanding print media, the lines are blurred between producers and receivers since “ritual is not something one is audience too, but something one is a participant in.”⁵⁷ This idea of journals as ritual is significant because it means the typical white middle-class woman in America was actively engaging with, not passively consuming eugenic ideas. Journals do not function as a one-dimensional power structure where producers control the minds and opinions of readers, rather, they are a dialogic form of media. In this way, the female reader was an active participant; molding and shaping the material presented to her in the journals by practicing her agency to self-regulate and manage those people often close to her (husband, children, friends) in accordance with eugenic ideology.

In this way, women’s journals took on both individual, private meaning and also shared communal value. Reading a women’s magazine was at times a personal experience, an interaction between the individual reader and the presented material held in her hands. This individual relationship formed between woman and page can then develop into something beyond the personal because of the opportunity the journal provides to take part in that which Kitch has named the cultural “ritual” of journalism. The choice to engage with the ideas and practices of eugenic womanhood that were idolized in the magazines becomes a public choice. Women reading these journals had to navigate the decision to modify themselves and regulate their actions in accordance with eugenic regulations on marriage, physical appearance, and personal roles as wives, mothers and daughters. These individual practices become community values and social norms. Knowledge of and exposure to eugenics and newly defined cultural expectations

⁵⁶ Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

of womanhood propagated and perpetuated each other like a racing spiral, powered by the eugenic biopolitics that were presented in women's journals and manifest in the thoughts and actions of the white, middle-class female readership.

This chapter will attend to the role of popular women's journals in early twentieth-century America as an invaluable cultural ritual where white middle-class female opinions were both shared and received within a community of female readership. These voices addressed a variety of discourses—some were concerned with fashion and consumer culture, marriage, and scientific motherhood, while others voiced national concerns of limiting immigration and the expansion of the maternal commonwealth. The presentation of self, especially for women, their fitness and their family, is embedded in the cultural history of eugenics. Fulfillment and happiness as a woman and as a citizen in America was often equated with eugenically endorsed marriages and well-bred children. An examination of popular women's journals is thus integral to understanding American national culture during the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century.

This chapter will begin with a brief history of women's journals as a social and cultural phenomenon in order to better locate their importance in the context of American popular culture. The following section will analyze the popular women's journals that gained critical acclaim from the turn of the century through the inter-war period. Articles chosen for discussion have clear eugenic themes and engage in the social conversations of eugenic biopolitics. Examining the articles and stories about eugenic ideas in these women's journals through the lens of female participation in the biopolitics of the eugenics movement yields greater understanding of the role these women played in establishing a national cultural engagement with discourses of eugenics in America.

A History of Women's Journals

Consumer women's magazines have reflected the developing roles, responsibilities, and interests of America's females ever since the early days of the republic. Antebellum journals that catered their content to the American woman differed from the publications that would follow in the post Civil War period. After the war, the prescribed audience of women's journals shifted, as did the funding, distribution methods and even the content. Still, these early publications provided an invaluable foundation for future journals by fostering women's reading habits and established a channel for female writers and editors to gain experience in the field of journalism.⁵⁸ During the Civil War, women's journals proved particularly influential to the wives, sisters and mothers who were left alone while their husbands, brothers and fathers were on the front lines. This community of women relied on women's journals to bare the burden of maintaining a strong morale, even during the longest, darkest winters of the war. This practice of keeping spirits high through stories in journals existed in both northern and southern publications, although it was often more challenging for the southern publishing houses where businesses were less established or financially secure. During this sectional conflict, both regions' publications proved to be the foundations of wartime literature.⁵⁹ After the Civil War a "new generation" of women's magazines was born, many of which lasted into the 1900s. It is this second brand of journals following the Civil War that will garner the attention of this thesis.

⁵⁸ Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), xii.

⁵⁹ Endres and Lueck ed, *Women's Periodicals in the United States*, xii.

After the war ended and as the nation regained economic, political and social stability, women's journals and their readership settled into a long and profitable future. During the period from 1865 to 1920 women's magazines were gradually increasing in size, improving their print quality and adding complexity and diversity to their content.⁶⁰ New technologies allowed for printing shops to utilize new mass-producing techniques such as conveyor systems, assembly lines, and timed production scheduling. The creation of the rotary press, a new printing method that increased the printing rate to ten times faster than the old system was also influential in the popularity and high circulation of journals.⁶¹ Each newly efficient technological development played a role in lowering the costs of publication and allowed for more copies of the journals to be printed in a shorter amount of time. By the turn of the century, women's journals had entered a growth period and stood at the forefront of the print media industry with new techniques of mass circulation.

These innovations could not have come at a more opportune time for publishing houses. Between 1890 and 1920, the total United States population jumped from almost sixty-three million to over one-hundred million. Perhaps due to gendered immigration patterns produced by World War I, within those same years the female population rose by about two thirds, growing from about thirty million to over fifty million citizens. This spike in the consumer pool was especially influential because the literacy rate in America rose with it, climbing to ninety-four percent of the total population in 1920.⁶² Women's journals, characterized by their low prices and high volume, soon reached hundreds of

⁶⁰ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 27.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 33.

thousands of female readers across the nation. This expanded readership is a very important factor when using these journals as a primary unit of analysis. Sociologist Marjorie Ferguson asserts that women's magazines are on par with other social institutions such as the church, the family and the school, in their contribution to the "wider cultural processes that define the positions of women in a given society at any given point in time."⁶³ This influence of women's journals is predicated on a broad readership, and in the early twentieth century nearly every middle-class white woman had in her home at least one issue of a "Big Six" journal.

Scholars of journalism and print media have categorized the "Big Six" as the handful of most influential and most widely circulated journals in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The "Big Six" is comprised of *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Women's Home Companion*, *Delineator*, *Pictorial Review*, *Good Housekeeping* and *McCall's*. These six publications came to define women's magazines, although many other magazines with less resources and a more narrow audience flourished on the periphery.⁶⁴ *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Woman's Home Companion*, and *Good Housekeeping* were the dominant lifestyle magazines, while *Delineator*, *Pictorial Review* and *McCall's* were founded in fashion. These journals were all written for and marketed towards a white middle-class female audience. The *Ladies' Home Journal* was known to use "boy sales," youthful agents used by editors who wanted to ensure that women were buying their product and thus ordered these young salesmen to approach women as they were shopping as well as

⁶³ Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1983), 1.

⁶⁴ Endres and Lueck ed, *Women's Periodicals in the United States*, xiii.

make door-to-door sales.⁶⁵ Similarly, *Woman's Home Companion* used what were called “pony boys” to expand their readers from urban to rural areas by hiring young boys to organize themselves into sales teams that would ride into rural areas to make sales. This driven and purposeful expansion from the city to the countryside was made possible by the success of the journals and their prestige among woman's circles.

During the early decades of the twentieth century white, middle-class women's roles and engagement in society shifted quite dramatically. At the turn of the century, America was experiencing rapid industrialization and urbanization. As more and more immigrants were arriving, cities and tenement houses became overcrowded and rates of disease and infant mortality rose accordingly. At the end of the nineteenth century middle-class white women were considered the “moral guardians” and protectors of the home. During the Progressive era of the early twentieth century, white women reformers used that logic and transferred it to apply to their ‘power to protect’ within the public sphere. Exercising their moral authority, women became leaders in the important social reforms to city sanitation, clean water, and the education system. Middle-class clubwomen and settlement workers organized together to address the issues that plagued their communities. The battles for women's suffrage were accompanied by the forces for moral uplift embodied by the movement for prohibition.⁶⁶

The decade after World War I was a decidedly a new era for women. Politically, women began these ten years with an exciting victory upon gaining the vote. Some New

⁶⁵ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 29.

⁶⁶ Walter LaFeber, Richard Polenberg and Nancy Woloch. *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s* 6th ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 142.

Women of the 1920s directed their attention towards jobs, careers and self-support. More and more women were going to college and getting married later, if at all. In popular culture, the New Woman of the early twentieth century sought personal independence, often through their sexuality. The much-celebrated “new morality,” a label used by its defenders, was part of a long-term revolution or even evolution of moral values and sexual behavior. According to social scientist, middle-class morals were in transition. Traditionalist feared social disintegration and suspected that the new morality was without any morals at all. The New Woman also garnered fear amongst eugenicists. A rise in women’s education only benefited the eugenics movement if girls were being educated to become mothers. The rise in sexual liberty among both men and women of the twenties was a cautionary flag for eugenicists. Women’s journals thus become a useful tool to gauge female ideas and perceptions of womanhood and femininity when social norms were in a turbulent transition.

Although data on audience members is hard to collect from the early periods, some inferences can be made. The dominant majority of those who read women’s magazines were white, middle-class (though also including upper- and lower-class) women.⁶⁷ Most African Americans and immigrants frequently could not afford these magazines, though this was of no concern for the editors who were not targeting these demographics regardless. Editors catered their stories and articles to the white middle-class women they expected to buy their product. The women’s journal remained for and of this exclusive group of women because the editors were responding to their readers’ thoughts expressed through letters to the editor. Whether letters were asking for more of

⁶⁷ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women’s Magazines*, 34.

one type of article, or disagreeing or rebutting another, letters from the readership informed what editors published. In this way, women's journals as a media source are truly a dialogue between the editors and readers: although the stories are produced by writers, the story types at least partly come from and return to the readers.⁶⁸ This type of involvement and engagement that women had in what they were reading, which was often permeated by the eugenic ideology of scientific motherhood, eugenic marriages, concerns for race suicide and calls for race betterment becomes pertinent when seeking to understand how and where women began to regulate themselves and their bodies in how they acted, what they thought and who they associated with in accordance to eugenic ideologies.

As women's journals are both a "cultural production" and a "communal practice," they both describe and proscribe cultural meaning in what is published.⁶⁹ An analysis of how and where women's journals addressed eugenics can offer insight into how the mostly white, middle-class female readers interacted and negotiated these discourses. Ferguson, a sociologist and scholar of women's magazines and their cultural and social role, describes that these types of publications "help to shape both a woman's view of herself and her society's view of her."⁷⁰ More often than not, these periodicals such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Home Companion* were about more than women, and women's concerns and practices, but also about concepts of "femininity" itself "as a state, a condition, a craft, and an art from which compromised a

⁶⁸ Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*, 1.

set of practices and beliefs.”⁷¹ This dynamic is the very key that makes an analysis of women’s journals both as a study of the individual woman and the cultural community she inhabits so important. Examining the articles and stories about eugenic ideas in these women’s journals through the lens of female participation in the biopolitics of the eugenics movement yields greater understanding of the role these women played in establishing a popular, national, cultural engagement with discourses of eugenics in America.

Eugenics in Women’s Journals and Magazines

At the heart of this history, it is important to remember that women’s journals were the popular, influential cultural products they were because of the information, messages, and images presented on the pages of the magazines. This section will explore where and in what light eugenics is discussed in journals that are geared towards a white middle-class female readership. In this analysis, each article will be put into the historical context of its publication, and where possible authors will be identified. More often than not, however, the authors were left anonymous. The purpose of this section is to use the journal articles to give texture to how the white middle class housewife, who was the primary consumer of this genre of publication, engaged with the principles of eugenics as they prescribed certain actions and practices to be upheld in society for the saving, or at least betterment, of the American race. In this context, as elsewhere in this thesis, when the term “American race” is referenced, it is important to remember the racially and politically charged history of this culturally and socially constructed phrase. By elevating

⁷¹ Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*, 1.

the white Anglo-Saxon “native stock” of the United States above all other races of American citizens, eugenicists were able to separate a part of society that was deemed “fit” and deserving of protection from the rest of “unfit” America whose existence and had to be limited, if not eliminated.

The women’s journals examined in this study address the concepts and ideas related to eugenics in varied ways and with emphasis on different aspects of the discourse. A call for more eugenic influence on the institution of marriage is a reoccurring event in many of the journals, while eugenic education as well as eugenic motherhood is also widely discussed and reiterated. Within these magazines, larger, national issues of immigration and child health reform are addressed within a eugenic context, as well as more individual private choices such as personal appearance and women’s engagement in consumer culture. An analysis of *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman’s Home Companion* and their discussion of eugenics in publications will be followed by the examination of eugenic discourse in two important though less widely circulated journals, *Vogue* and *Young Woman’s Journal*.

Ladies’ Home Journal, categorized as one of the “Big Six” in the ranking of women’s journals, interestingly enough largely avoids the topic of eugenics. However, there are two issues of the *Journal*, the first in 1912 and the second in 1918, that both address eugenics openly in a supportive and convincing light. The 1912 article largely discusses the newly dawning concept of heredity. The article begins by addressing the often debated comparison between better human reproduction and the breeding of farm animals. As a “higher order species” some Americans in the early 1900s were frustrated and appalled by such juxtapositions. In an attempt to alleviate these concerns, the author

returns to the sacred institution of marriage, and calls on the importance of understanding how to make the correct eugenic choice in spouse to ensure the best quality of life for your offspring and your country.

This article comes from a repeating segment entitled “His Letters To His Mother.”⁷² The fictional mother’s question for this month is, “What is meant by Eugenics?” In response, the son’s opening line begins forcefully and to the point: “A learned man has defined eugenics as ‘the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding.’”⁷³ The son then explains to his ‘mother,’ effectively the journal’s readership, that it would be foolish for society to view the human race differently from any other living or growing thing that has benefited from the involvement of man’s calculated thought put into the decisions of which pairings will yield the optimal offspring. Knowing that the idea of relating humans to other animals would chafe readers’ notions of human superiority, the author qualifies this remark by stating, “Oh yes there are a lot of sentimental people who object to the treating of the human race as if it were governed by any of the same natural laws that govern the lower animals.”⁷⁴ In response, he addresses those who consider scientific breeding in humans “indelicate or even irreligious” by citing what a great fortune it was that humans had been given by God life here on earth, and that we should “not let it run to waste” but to seek to “improve.”⁷⁵ With the knowledge of eugenics the author sees no other way to best improve the human stock than to educate Americans to ensure the proper selection of a companion in marriage.

⁷² “His Letter to His Mother” *Ladies Home Journal*, vol 29 1912, 14.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

A eugenic marriage, the son proposed, was the best and brightest solution for the improvement of the 'race.' The topic of marriage begged the question of heredity and what was or could be inherited. The writer provides two different examples that deal with the question of inheritability, "bodily defects" and morality. The first example addressed the inborn defects such as deaf-mute syndrome. The author poses the important questions that American reformers were grappling with at the time: Should society segregate these "defected" individuals in an institution? Or, would such a situation create the opportunity for two deaf-mutes to fall in love and marry, and bring more deaf-mute humans into the world? In that case, would it be better to keep such individuals in mainstream society, in hopes of the defective person marrying a "normal" spouse and thus "increasing the likelihood of having normal children... the normal blood carrying away the taint."⁷⁶ This idea of a watering down of "unfit" bloodlines will come up again and again as eugenics worked to establish its stance on heredity and its scientific legitimacy.

The second example of ill-fated unions expressed in the article dabbles in the question of the inheritability of morality. If one parent has become "poisoned" by alcohol or any other narcotic from which the "effect on the next generation may be terrible" what can be done?⁷⁷ The overarching eugenic lesson conveyed in this example is the reminder that "not all transmitted defects are physical or mental. There are moral and temperamental peculiarities which can be traced with equal certainty to the shortcomings of parents or other ancestors."⁷⁸ Eugenics does not suggest that if one parent is a thief, then the child will be biologically controlled to live out the same fate in adulthood, but

⁷⁶ "His Letter to His Mother," 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

rather will inherit the same “tendencies” of his parent, and might “dabble in forgery, embezzlement or counterfeit.”⁷⁹ Drinking alcohol, or “consumption,” as the habit was called by the reformers of the early twentieth century, was also known to be a red flag in spousal selection and something to take note of, the author cautioned. As to leave readers with a positive conclusion, the author finishes with examples of well bread individuals, whose parents came from long lines of distinguished, healthy men and women such as “the Darwin’s of England” inspiring involvement by celebrating the good fortune that can come from solid, eugenic marriages.⁸⁰ This article is framed as a son explaining to the journal’s resident ‘mother’ the importance of spousal selection and hereditary knowledge. With such strong opinions expressed and directed so clearly to the female audience, it is surprising that the topic of eugenics does not arise again until six years later in 1918.

On the second occasion that the *Ladies’ Home Journal* addresses the emerging science of eugenics, it is in the same affirming light as the previous article. This time, the focus is placed on the importance of education and scientific reasoning for the success of eugenics. Entitled “What Eugenics is Revealing” the author quickly establishes his unwavering faith in the pseudoscience of eugenics in the first declamatory sentence: “eugenics is the science of improving the human race by producing better children” and further, “a race can be permanently advanced only by securing the best blood.”⁸¹ By securing the “best blood” the unspecified author meant that society must “induce young persons to make a better selection of marriage mates.”⁸² Although some opponents to this sentiment were still loud in the late 1910s, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* forcefully proposed

⁷⁹ “His Letter to His Mother,” 14.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “What Eugenics is Revealing,” *Ladies Home Journal*, Oct 1918, 94.

⁸² Ibid.

“marriage is really nothing but an experiment in the reproduction of mankind, while the breeding of many animals and plants has been reduced to an exact science.” Not only is the *Journal* making a claim that a modern marriage ought to be grounded in a scientific justification, the author feels that there is a need to educate the readership, fully aware that the audience was comprised of predominately women, that mother’s must teach their children how to avoid making poor choices in picking a life partner. The greatest fear for eugenicists, next to “indifference” was ignorance, the article declared. The *Journal* suggests that “great progress cannot be expected until purity of spirit can be imparted early,” from mother to child.⁸³

The *Journal* in this article is also engaging in the emerging discussion of the maternal commonwealth, the idea that it was important now for women to transition the values of the last century’s “cult of domesticity” beyond the home. Many more women were becoming college educated, and longed to put their skills and knowledge to work. Addressed here, and in many other women’s journals, was the very critical and popular reality of the high infant mortality rate in the United States during the early 1900s. This author argues that too many adults are becoming parents who are either not fit for parenthood as an individual, or not with the right person. The children who are dying “have been produced by blind, helpless instinct, and have been allowed to die by hundreds of thousands,” and the author states that “this is the condition that eugenics seeks to remedy.”⁸⁴ It was argued that, eugenics, potentially, if executed with purpose and under the guidance of educated physicians and judges, could lower the rate at which infants died in America by ensuring scientifically grounded marriages. This is the

⁸³ “What Eugenics is Revealing,” 94.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

message that the *Ladies' Home Journal* offered up for its female readers, most of whom were likely mothers already, to negotiate.

With only two articles that explicitly address eugenic discourses, *Ladies' Home Journal* was not by any means the loudest voice of the eugenics movement. However, the two articles that were published reflected an unwavering sentiment that eugenics was an important, new science that ought to be incorporated into a woman's life as both a wife and a mother. *Good Housekeeping*, another women's journal that claims membership in the "Big Six," similarly addressed the issues of eugenics and women through the lens of children and marriage.

The earliest article that breaches the topic of eugenics using the word itself in *Good Housekeeping* appears in February of 1912, just after the New Year in January. This is of some relevance because *Good Housekeeping* chose to kick off the New Year by holding a contest to applaud the best infant in America.⁸⁵ The article in question is entitled "100 Super Fine Babies: What the Science of Eugenics Found in the Babies of our Contest".⁸⁶ The opening line, that catches the eye of readers, after the large, almost half page size pictures of plump white babies clothed in white cotton jumpers, states, "Eugenics is sometimes defined as 'the science of being well born.'"⁸⁷ After a brief introduction to Francis Galton and his "conclusively proved" findings about human heredity, the author George Dawson, Ph.D., states that *Good Housekeeping* deserves notice because of its popular contribution to the eugenics movement in the form of a

⁸⁵ George Dawson, "The Prize Winners in The Good Housekeeping Babies," *Good Housekeeping*, Feb 1912, 236.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

“Baby Contest.”⁸⁸ The contest was framed to be an educational event, aimed at making parents aware and “conscious of the conditions that factor into normal growth or the opposite of their children.”⁸⁹ Since this idea of race betterment was one of the eugenics movement’s goals in the grand scheme of saving the American race, educating parents to be eugenically minded when tending to the practice of making and raising babies, Doctor Dawson declared that the *Good Housekeeping* Baby Contest must be considered as a “distinct and practical contribution to the eugenics movement.”⁹⁰

The discussion of the race betterment to preserve the ‘true’ American race from race suicide was often invoked in the discourse of the “immigration problem.” Remembering that eugenics was not only a movement to weed out the “feebleminded” idiots, morons, and imbeciles, but also a strategy to discourage and ideally prevent any intermarriage between the white Anglo-Saxon or Nordic races and the “lower races” was a key component to understand race betterment. In the early twentieth century, when immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flocked to America by the thousands, the “native stock” felt that their way of life was threatened. This was not only a matter of race, but also grounded in economics—fears that a growing welfare system could disrupt the maintenance of white racial supremacy were prevalent. As is evident in the structure and scoring, the Baby Contest in *Good Housekeeping* reflects these negative sentiments towards immigrant or foreign-born parents.

The contest was organized into three different categories: nationality of parents, age of parents, and the vitality of the offspring. The winner had the highest cumulative

⁸⁸ “The Prize Winners in The Good Housekeeping Babies,” 238.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 239.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

score from all sections. The first category, parent's nationality was again divided into three possibilities: both mother and father were American, both parents were foreign, or one parent was American and the other was an immigrant. Having two American parents was a clear advantage and evident in the statistics of those babies who won medals. Additionally, the highest percentage of individual babies entered into the contest came from the two American born parents—followed by a hybrid couple, and lastly the lowest percentage of infants had two foreign born parents. Dr. Dawson toes the eugenic line when he emphasized that the “pure American stock,” as rightful decedents of Anglo-Saxon heritage, were in fact the most eugenically “sound of blood.” The few foreign born parents who did attempt to enter their babies into the *Good Housekeeping* contest were exclusively from England, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, Wales, and Denmark.⁹¹ Although not American born, families from each of these countries were still Northern Europeans closely related by blood to America's “native stock,” and did not experience the same prejudice that people from Southern or Eastern Europe experienced when immigrating to America.

The second category the babies were segregated into and evaluated by was the age of the parents. This is an interesting qualifier because it speaks not to heredity or marriage, but rather a new topic of when humans are most fit to reproduce. One possible explanation to this category was that in general the New Woman was having children later in life, if at all. This emphasis on parental age could be a eugenically driven response to changing demographics. Dr. Dawson suggests that perhaps the more significant factor is the “difference between the ages of the fathers and mothers” that

⁹¹ “The Prize Winners in The Good Housekeeping Babies,” 239.

winning mothers were often younger than fathers.⁹² This section has less scientific backing, and seems to serve more as a commentary on at what age the normative American couple is having babies. Women reading this work might either worry that they had their children too young, or that they are getting too old to have children. Or, and most successfully for the journal, the women reading might be reaffirmed in their age and their children's' health.

The third section of this contest revolved not around the baby's parents or heredity, but rather themselves as small humans, and their "vitality," meaning their worth as future reproducers. Each contestants' body measurements were taken, and the averages were published in the story, again providing a eugenic framework for women at home reading to follow and perhaps evaluate their own children and reaffirming the power of scientific reasoning. The judges made the concession that mothers who might read these measurements and want to compare them to their children should not despair if their own kin do not align—that the individuals who submitted their babies to such a competition were already of above average intelligence and therefore the standards that their babies are measured against could be different or incompatible with the rest of the population in the United States. It is for this reason that they are not just "better" babies, but more specifically "super fine" children. This statement reaffirms the eugenic principle that the most superior of human stock bring forth into the world the best of the best babies. The article concludes and leaves its readers with the strong statement that humanity is "beginning to learn that there is no sure basis of its advancement, or, indeed, of its self

⁹² "The Prize Winners in The Good Housekeeping Babies," 240.

perpetuity, except by the intelligent control of the beginnings of life.”⁹³ The future, Dr. Dawson claims, “belongs to those races, those communities, those families that first bring scientific knowledge into working relationships with parental love.”⁹⁴ The insistence on scientific language and knowledge is exhibited within the article itself. In the captions under the photographs of each prize-winning baby, the data and measurements taken in the contest were published and the children were repeatedly referred to as physical specimens. Clearly, education is the overarching purpose of this piece. The article celebrates that, for any reader, “Eugenics will mean something” after the “perusal of the article.”⁹⁵ Readers, once fully introduced to eugenics from this article, were prepared to engage with the next eugenic discussion in *Good Housekeeping*, “Practical Application of Eugenics” in the July issue of the same year.

This next piece suggests that every law that endeavors “to prevent the propagation of the habitual pauper classes, the mentally deficient, epileptics, habitual criminals” were all “practical applications of the science” of eugenics.⁹⁶ Not only calling for new legal statutes to limit whom and to whom marriage licenses ought to be issued, this article seeks to encourage eugenic education. If society can be improved so extensively by the practice and application of eugenics then the author, a male doctor by the name of William Mecklenburg Polk, suggests “by all means, let the young of both sexes, especially our girls, be carefully and thoroughly instructed in eugenics.”⁹⁷ As a male doctor, it is interesting that Polk does not seek to guide his fellow men to choose a correct

⁹³ “The Prize Winners in The Good Housekeeping Babies,” 241.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁹⁶ William Mecklenburg Polk, “The Practical Application of Eugenics,” *Good Housekeeping* July 1912, 131.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

wife but places the burden of selection on the female partner. He states that the special eugenic education of women is important because, often times, women show “their independence in their marriages more definitely than in anything else.” With such a statement, this article seems to suggest that women had both power and agency in their own lives. Therefore, he felt it was important to let women seek in eugenics “knowledge they no longer get at home.”⁹⁸ In asserting that “no girl wished to have children who are not perfect” and “no man wishes to father a sickly child,” Polk is crafting a persuasive argument for a female audience to abide by eugenic marriage selection in order to live the life that should be desired by every American woman. Thus, this article equates feminine fulfillment and happiness with well-bred, eugenically supported marriages and children. This message is coming, not only from *Good Housekeeping*, but other women’s magazines as well and the idea that perfect children will result from the “practical application of eugenics” and that producing such offspring is the only purposeful value women had in America.⁹⁹

Polk was by no means the only professional in American who encouraged eugenic education, especial for women. Four years later, in September of 1916, Sarah Comstock authored an article entitled “Today’s Schoolgirl, Tomorrow’s Mother” in *Good Housekeeping*.¹⁰⁰ Comstock, who specialized in “mothercraft,” aims her plea to mothers reading *Good Housekeeping* that they raise their teenage daughters correctly to become good mothers. Generally speaking, there is no implied harm in raising one’s children to be good humans, and thus good parents as well. However, the concept of “good

⁹⁸ Polk, “The Practical Application of Eugenics,” 131.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Comstock, “Today’s Schoolgirl Tomorrow’s Mother,” *Good Housekeeping* Sep. 1916, 144.

parenting” in this context was inextricably tied to the eugenic lessons in differences of race and class, and the importance of white supremacy. Unlike the best baby contest of years past, where the focus was placed on breeding the best baby, this article addresses issues applicable to raising the child once she is born: helping her grow through a period of “physical, mental, and yes even moral ‘unstable’ equilibrium.”¹⁰¹ In no vague or subtle way, this piece is overtly claiming that women should raise their female children to be mothers, that this role is the one and only most important contribution that women can make as members of American society. As discussed in other stories in *Good Housekeeping*, the absolute best future for America will be a result of the proper eugenic education of women. Because this article is written by a woman, embedded in the narrative is a message from one woman to many women defining their civic and motherly duty as Americans as first and foremost to oversee the eugenic education of their daughters.

In the same issue of *Good Housekeeping* was an article by Dorothy Dix entitled “Mirandy on Eugenics.”¹⁰² Dorothy Dix was a pseudonym for Elizabeth Gilmer, a Tennessee native who mostly by chance fell into the business of writing a woman’s gossip and advice column.¹⁰³ Dix’s writings were published not only in many American newspapers but also periodicals that circulated globally. She became the world’s most widely read and also highly paid female journalist writing for newspapers. Due to the amount of letters she received from readers, Dix became known as the “mother confessor

¹⁰¹ Comstock, “Today’s Schoolgirl Tomorrow’s Mother,” 148.

¹⁰² Dorothy Dix, “Mirandy on Eugenics,” *Good Housekeeping*, Sep. 1916, 53.

¹⁰³ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Elizabeth Mariwether Gilmer,” accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/233822/Elizabeth-Meriwether-Gilmer>.

to millions.”¹⁰⁴ This is another article that serves to educate the readership on a certain discourse on eugenics. The piece is framed as a dialogue between two women, two African American women. Their topic of discussion is eugenics, and one woman illuminates for the other the wisdom in a world controlled by the scientific benefits that eugenics has to offer society. The discussion is framed so that one woman is depicted as ignorant when she expressed her feelings of concern about eugenics and how the science is sacrilegious by “takin’ de Lawd’s wuk out of His hands.”¹⁰⁵ As is apparent in this quotation, Dix portrays her Mirandy column in “negro dialect” an African-American brand of “folk-wisdom.”¹⁰⁶ Though blatantly demeaning to African Americans, the Mirandy stories were popular enough to be published not only in *Good Housekeeping*, but also other newspapers and periodicals of the early 1900s. Dix decided to take on the discussion of eugenics through her Mirandy column instead of her general weekly advice column—perhaps because she wanted to emphasize the point that eugenics was such a clearly beneficial social good that even African Americans supported it, oblivious of what the American eugenics movement wished for the future elimination of their race. In this piece, through the guise of perceived playful banter between two black women, *Good Housekeeping* is educating its white female readers on how eugenics can ensure that only the people who are meant to reproduce will have babies under the guidance of eugenics.

Mothers were repeatedly the presumed primary audience both for the editors of *Good Housekeeping* and for the teachings of eugenic theorist. Directed at this audience, the story “Make Way for the Baby” (1918) established a firm foundation for

¹⁰⁴ “Dorothy Dix Special Collection: Research Guide,” Austin Peay State University, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://library.apsu.edu/dix/research/guide.htm#ResearchGuide>

¹⁰⁵ Dix, “Mirandy on Eugenics,” 53.

¹⁰⁶ “Dorothy Dix Special Collection: Research Guide.”

understanding the “Rights of the Unborn” (1922). In “Make Way for the Baby” by female writer Olivia Dunbar, the healthy care of pregnant women is discussed as it connects to the shamefully high infant mortality rate.¹⁰⁷ Making allusions to the eugenic concept that all babies have the “right to be well born” this article introduces the women readers, if they had been previously unaware, to the existence of the Federal Children’s Bureau in Washington DC, one of the greatest success of women reformers of the maternal commonwealth.¹⁰⁸ An institute with the moral goals of bettering the world so that more babies survive, the Bureau shares many ties with the American Eugenics movement with respect to which babies particularly need to be living longer, better lives.

“The Rights of the Unborn” published in 1922 by Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, the director of *Good Housekeeping’s* Bureau of Foods, Sanitation, and Health, addresses the need for “the state to exercise control over marriage to a much greater extent than has yet been done” in order to give each child the right to life he deserves.¹⁰⁹ Most feminists in the 1920s rejected this concept of regulating marriage to a greater extent. However, the preeminence of scientific authority meant that few others felt unsure about the important role scientific analysis should have in politics. Doctor Wiley, the author of the piece, begins by stating his own eugenically sound heritage: “I consider it the greatest asset which has ever been active in my own character to have been the son of moral, intelligent, and physically perfect parents. I mean by the word “perfect,” as perfect as circumstances permit.”¹¹⁰ Lamenting that all do not enjoy his great fortune, that “all children cannot be descendants of an ancestry of this kind,” it was “justified” within the

¹⁰⁷ Olivia Dunbar, “Make Way For the Baby,” *Good Housekeeping* Oct. 1918, 30.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁹ Harvey W. Wiley, “The Rights of the Unborn,” *Good Housekeeping* Oct. 1922, 32.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

duty of the state to “protect and perpetuate itself” and inquire about “possibilities of the future citizens.”¹¹¹ Dr. Wiley as the director of health at *Good Housekeeping* received letters to the publication and he wrote and expressed that if others could hear the anxious mothers whose daughters were about to be married, they too would be inspired to have the state play a larger role in monitoring reproduction and would eagerly join in promoting a “sufficient protection” of the unborn babies destined to be their grandchildren.¹¹² The article claims that “no one but a mother” can be “so filled with fear and horror” of a union between two people which results in “deformed, deficient, or physically and morally tainted children.”¹¹³ “Healthy, moral and untainted children,” the journal states boldly, are the “sole object of matrimony” and thus, with the science that is already known there ought to be much more care put into the sound selection of mother and father before any marriage vows are exchanged. The “rights” of children thus described were to have eugenically fit parents and Dr. Wiley suggested that scientific regulation of marriage was the key to securing that “right” for the future.

The final story in the *Good Housekeeping* that spoke to the topic of eugenics within the framework of this study was published in 1927. The article entitled “Shall I Marry this Man?” by Albert Edward Wiggam, the author of *The Fruit of the Family Tree* (1924) a successful book that explores all facets of heredity in family life. Wiggam became especially famous after taking up the call to spread the gospel of eugenics as a traveling lecturer proclaiming the new “Ten Commandments of Science,” and these included “The Duty of Preferential Reproduction” and “The Duty of Trusting

¹¹¹ Wiley, “The Rights of the Unborn,” 32.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Intelligence.”¹¹⁴ In *Good Housekeeping*, Wiggam asserted, “nearly all the misery and suffering in the world depends upon whether the right or the wrong people marry each other.” Wiggam validated this belief by offering the example of two wellborn sisters, who chose different husbands of two different stocks, and the varying successes and failures they experienced in their lives as a result. Wiggam allowed some room for environmental factors to play a role in the destiny of one’s life but claims unabashedly that “when the right people get married, you have health, normality, intelligence, and good character for the environment to work upon; and when the wrong people get married, the best environment in the world, and all the doctors and school teachers on earth, can not prevent a vast deal of misery and suffering.”¹¹⁵ With this sort of daunting ultimatum that predicted so blatantly what a woman’s future may or may not hold, Wiggam graciously offered some advice to navigate this situation in order to be successful. This magazine offered its readers four simple necessities to consider that will ensure a good marriage. First, the couple must be “well mated” and secondly they “must be healthy, normal, and intelligent.” For a life without problems, “a large majority of [the potential husband’s] parents, grandparents and great grandparents must have been healthy, normal and intelligent.” Lastly, and perhaps of greatest importance is that the future husband in consideration “must expect to rear children.”¹¹⁶ This aspect of parenthood and being a good mother as it related to topics of eugenics played a central role in how progressivism, eugenics, family, womanhood and motherhood is portrayed in the third “Big Six” women’s journal left to be discussed, *Woman’s Home Companion*.

¹¹⁴ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America’s Quest for Racial Purity* 1st ed. (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006), 243.

¹¹⁵ Albert Wiggam, “Shall I Marry This Man,” *Good Housekeeping*, June 1927, 29.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Woman's Home Companion danced around the topic of eugenics with the establishment of the Better Babies column that appears in every issue in the early 1900s without saying the word “eugenics” outright. However, as will be discussed later in this thesis, the foundation of the entrance, scoring, and awards of Better Babies contests were inextricably tied with eugenic ideas. The popularization of the Better Babies contests by the *Woman's Home Companion* played an important role in their success, and the eventual evolution of the contests to Fitter Families competitions. A squared off half-page section entitled “Better Babies” appeared in nearly every issue of the early twentieth century was designed for mothers who sought advice and camaraderie in how to raise healthier children. The top section of such stories included four letters to the Better Babies Bureau sharing with the editors how their advice helped certain women establish a support group for mothers within their own community, and also a place where mothers or wives could ask questions to the Bureau officials. The bottom half of the story describes what the Bureau had to offer: The Expectant Mothers Circle, the Council Room, the Mothers' Club, and the Keeping Well leaflets. These groups provide a gendered space where women could talk about specifically women's issues as they relate to pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing.

One specific letter was a thank you response to the Bureau for reaching out and supplying the materials for a local club to provide a space for women to relax was exceptional in its use of the word eugenics itself. Identified as a librarian in Kansas the woman wrote: “We should never have been able to start a Better Babies movement here without your help. Here, in our public library, we are making our Mothers' Department a clearing house for information about the care and guidance of children, eugenics, sex

hygiene, education: and, as you suggested, I arranged a corner in the library where mothers meet once a week and discuss some topic in connection with Better Babies.”¹¹⁷ Letters such as this one only begin to illuminate the high levels of engagement in eugenic motherhood that were spurred on by the women’s journals like *Woman’s Home Companion* in the early twentieth century. The three other components that the woman listed, guidance and care of children, healthy sexual activity, and education were also indivisibly a part of the work of the eugenics movement.

An area of the women’s journals separate from the educational articles and the entertaining stories that was integral to the success and continuation of the journals themselves was the role these journals played in consumer culture. Eugenic ideology was able to matriculate into advertisements in the *Woman’s Home Companion*. Always juxtaposed with the Better Babies column in every issue was an advertisement related to the health of children. The period from 1895 to 1930 was witness to a revolution in the marketing and display of manufactured goods in American culture.¹¹⁸ Increasingly, women became the buyers of the household, making decisions on products and family needs. Therefore, advertisers marketed to the female buyer. Full-page advertisements for foods and goods were marketed to the woman who yearned to have the most “fit” child in his class. The ads played on these desires convincing women that if they bought certain goods for their children, their sons and daughters would be the biggest, strongest, healthiest, and most fit versions of themselves. “Baker’s Cocoa,” the “weekly treat” that became a “daily delight *and Jimmy’s weight went up!*” is just one such ploy on behalf of

¹¹⁷ “Better Babies,” *Woman’s Home Companion* 42 no. 7 1914, 29.

¹¹⁸ Martha H. Patterson, ed., *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 18.

marketers to target female mothers. Gender became a defining factor in consumer culture and the ever-increasing rise of capitalism in America.

Beyond the “Big Six,” other periphery women’s journals had their own messages to share with their readership concerning eugenics. *Vogue*, which experienced a surge in popularity at the turn of the century offered a social commentary on the presence of eugenics in American society in their piece “When *and* Why: Who Shall Marry Whom.”¹¹⁹ The opening line of this article states that “Eugenics may be a very new science but it is a very old art.”¹²⁰ Instead of using the common categorical term of different methods to reach eugenic goals such as positive and negative eugenics, this anonymous *Vogue* author describes a gendered dichotomy of eugenics. Male eugenics, it was proposed, resembled the practice the Spartans embraced of brutally leaving unfit offspring alone in the elements to perish.¹²¹ However, long before Spartans devised such barbaric plans, *Vogue* claimed that women had been practicing the art of eugenics through selective fashion and with significant success.¹²² The *Vogue* writer asserted that “the most powerful of all influences for the eugenic development of the race,” lay in the ongoing “wish of men and women, and more especially women, that their children shall be better than themselves.” This article suggests that women particularly have a vested interest and dedication to the art of perfecting her outward appearance for this is what she will be judged upon for the selection of her future mate and thus the vitality of her children. As a predominantly fashion magazine, this argument fits seamlessly in with the dress patterns and beauty tips. Situated in the center of the article is the highlighted quote,

¹¹⁹ “When *and* Why Who Shall Marry Whom,” *Vogue* April 1914.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

“Woe to the man or Maid who enters the holy state of matrimony with an undiagnosed sore throat or a chronic earache,” exclaims the eugenicist emerging from the laboratory with the light of discovery in his eyes and a brand-new penal statute in his hands.” The author in *Vogue* is in fact mocking the modern scientist, for he thinks his discoveries are new, where as the truth is that eugenics is rooted in ancient foundations. *Vogue* argued that the eugenic selection of a mate for human reproduction had a rich social history embedded in the way individuals, though particularly women, present themselves in society.

Another peripheral journal, which seemed to occupy the polar opposite of the spectrum of women’s magazines from *Vogue*, is *The Young Woman’s Journal*. Published by Mormons, *The Young Woman’s Journal* is the only religiously affiliated journal that will be analyzed in this thesis. The constant debate over eugenics in the *Young Women’s Journal* revolves around the union of the concepts of a marriage based on scientific knowledge and wisdom, and “that perfect love which alone can justify the institution of marriage.”¹²³ In this particular essay within the journal “Eugenics and Parenthood,” the author Amey Eaton attempts to justify eugenic ideas in the light of God’s work and not as a contradiction to his message. Eaton writes, “the best of mankind will never marry because of scientific laws, and we thank God for that.”¹²⁴ However, Eaton hopes that civilization is moving toward a world where “selection is mutual,” “that the youth no longer captures his bride or barter for her, as in older times; and that the maid no longer tries to ‘catch’ a desirable man because of his desirable wealth, or his social position.” Instead, Eaton foresees a change on the horizon for the standards of parenthood that they

¹²³ Amey B Eaton, “Eugenics and Parenthood,” *The Young Woman’s Journal* Jan. 1913, 13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

will love each other because they believe the other would become a wonderful mother or father. The author proposes the possibility that such an equalization of the gender roles in courting and relationship forming has the potential to “do more than anything else to develop the art of Eugenics.”¹²⁵ Mormons have always felt that in the “matter of marriage, great care should be exercised.”¹²⁶ The editors of *The Young Woman’s Journal* simply invert the conventional language of eugenic science so that it is more palatable for their religious audience.

In the *Young Women’s Journal*’s 1913 publication of “Our Interest in Eugenics” by Dr. John Widtose, eugenics is first defined as “the improvement of the human race by breeding” and then this phraseology is transformed to appeal to a non-scientific audience to read, “—that is, [eugenics] believes that by the proper choice of parents each successive generation may become better in certain qualities.”¹²⁷ As the Church is founded on “progressive and continuous revelation,” Widtose suggests members of the Church should and “undoubtedly do welcome this new branch of science which intends to use the best human means for the purpose of discovering such laws of nature as may be used in the improvement of the race by the more careful attention to father and motherhood.”¹²⁸ These articles in this Mormon journal serve the purpose of convincing a religious population that eugenics, although the new science, is man’s way of integrating “God’s natural work” into regular, human practice. Essentially it is argued that the goals shared by eugenicists and men of God are similar, and compliment one another.

¹²⁵ Eaton, “Eugenics and Parenthood,” 17.

¹²⁶ John Widtose, “Our Interest In Eugenics,” *The Young Woman’s Journal* Feb. 1913, 81.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

The *Young Women's Journal* in this way is performing the same role as other women's journals of the time. The presentation of eugenic ideas is palpable and relatable in these journals because they are framed within the intrinsic elements of women's lives as mothers, wives and daughters. Eugenic principles concerning physical appearance, marriage, and motherhood arose unilaterally among the five women's journals analyzed in this chapter. Some journals focused their attentions differently with respect to emphasis being put on one area of a woman's life over the others. However, media historian Zuckerman found that women who bought at least one women's journal would often buy subscriptions to others.¹²⁹ This means that one reader could engage with *Ladies' Home Journal* right after negotiating the articles in *Good Housekeeping* and in this way the overlapping content in the two women's magazines reinforce the importance's or popularity of information that might be overlooked otherwise. Articles that addressed the educational conversation of how a woman knew if a man was "eugenically fit" to be a husband and father followed by suggestions on how to raise children in accordance with eugenic ideals were reoccurring themes in women's journals. This emphasis on marriage and childbearing framed eugenic motherhood as the most vital and influential role women could play as citizens of the United States.

Conclusion

Examining the most widely read women's journals of the early twentieth century can help historians understand where and through what mode the average American housewife, unaffiliated with formal structures of eugenic reform or eugenic feminism,

¹²⁹ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 34.

became involved, navigated and engaged with eugenic discourses. Women's journals are an important and illustrative unit of analysis because they involve both the private, intimate relationship between one woman and the journals she reads, and also the collective, communal values that women who read journals begin to share. The five journals studied here all shared a similar, if not overlapping readership, one comprised of a homogenous and exclusive group defined by their race, class, and gender. The white middle-class female readership's identity was reflected in the content of the journals because of the dialogic relationship between producers and consumers of print media. By studying what eugenic concepts women consumed through reading these journals it is apparent that ideas about fashion and physical appearance, ideas about gender and engagement with the rising consumer culture, rules concerning when and who and why a person should be eligible for marriage, and new dominating beliefs about the authority of scientific parenting were popularly circulated. With this understanding, we can more completely comprehend the powerful and important role these women played by engaging in the biopolitics of eugenics in the actions and choices of their lives in establishing the popular, cultural adherence to eugenic ideology.

CHAPTER THREE

Eugenics in the News

Remaining within the realm of print media, this chapter will shift its focus away from women's journals and onto two popular newspapers of the early twentieth century, *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Examining a news source that is not directed towards a specific female audience but rather the nation as a whole lends itself to broader conclusions about American culture from 1900 to 1930 drawn from a larger scope of ideas and backgrounds. A close reading of the biopolitical eugenic discourses presented therein reveals that newspapers acted as both a method for the dissemination of national ideas about race, gender and women's roles as mothers and wives, and also a forum to celebrate and recognize the micro work of women on the local level who embodied these constructed gender roles, and in doing so, establish the female's worth as a citizen in the United States.

The eugenic discourse on the national, or macro, level within the newspapers was located within articles centered in matters of national security. What was considered a threat to the nation varied—World War I, immigration (and fear of race suicide,) prostitution and other problems “created” by women. However, the newspapers responses to these threats were predictable. Repeatedly, the solutions to these purported social ills and national threats were framed within the conversation of the American eugenics movement. The ongoing race betterment movement, coupled with improved and increased eugenic education, circled back and reemerged over and over in the news throughout the first thirty years of the twentieth century as the best answers to America's problems.

Within these two newspapers, the role of eugenics also was manifest in articles and reports tied more closely with the local community. A focused reading of regional or community based stories in the news highlights discussions of marriage, motherhood, eugenic education for children (especially young girls,) social forces such as the church and within articles focused on popular culture such as reviews of books, movies, and plays. Women's choices and actions as individuals were scrutinized by society in newspapers, which exercised an authority to determine whether women were doing "their part" to save the American race—which would effectively save the nation. To do their part, they had to be separated from the problem, which meant that non-white women could not be part of the solution. White middle-class women established their importance to the nation by engaging with and negotiating their invaluable role in America as intelligent, educated, and "fit" reproducers.

Newspapers often serve the purpose of reporting on current news, educating a populace on what has occurred and what is occurring in the society in which they inhabit. A daily publication rather than a once-monthly journal, newspapers can be more flexible and evolve quickly as political decisions and social opinions change. What appears in newspapers can be viewed as a representation of the culture, which is both producing and consuming the ideas. Representation can be understood in different ways; that newspapers re-present realities that are already there—that they project a distorted reflection of a reality, or that newspapers represent, as in "stand in for," like democratic political figures are thought of representing a body politic. A newspaper could reflect a distorted version of the American society that produced it, and it could also stand in as a representation of that culture. Newspapers as a popular source of media had a significant

and central role in representing, by both definitions, American society in the early 1900s. Newspapers were one of the most reactive public media outlets that disseminated knowledge on a massive scale. The editors of newspapers gave meaning to stories and opinions printed in their papers simply because they were published, and the readership engaged in the value of what was published by buying and reading the news.

This chapter will address the ways eugenics was written about in both the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* from 1900 to 1930 and what those discourses meant for women and the nation in its entirety. Any article published in either publication that printed the word ‘eugenics’ in the timeframe provided was examined and then categorized thematically for analysis and discussion. A brief review of any pertinent contextual history on both newspapers and an explanation of how the two were selected will be followed by the analysis of the primary documentation taken from the newspapers themselves. By analyzing these two newspapers it becomes clear how white middle-class women’s personal navigation and engagement with eugenic concepts were, in fact, important issues of national security. Women’s choices in terms of marriage, sex, and child rearing had a profound impact on and were closely related to matters of the state. Newspapers were thus a public place where—through the celebration of women’s performances of eugenic biopolitics at the micro level—it becomes clear that women’s actions helped to determine the course of the eugenics movement nationally.

***The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*: History and Importance**

The histories of *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* differ, although they were both established in the late nineteenth century and continue on with fervent

success today. *The New York Times* was established in 1851 as a “penny paper” that was dedicated to reporting news in a restrained and objective fashion, steering away from the sensationalism that was popular in the day. At the onset, the paper enjoyed early success as the editors catered their publication to a cultured, intellectual audience instead of a “mass audience.” However, this attempt at a moral high ground did not prove to be a lucrative position for *The New York Times* and could not endure. It was not until Adolph Simon Ochs bought the paper in 1896 that the brand name began to grow into the internationally respected daily paper that it is today. Ochs placed greater stress than ever on full reporting of daily news. He also maintained and emphasized existing good coverage of international news.¹³⁰ *The New York Times* reputation for abstaining from over sensationalized news reporting makes it an interesting source to analyze the coverage of the development of the pseudoscience of eugenics because the historian is reminded that the news reports, although they may appear outrageous today, were commonplace and mundane within the context of their time.

Shifting westward, the *Los Angeles Times* was established in 1881, partially owned by Harrison Gray Otis who incorporated the paper within the public corporation Times-Mirror Company in 1884. The paper prospered and became an important political power in California and major voice in the southern part of the state.¹³¹ In contrast to *The New York Times*, this paper wrote for a smaller audience—circulation did not extend beyond the state borders until nearly the 1930s. However, the *Los Angeles Times*’ unique coverage of California’s most prominent leaders in the eugenic movement like

¹³⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “The New York Times,” accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/412546/The-New-York-Times>

¹³¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “The Los Angeles Times,” accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/348328/Los-Angeles-Times>

Paul Popenoe and Dr. David Jordan, who were renowned and respected by their eastern counterparts, render this paper influential and thus worthy of examination.

The New York Times and the *Los Angeles Times* were chosen as the two units of analysis because of their different geographic locations in an effort to include regional difference or variation in reporting methods or story selection with the goal of ultimately painting a more complete picture of the nation and its social and political ideas as they relate to discourses of eugenics in newspapers. Until recently, the study of eugenics has been fairly east-coast centric. For the most part, scholars have examined eugenics both as a pseudoscience and an American movement from the vantage point of organizations such as the Eugenics Record Office and the American Eugenics Society and individuals such as Charles B. Davenport and Henry Laughlin, all based along the Atlantic seaboard.¹³² A history viewed through the lens of only the northeast would be limited and at times chafe against the more inclusive history of the movement that becomes illuminated when the south, the west, and the midwest are examined in full. The *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* were chosen to account for a more inclusive history, from the east to the west coast of the nation.

Between the two papers, the ideas and politics of eugenics were presented in similar sections and in the same positive light: as a burgeoning new science whose message the public ought to heed.¹³³ The textual analysis of the newspapers will be divided thematically and separated into categories defined by the ways eugenic

¹³² Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

¹³³ I examined over 800 news articles in total. There were over 400 reports that included the word “eugenics” in both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. I sorted these articles chronologically and thematically to analyze them.

discourses emerged within the newspaper. The themes analyzed in this chapter were directed by the nature of the articles: reports on ideas about marriage both legally and socially, the concepts of race betterment, eugenic education, reviews of popular entertainment such as plays, movies and books, good American “scientific” parenting, the role of the Church in the discussion of eugenics, the “immigrant problem,” World War I, and eugenics in conjunction with other “women’s issues.”

The readership of both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* newspapers most likely would have overlapped with the readership of the women’s journals mentioned in the last chapter. Although the papers’ prices varied, during the majority of the years from 1900 to 1930 both papers on average only cost a penny. Fairly inexpensive, and easy to get a hold of, newspapers were common household items. Therefore, the overlapping content between newspapers and journals worked together by reinforcing messages and make for a stronger argument that public media reflects popular culture. What was published in and consumed from these two newspapers mirrors how many Americans understood their individual identity as a part of the nation. This chapter is most interested in how white middle-class American women engaged in the ideas of eugenics, personally within their families and communities and publicly by examining how their actions impacted the nation. Newspapers reflected the influence that emerging eugenic biopower had on American concepts of womanhood, motherhood, citizenship and the woman’s biopolitical responsibility to and thus calculated worth within the nation state.

Eugenic Themes in the Newspapers

The overwhelming majority of news stories that involve matters of eugenics are not surprisingly articles that address the biopolitics of mate selection—the institution of marriage. What is important to remember is that eugenic theories and practices were so often brought into writings about marriage because in the early twentieth century there continued to be an unquestioned corollary between the marriage of a man and a woman and the production of children in both the newspapers. Although this era did see the emergence of the idea to marry for romantic love, a strong social force still called for a practical marriage that existed to produce children. The marriage-themed articles range from brief announcements of eugenic marriage laws in different states across the nation, to expressing the biopower of marriage in the national effort of race betterment, to more private ideas about the roles of love and science in the marriage union and the national consequences of divorce.

Both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* reported stories announcing legal changes to marriage laws that were occurring across the nation. Sometimes simple brief announcements of a law passage or defeat, other times longer articles exploring the legality or morality of the intricate details of each state's law. Remarkably similar in both wording and content, the eugenic marriage legislation succeeded and failed throughout the nation repeatedly. New reports on the status of such laws appeared as early as 1908 and continued to reappear throughout the next twenty years.¹³⁴ These eugenic marriage laws, which call for medical examination before a marriage license could be issued, occupied a volatile contested space of states rights and eugenic purpose. Using legal

¹³⁴ “Rosebery on Eugenics: Ex-Premier Say Modern Laws Seek to Build a New Society on Ruin of Old.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 5, 1908.

channels to achieve racial betterment through the positive eugenics of “fit” marriages was just one avenue eugenicists pursued and also only one of the lenses through which race betterment was reported on in public media. The emergence of these laws and their passage or failure mirrored the evolution of the eugenic process.

Less grounded in legal issues and state politics, a debate over the real purpose and reason for marriage was contested in America and was printed on the pages of both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Both newspapers published articles that engaged in the debate between the necessity of love the in a marriage versus the importance of an intelligent, scientific marriage between the most “fit” individuals in America. In 1913 a university professor wrote a letter published in *The New York Times* “defending romantic love” and expressed himself “definitely against any sort of official interference with the course of romantic love.”¹³⁵ He supported his opinion with the logic that “initiative” and “affection” were qualities that “the race should be allowed to cultivate themselves.”¹³⁶ Without rejecting the eugenic message that the goal of marriage was first and foremost to improve the race, the professor implied that love rather than science was the key to securing such aims. Just the next year the same paper published a report from the Bureau of Sanitary Science of the American Institute of Homeopathy where a doctor was quoted to have said “old fashioned love was really the best and highest form of eugenics.”¹³⁷ This is shockingly different news than the public was used to reading, but his logic followed to blast away any concerns: “as long as man is attracted by beauty and woman by strength, eugenics will in a great measure take care of

¹³⁵ “Defends Romantic Love.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jul 16, 1913.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ “Love the Best Eugenics.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jul 3, 1914.

itself.”¹³⁸ This is an example of how a middle ground was often found the debate over the meaning of marriage in *The New York Times*.

Even more controversy arose concerning the social value of love or eugenics in a marriage within the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. Articles within this newspaper were far less accommodating, naming the tyranny of a eugenic law as “life under the medical inquisition” in 1910 the *Los Angeles Times* writer claimed, “marriage is the one thing that [the eugenicist] cannot regulate.”¹³⁹ A similar sentiment was expressed two years later when it was suggested, “nature herself was the best antidote to “race suicide” and although “unscientific,” love rather than eugenics would save the race.”¹⁴⁰ This statement is interesting because the writer still clearly subscribes to the principle issue that faced eugenicists, namely that the white Anglo-Saxon race in America had become threatened, but the article simply expressed that the biopower to scientifically regulate marriages to “breed” better humans was not within the realm of the state’s power as a tool to respond to America’s race crisis.

A year later in 1913 as the United States was very in tune with its own civility, a Cornell University professor authored an article that asserted that as humans civilized, so too did the nature of their love evolve, that eugenic love had developed as humans grew into civilization and the new “real love” was “of the strong for the strong.”¹⁴¹ Another argument advocated that both love and eugenics could play a role in the institution of marriage. The author argued that “the love match is a good thing for eugenics...it is better for a pretty girl to marry a brave handsome youth for love—true love—than it is

¹³⁸ “Love the Best Eugenics.”

¹³⁹ “Love and Doctors.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Dec 8, 1910.

¹⁴⁰ “Eugenics.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug 2, 1912.

¹⁴¹ “Love’s Ideal Gets A Jolt.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jan 16, 1913.

for her to marry an elderly millionaire for his money” because the loving couple will work hard for each other too keep their family out of poverty.¹⁴² But questioning minds reemerge two years later. One article in particular located the debate in conversation with what “a current magazine” published about “when you should marry.” The article stated that although marriage is “obviously for the perpetuation of the race, no two people can think of this in contracting their alliance.”¹⁴³ Again, this piece does not question the fundamental sentiment and purpose of marriage as a way to propagate the best of the race, it simply holds that a marriage grounded in love rather than science had more of a future and would be less likely to result in divorce leaving “little half-orphans.” This way the debate between the validity of scientific marriage over the value of a marriage rooted in romantic love is presented in both newspapers without demonizing or even questioning the concern for race suicide in America. The language of the news coverage reflects a culture that was open to hearing the arguments of scientific reasoning even in the most ‘private’ arrangement of marriage. The implied connection between marriage and the production of children invited a national engagement with the biopolitics of reproduction.

While the debate over eugenic marriage legislation raged on within the halls of state legislative buildings and within communities who were unsure how love and science could both play a part in the equation of marriage, discussion of the national crisis of race suicide dominated the news. Articles that sought the best way to work for race betterment framed their argument both in marriage law and eugenic education. At a time when science did not have the medical cure for many diseases carried by the “mentally defective,” and ‘prevention’ rather than ‘cure’ was the buzzword among medical

¹⁴² “Poverty and True Love.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jul 6, 1913.

¹⁴³ “Marriage for Love.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), May 1, 1915.

communities, the influence of eugenic marriage laws seemed to be the best means of preventing the reproduction of the ‘feeble-minded.’¹⁴⁴ A Louisiana physician declared at a meeting of the Southern Medical Association in 1912 the disgrace it was that “we let these people to marry and multiply...the insane, the criminal, the consumptive...even the pauper on the poor farm to marry with the sanction of the law and the blessing of the church.” This doctor expressed his wildly shared fear of race suicide and called for the betterment of the race through the implementation of more specific and eugenic marriage laws. The newspapers headlines in the years just before and just after this conference of southern doctors in 1912 expressed the same ideal: one read, “A Perfect Race of Men”¹⁴⁵ another, “To Improve the Race”¹⁴⁶ and a third, “Wants Better Men and Women.”¹⁴⁷ All three articles shared similar messages that beckoned a new era of descriptive and restrictive eugenic marriage laws on both the east and the west coast of the nation. In this context, the regulation of marriage was a biopolitics through which eugenicists could ensure the production of an entirely superior race.

Eugenically-guided education of spousal selection and child rearing was the other primary avenue discussed to achieve the improvement of the race. In 1913, Henri Bergson a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “The end sought by eugenics may be best achieved at present by educating young men and young women to make the right selection by their own free will.” He wrote that this type of education should not start too young, but rather when children are “merging into manhood and womanhood.” While

¹⁴⁴ Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 54.

¹⁴⁵ “A Perfect Race of Men.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 27, 1908.

¹⁴⁶ “To Improve the Race.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar 24, 1912.

¹⁴⁷ “Wants Better Men and Women.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct 2, 1912.

decidedly certain that a eugenic marriage law imposed by the state would be “a species of tyranny worse than political oppression” he asserts that American public schools should and ought to, for the good of “the race” implement instruction for its students on whom was eligible to marry whom.¹⁴⁸

The education of proper marriage arrangements for optimal race betterment even slipped into articles with headlines one might not suspect. Entitled “Californian to Teach Six Million Farmers,” professor of economics at Harvard, Thomas N. Carver, was said to have given a “remarkably frank talk” with the goal of teaching American farmers “better business methods.”¹⁴⁹ The topic of marriage arose when he began to speak to the white man’s superiority over Indians in their ability to be “productive.” He was quoted claiming that “America is filled with unproductive or inefficient men. And they are permitted to marry and become fathers to boys who will grow up and become exactly like themselves. The man who cannot earn \$2 a day with some degree of regularity should not be allowed to get married.”¹⁵⁰ The division this professor created between those who should and should not be permitted the freedom to marry, and to marry whom ever they pleased at that, is not only rooted in classist and racist ideologies, it re-inscribes the Puritanical maxim that “the productive life is a moral life,” and “the unproductive life is an immoral life.”¹⁵¹ Focusing on men, and the male’s role in a eugenic marriage is a unique angle; far more popular was the discussion of marriage framed as a duty beholden unto women.

¹⁴⁸ Henri Bergon, “My Philosophy.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Mar 20, 1913.

¹⁴⁹ “Californian to Teach Six Million Farmers.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug 24, 1913.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Women were not only more often the partner who bore the burden of being eugenically educated, they were established in the news as having to present themselves physically in the most eugenic form. The 1914 article from an anonymous author reported on talks at the first day of the National Conference on Race Betterment in Battle Creek, Michigan entitled “Eugenics Defines Ideal Type of Woman.” The descriptions in the subtitles get even more specific, “Should Have Curves Instead of Angles, say doctors.”¹⁵² The discussion of women’s bodies is scientific and calculated, and framed within the context of how appearance reflects development of civility. Dr. Smith, a man, professed that “modern methods of living” have proved more “disastrous” for women than for men. He went on to say that women should be “fleshy enough for the anatomical angles to be nicely rounded out” and in the very next sentence urged the support of Henry Laughlin’s sterilization program for those women who were not so “fit.”¹⁵³ The discussion of negative eugenics is paired with a discussion of the worlds’ birthrate, and the need for the best of the “civilized nations” of the world to be producing more children.¹⁵⁴ A strongly imparted message in this newspaper to the readers was that women, if they wished to consider their home a civilized country, must fulfill their womanly duty to reproduce for the sake of the nation. By engaging with the eugenic biopolitics of encouraging increased birth rates among the white middle-class, these women became part of the dispersed web of power and influence that was integral to the success of the eugenics movement.

¹⁵² “Eugenics Defines Ideal Type of Woman.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jan 9, 1914.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

The New York Times when covering the same Race Betterment conference stressed the important message calling for eugenic education among all the speakers. The conversation of eugenic education for youth was often coupled with an urgent cry for more regulatory marriage laws. One speaker said that only a girl schooled in the principles of eugenics and “a high ideal of manhood” can be “trusted not to fall in love with a man who falls far short of this ideal.”¹⁵⁵ By the summer of the same year as the Race Betterment Conference in Michigan, “health certificates for marriages and instruction in sex hygiene in high schools” were advocated for in Chicago at a conference of psychiatrists and neurologists representing thirty-seven States.¹⁵⁶ The education of girls and women to ensure they understood what type of person was worthy of reproducing with her was vital for her to become a necessary and important part of American society, and if she fell short, she became a problem.

Calls for more extensive education reform did not only appear in reports on race betterment conferences, or linked to announcements of new marriage laws, but also in news reports about a greater social ill—women in general. Headlining, “New York’s Biggest Problem, Not Police, But Girls,” the article addressed what was often called by white middle-class progressive reformers, the “girl problem.”¹⁵⁷ “Immodesty, extravagance and ignorance” were among the three identified problems among working class and immigrant women in the early twentieth century. Immodesty was to be resolved in a “reform in dress” and extravagance through a restoration of proper “society” lifestyles. Ignorance on the part of women was to be righted through explicit eugenic

¹⁵⁵ “Calls Thin Woman an Imperfect Type.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan 9, 1914.

¹⁵⁶ “Alienists for Eugenics.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jul 18, 1914.

¹⁵⁷ “New York’s Biggest Problem, Not Police, But Girls.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug 4, 1912.

education. The author complained that girls “these days know nothing of motherhood” and therefore should attend “schools of mothercraft,” like the one established by Mrs. Reed to learn the matters of “practical eugenics.”¹⁵⁸ Mrs. Reed, who was interviewed as an expert specialist in the matter of the “girl problem” stated that she “admire[s] American manhood” and sees American men by definition “energetic, able, and industrious” while American womanhood she declared is over celebrated and should be replaced with a greater reverence for American motherhood.¹⁵⁹ To do this, the key she believed in was education, “the basis of all progress.”¹⁶⁰ This article is important because it speaks to the possibility of a greater connection that a female reader could have when reading the words of a woman who was deeply intertwined with the biopolitics of motherhood and reproduction. Perhaps the engagement with Mrs. Reed might foster a deeper interest in or engagement with eugenic motherhood on the part of the female readership.

The attendees of the “Annual Association of the New York Homeopathic Medical College and Flower Hospital” also called for education for women and girls. It was decided that it should require “very little argument” to convince the nation of “the need of a more active interest, a more frequent teaching and a more earnest application” of eugenics in women’s lives as wives and mothers.¹⁶¹ In 1913 *The New York Times* called for the teaching of eugenic hygiene and disease prevention to women. However, the educational freedom of women was limited by eugenic standards; they could learn how to be the best wives and mothers. Learning beyond what was integral to the home was

¹⁵⁸ “New York’s Biggest Problem, Not Police, But Girls.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ “Argue for Eugenics.” *New York Times* (New York, NY) May 31, 1912.

unnecessary, if not dysgenic. In 1914, one year after *The New York Times* published an article calling for more women to attend institutions for women's education, another article blamed women who sought education as "seriously threatening the perpetuation of the nation."¹⁶²

The debates over women and higher education as they relate to eugenics are complicated when framed within the discourse of motherhood and the mothers' eugenic responsibility to the nation. In the early twentieth century there was a movement for more women to be continuing their education past high school in some institution of higher learning, but this shift is accompanied by a decreasing birth rate. Highly educated women were having fewer and fewer children while less educated, poorer women were having more and more babies.¹⁶³ Although eugenicists wanted to educate women to be the best, most 'eugenically fit' mothers they could be, that college educated mothers were having fewer children than the working-class and immigrant populations was a seemingly frightful reality for the stability of the nation.

In response to this imbalance in birth rate, newspapers took a stand. The women's movement and the higher education of women was inextricably linked in the media to the dipping birth rate among the white middle-class. Articles had inflammatory opening lines such as "The women's movement is a movement towards national suicide" a concept that was one of eugenicists' most dire concerns.¹⁶⁴ The author of this piece referenced "the budding science of eugenics" as it "reveals the incalculable worth of breeding for the

¹⁶² "The Woman Movement and the Baby Crop." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug 29, 1915.

¹⁶³ Wendy Kline, *Building A Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 11.

¹⁶⁴ "The Woman Movement and the Baby Crop."

improvement of mankind” and important new role eugenics played in solving the imbalance in birth rate, encouraging the “ablest and best trained” mothers sought out higher education to have more children.¹⁶⁵

Later news stories that covered the subject of eugenics in conversation with higher education for women focused more on what women were actually learning within the classrooms of these institutions. “New Woman’s Colleges Unlike All Others” was the headline to a piece that covered the special courses only offered to women “to train women for a broader life in the home.” These courses included “literature, history, art, music, social sciences, child psychology, biology, physiology, eugenics, sociology, economics, and chemistry and physics as applied to the needs of the home.”¹⁶⁶ Headlines such as “Vassar Girls to Study Home-Making As Career” are followed with the subtitle “new course in euthenics, the science of human betterment, will adjust women to the needs of today.”¹⁶⁷ “Euthenics” was a new word, and one few completely understood—in its simplest terms it meant “efficient living.” Feminized in this context, applying euthenics to a set of college courses meant teaching the aspects that go into an efficient woman’s life: “the business of living as a wife, a mother, a home-maker, a member of society.” The article addressed readers who were suspect of “euthenics” because of its newness by reminding the audience “twenty years ago ‘eugenics’ was a new word, forty years ago ‘psychology’ was a new word, ‘sociology’ and ‘anthropology’ were both once

¹⁶⁵“The Woman Movement and the Baby Crop.”

¹⁶⁶ “New Woman’s Colleges Unlike All Others.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr 20, 1924.

¹⁶⁷ “Vassar girls to Study Home-Making As Career.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 23, 1926.

new words.”¹⁶⁸ Eugenics and eugenics were fundamentally similar; eugenics simply put its efforts towards future generations while eugenics was concerned with seeing immediate results in the improvement of the ‘race.’ In the particulars of this publication, eugenics was being applied at Vassar as a tool to maximize a woman’s capabilities within the home to teach and act in a eugenic fashion. In this way, a school (although a private institution and not one of the state) was a biopolitics through which eugenics could ensure that women were actively learning as girls how to be the best mothers for the nation.

The *Los Angeles Times* had an equal amount of articles that speak broadly to eugenic education, and offered the same viewpoint as *The New York Times* in regards to the gendered slant of the articles: advocacy for eugenic education was entirely directed towards women. Race betterment, or the avoidance of race suicide, continued to be the focal point of such news reports—in fact, the concept of the “race” took on a life of its own. Eugenic educators believed that American society as it was in 1913 “threatened the very life of the race.”¹⁶⁹ The *Los Angeles Times* also ran articles explicitly addressing the debate over the eugenic benefits or disadvantages of higher education for women.¹⁷⁰ A happy medium came to rest in the education of women for eugenic purposes. This type of education often was passed from one woman to another.

Miss Mary Reed, whose interview with *The New York Times* publicized her opinions about how to solve the “girl problem,” was one of the those very women whose life’s goal was to teach girls the “practical eugenics” of motherhood. In 1912 *The New*

¹⁶⁸ “Vassar girls to Study Home-Making As Career.”

¹⁶⁹ “Broaden Study of Sex Hygiene.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug 28, 1913.

¹⁷⁰ “College Girls as Wives and Mothers.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jul 25, 1915.

York Times published another article that covered the entire page entitled “This School Teaches Women How To Be Good Mothers.”¹⁷¹ As a school of mother-craft, curricula took a two-pronged approach to educating women depending on whether they were soon-to-be-wives or soon-to-be-mothers. The classes that were focused on educating young girls on how to choose the best husband and mate for life were especially directed towards younger women who were still dating and not committed to a man. Another line of courses aimed to educate mothers to properly care for their children, from infancy to adolescence, using practical eugenics. Miss Reed was quoted to have said that “even for the woman who does not intend to marry and is one of those who cling to this decision, instruction in mothercraft is still useful; to some celibate women, indeed, it is as essential as it is to women who marry and have families.”¹⁷² Reed went on to explain that “in the complex scheme of modern life thousands of women who never become mothers are none the less intimately entrusted with the care of children.”¹⁷³ It was true, female teachers, advocates, politicians, social workers and mothers entirely dominated the child welfare movement. Later on in the twenties, some universities began to offer summer courses just for women. Dr. James Dickenson of Harvard taught a course on “eugenics, growth and development of the child, and principles of child psychology.”¹⁷⁴ Exact curricula varied, although all focused on the subjects that were most important for women to learn to be the best eugenic mothers and euthenic homemakers they could be.

¹⁷¹ “This School Teaches Women How To Be Good Mothers.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jun 9, 1912.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ “Interesting Courses of Study Open: University Classes Offer Club Women Chance to Turn Leisure to Account.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jul 18, 1926.

Publicized widely and popularly attended, these courses were one of the formal ways that women engaged with eugenic discourses, as a community of women together.

Taking weekend classes was not the only option women had to engage actively with the new educational ideas presented in both newspapers. Those women who could not afford to enroll in college courses were alerted in the newspaper of other educational opportunities where they could listen to, participate in, and learn about the same eugenic ideas. Listed twice in the daily events column of the *Los Angeles Times*, “What’s doing today?” were free public lectures by leading eugenic scholars and doctors like Paul Popenoe and Dr. Rosanoss at the chamber of commerce and the public library respectively.¹⁷⁵ These public spaces were accessible to all and allowed for a place of open engagement, while being advertised in print.

It is apparent that American women had many ways then to engage with eugenic theories in a formal educational setting and through women’s journals, but one outlet that the newspapers provided that was not accessible in a college course or in a journal was the advertising for and reviews of popular movies, plays and books that implicitly teach, condone, and celebrate eugenic ideas. One of the earliest published public events that advertised its open engagement with eugenic ideas was a play called “Is Matrimony a Failure?” in 1909. The theater director spent months looking for actors to play the roles of daughter and son that resembled the actors who would be playing their parents. He felt that it was important to be as realistic as possible now that society was aware of “the laws of heredity and eugenics.”¹⁷⁶ Years later, on the west coast, a play called “The Escape”

¹⁷⁵ “What’s Doing Today?” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Mar 21, 1928 and “What’s Doing Today?” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Feb 18, 1928.

¹⁷⁶ “This Stage Family Will Look Genuine.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug 6, 1909.

was advertised in the *Los Angeles Times*. The playwright chose to make a social commentary on the divergent realities of the birthrate among middle- and working-class Americans. One of the “keynotes” on which “The Escape” is based is that “in filth, squalor and poverty of the slums a child is born every two days, while on Fifth Avenue only one every two years.”¹⁷⁷ This play was developed into a movie two years later and advertised as “‘The Escape,’ A film Treating of Eugenics and Sex Questions, exhibited in Cort Theater” in *The New York Times*.¹⁷⁸ Both the play and the film were highly popular and emphasized that the “girl problem” could find solutions in eugenics. Another movie called “Temptation” was a feature attraction and screen drama with the strong message that “every child had the right to be well born, that for economic reasons care has been taken to breed the best poultry and horses,” and the same care should be applied to “breed the best brand of babies.”¹⁷⁹ The “rights of the unborn” was a common phrase in the early twentieth century that attempted to create a sense of pending guilt of future misconduct or extra sense of female civic duty to the nation seen in journals and newspaper articles, heard in sermons at church, and now being expressed in movies.

Other plays were never turned into movies, but could have had just as much a role in the lives of both newspapers’ readership. Listed in the ‘Women’s Section’ of the *Los Angeles Times* under “Women’s Work, Women’s Clubs” was a list with descriptions of “Dramas Dealing with Eugenics.”¹⁸⁰ Days later, there was a much longer article in the same section of the paper reporting back on the success of the plays. Sydney Ford, the

¹⁷⁷ “The Problem of Humanity: Improvement of the Human Race Task of the Ages.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct 28, 1912.

¹⁷⁸ “Show d’Annunzio’s Photoplay ‘Cabiria’.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jun 2, 1914.

¹⁷⁹ “Eugenics Theme at Palace.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jul 27, 1920.

¹⁸⁰ “Women’s Work, Women’s Clubs.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Nov 14, 1913.

columnist, wrote that “whether it was the subject ‘Eugenics’ or the personnel” there was a huge turnout—“women enough to crowd the big classroom to overflowing.”¹⁸¹ The three productions focused on family, the woes of the dangerous inheritability of alcoholism and the dramatic “inevitable tragedy” when couples marry each other without consideration of their spouses “untainted parentage.”¹⁸² Ford reported, “the reading of the plays occupied so much time that there was little opportunity for discussion,” but “will doubtless come up in the next meeting a fortnight hence.”¹⁸³ This type of report exhibits the opportunity for active engagement with eugenic ideas afforded to many clubwomen. The documentation and publicity of such events expanded the circle of readership on the eugenic principles discussed to those who were not present and could therefore engage with the ideas tangentially. Analyzing club-meeting minutes in newspapers that were accessible to most middle-class women casts the net of eugenic engagement even wider to groups of women who were disconnected to structured women’s groups. Through newspapers, conversations about eugenics that could have stayed within the classrooms or clubrooms emerged into the vernacular of the kitchens and the front porches of any number of American women. In this way, newspapers reports on events of entertainment and amusement were an integral part in beginning biopolitical conversations with women in their own homes.

On the east coast, there was a play in the same year that garnered a lot of news attention in *The New York Times*. “Damaged Goods” written by a Frenchman, Brieux, was centered on the issue of “white slavery” a term used for the growing system of

¹⁸¹ Sydney Ford, “Women’s Work, Women’s Clubs.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Nov 21, 1913.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

prostitution in urban areas. The play debuted to a private audience of hand selected budding sociologists who were interested in John D. Rockefeller's initiative to combat vice in New York.¹⁸⁴ Months later the play's momentum had not lost steam. Headlines read, "Use Stage as Pulpit to Preach Strong Medical Sermon" as the Brieux play was to "be given before the President of the United States and Congress in the hope that it may interest them in the movement against social disease."¹⁸⁵ The French playwright was entirely well received in America, in fact he spoke out saying that although eugenics was becoming more and more popular in France, he felt that the American audience understood his educative purpose in a deeper way, and without mistaking him for "exploiting vice on stage."¹⁸⁶ This play, although performed often for exclusive audiences, was publicized so frequently in newspapers, that anyone who picked up *The New York Times* would have quickly become aware of the plays significant message.

Far more private an experience, except when shared in reading clubs, was the engagement with eugenic principles in books. Newspapers ran entire sections in the papers for reviews and announcements of new fictions and non-fictions. The earliest review of a eugenic book came in 1909 with Francis Galton's paper "Eugenics" which began the dissemination of ideology about heredity and race hygiene.¹⁸⁷ The reviews became more nuanced in 1909 when the newspaper published, "with the increasing interest in eugenics manifested through thoughtful people, the new book by C.W. Salbeey

¹⁸⁴ "Choosing Audience for Brieux Play." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb 23, 1913.

¹⁸⁵ "Use Stage as Pulpit to Preach Strong Medical Sermon." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr 6, 1913.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ "Other Reviews: Fiction. Excellent Works." *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr 2, 1905.

on ‘Parenthood and Race Culture’ will command attention.”¹⁸⁸ The central discussions in this book were biopolitical in nature, raising concerns about parenting and race betterment, and the important segregation and institutionalization that had to take place to limit the opportunities for the unfit to become parents. While this book remained on living room bookshelves, and bedside tables, other emerging publications such as the “Task of Social Hygiene” by Havelock Ellis were incorporated as primary textbooks in many university course curriculums on eugenics.¹⁸⁹ More and more books, both scientific and character driven narratives, were published by important leaders like Charles Davenport and Lothrop Stoddard with summaries and reviews in the papers for the best, most responsible and active citizens to engage with.

One of these such books jumpstarted one of the most large scale, country wide discussions on eugenics, and newspapers played the important role of disseminating that conversation to women across the nation. In 1917 Havelock Ellis published a continuation of his original papers “The Task of Social Hygiene” under a new title, “Essays in War Time.”¹⁹⁰ This work emboldened the discussion of the eugenic impacts that World War I was going to have on “civilized societies.” The English writer examined “the effect of war upon the race” and found it “wholly bad.”¹⁹¹ He found that the raising of armies interferes with “eugenical breeding, and none to favor it.”¹⁹² The idea that war was not eugenic was not entirely original. In 1913, Dr. David Starr Jordan

¹⁸⁸ “What Publishers Have in Store For Us.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug 8, 1909.

¹⁸⁹ “Book News.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Dec 15, 1912.

¹⁹⁰ “Essays in War Time.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb 11, 1917.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

wrote that war “spoils the human breed.”¹⁹³ He claimed that it was Benjamin Franklin that was first to notice “the fact that during a war a nation breeds from inferior stock—those left at home.”¹⁹⁴ Both newspapers played an important role in conveying a new gendered norm by spreading the eugenic concerns that women would marry the feeble men who were not selected as “fit” enough to be soldiers and thus usher in the demise of the American race. In another article Dr. Jordon warns that if war continues, the next generation of London’s people “will be the sons of slums”—a notion that returns more directly to the fear of the lower class out-producing the middle and upper classes.¹⁹⁵

Other American doctors had more specific concerns than Ellis. Dr. Clement Penrose’s greatest concern was that “history undoubtedly proves that masculine women almost always are attracted to the weaker, more effeminate types of men” which, *of course*, was a troubling situation for eugenicists.¹⁹⁶ With all the strong, “fit” men fighting in Europe, there was serious concern that if the war were to continue too long, the strongest strains in the American race would be eliminated. Professor Irving Fisher was less concerned about the nature of inevitable marriages on the home front, and more concerned with the reality that the wives with the most “fit” husbands were on another continent and the women were thus not able to get pregnant. “Empty cradles” were the “worst war horror” he declared to *New York Times* reporter Edward Marshall, a more formidable consequence than the war itself.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ “War the Foe of Eugenics.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jul 15, 1913.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ “Sees Eugenic Evils in War.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec 6, 1914.

¹⁹⁶ “A Nation’s Life Depends on Men’s Fighting Efficiency.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct 4, 1914.

¹⁹⁷ Edward Marshall, “Empty Cradles Worst War Horror.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jul 25, 1915.

Fisher saw that Europe was going to be ruined come the war's end, and that the United States would be the "one great nation physically and otherwise fit to carry onward the touch of civilization." He believed that it was time that America focus its energies on the task of "saving life," instead of "spending life," referring to the war in Europe. The task of accomplishing his life-saving goals could be approached in two ways, "executing plans tending toward world peace," which seemed implausibly idealistic or, "pursuing the principles of hygiene and eugenics," the rational, attainable choice. Fisher went on to explain "the fact that Europe is industriously weeding out her best should supply us with an incentive for weeding out our worst."¹⁹⁸ Professor Fisher thus framed the role of eugenics, and the eugenic education of women, as not only a necessary safeguard insuring the purity of the American race, but also the national security of the United States.

Another doctor, Dr. Fraenkel, concurred. This Great War, he cautioned, was going to have a negative effect on the babies of America, potentially leaving its mark "physically and mentally on the coming generations."¹⁹⁹ Fraenkel asserted that to avoid this fate for the nation, the duty lay with the American mothers. Dr. Fraenkel expressed his concerns that women might not marry American men who come home after the war because they were deformed or injured. He urged women that they must not forget that the soldier returning from war is a "picked man"—that he is a "nearly physically perfect specimen of manhood as can be obtained." For those who did not accept that argument, he offered an alternative suggestion that women might marry "crippled men" as it would

¹⁹⁸ Marshall, "Empty Cradles Worst War Horror."

¹⁹⁹ "Effect of the World War on the Babies of America." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 30, 1917.

be “in harmony with her mother instinct and protective spirit... and the men will have the added appeal of heroism and glory.”²⁰⁰ This union, he suggested, was the most eugenic and proactive solution to the race crisis that was eminent at the Great War’s conclusion. The war, as it was reported in the news, became a biopolitics of its own encouraging middle-class women not to engage with men who were left behind by enlistment officers, yet still encouraging women to be producing babies to “fill cradles” and marrying crippled veterans out of their motherly sensibilities in order to have more children than lower-class Americans—all in order to save the nation.

Apart from the “degenerate men” who were left behind during World War I, there was another population of individuals that was accruing greater attention as being eugenically unfit for the nation’s race: immigrants. The *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* addressed the “immigrant problem” with blunt, straightforward language. *Good Housekeeping* better baby contests in the women’s journals analyzed in Chapter Two also spoke of immigrants and portrayed them as eugenically inferior but in a less open and frank manner.

The languages of eugenics and immigration policy in America are inextricably intertwined and build on one another. Although the Immigration Act of 1924 never explicitly mentioned race, the ideologies reflected in the laws terminology like “native stock” versus “foreign stock” were a production of racial constructs. There was an intersection between nationalistic attitudes and racial ones in the minds of American eugenicists. Focusing their efforts on the saving of the American race, eugenicists equated citizenship within the United States to embodying Anglo-Saxon or Nordic racial

²⁰⁰ “Effect of the World War on the Babies of America.”

heritage—and sought to preserve that bloodline. From the eugenicist’s prospective, the immigrant problem was at its heart one of heredity, and admitting a surplus of “degenerate breeding stock” seemed to be one of the worst sins a nation could commit against itself.²⁰¹

By 1921, after the arrival of 1.2 million immigrants in just one year, headlines screamed, “Eugenicists Dread Tainted Aliens—Believe Immigration Restriction Essential to Prevent Deterioration of Race here: MELTING POT FALSE THEORY—Racial Mixture Liable to Lower the Quality of the Stock.”²⁰² Inflammatory, eye-catching, and dripping with eugenically founded fear and hatred, these headlines capitalized on the urgency of the immigrant crisis. In 1924 the National Origins Act breezed through Congress with a substantial majority. A report published in *The New York Times* from the Eugenics Committee suggested limiting the number of incoming Southern Europeans, as they were an “inferior race.” Since there were fewer Southeastern Europeans in 1890, they argued the census from that year should be used for formulating quotas instead of the 1910 census—that way, the percentages “would decidedly cut down the number of immigrants” and “change the character of immigration, and hence of our future population, by bringing about a preponderance of immigration of the stock which originally settled this country.”²⁰³ Eugenicists believed that “in the whole, immigrants

²⁰¹ John Higham, *Strangers In The Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1985), 151.

²⁰² Walter LaFeber, Richard Polenberg and Nancy Woloch. *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s*. 6th ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 125. and, “Eugenicists Dread Tainted Aliens.” *The New York Times* (New York Times, NY), Sep 25, 1921.

²⁰³ “1890 Census Urged as Immigrant Base.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY) Jan 7, 1924.

from Northwestern Europe furnish us with the best material for American citizenship and for the future up building of the American race.”²⁰⁴

Ultimately the eugenicists’ choice, the 1890 census, was selected and informed the quota that was integral to the 1924 Act. In full, the National Origins Act provided for the annual entry until 1927 of only 164,000 European immigrants. Under this arrangement, the combined quotas for Russia and Italy were less than that for Norway; the combined quotas for Poland and Greece were less than that for Sweden.²⁰⁵ The National Origins Act was a great victory for the eugenic sector in America, as the “Nordic race” qualified as a member of the superior races. In 1928, when discussions about lessening the restrictions on immigration were being had in Washington, many powerful white men and white women in the political, labor, and commerce sectors met for a conference and ultimately offered a warning against any lessening of the restrictions on immigration.²⁰⁶ The ultimate suggestion produced by this conference, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, was the implementation of new fitness tests as a prior to immigration—“to be desirable, the immigrant himself and his thirty or forty nearest blood kin should be superior people...we need only take the cream of the cream.” To be a superior person meant both one was either Anglo-Saxon or Nordic in heritage and without any sign of inherited degeneracy that was specified in other eugenic legislation like the marriage acts. The speakers predicted, led by Professor Laughlin, that “with a return to wholesale and unrestricted admission of immigrants, American ideals, habits

²⁰⁴ “1890 Census Urged as Immigrant Base.”

²⁰⁵ LaFeber, *The American Century*, 125.

²⁰⁶ “Alien Pedigree Barrier Urged.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jan 20, 1928.

and health will suffer.”²⁰⁷ The immigration issue divided the progressives but galvanized the eugenic community—the 1924 Immigration Act was a huge victory for eugenicists seeking race betterment and the end to race suicide. The information published in the papers was grounded in “scientific” legitimacy and agreed with the same messages produced in other media outlets.

Scientific legitimacy could not hold as much weight when matters of God came into the eugenics conversation. At a first glance, religion and eugenics do seem like an odd mix and perhaps not surprising that news articles discussing religion were the only articles that openly questioned the eugenic movement’s principles, actions or goals—but this rejection was not by any means universal or complete. Most ministers responded to the growing influence of science in the early twentieth century by denouncing it though intentionally incorporating scientific methods into their own belief system. Regarding eugenics, the eugenicists and clergymen shared a respect for the quality of human life as well as a belief in its “perfectibility,” though they often approached these issues from different perspectives.²⁰⁸ In March of 1912 a Reverend from Chicago, Illinois announced in his sermon that no couples would be wed any day after Easter unless they could present “a certificate signed by a reputable physician showing that the contracting parties [were] physically and mentally normal and have neither an incurable nor communicable disease.” This church saw “no need to raise a fuss” in opposition to eugenics when the only demand was a “simple safeguard to their future health and happiness.”²⁰⁹ Here, the

²⁰⁷ “Alien Pedigree Barrier Urged.”

²⁰⁸ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

²⁰⁹ “Eugenics and the Church.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jun 2, 1912.

church refrained from commenting on negative eugenic strategies and simply focused on the positive, which sought to propagate more healthy individuals of the American race.

On the same day in the same newspaper a church in New York denied participating in the selective granting of marriage licenses. However, it was not the eugenic principles that they objected to; Reverend Sanders said he “sympathized with the effort to improve the race by a stricter supervision of marriage.”²¹⁰ However, despite his understanding, the Reverend felt that marriage, being a civil contract, was more within the realm of the State to “exercise this supervision, under the direction of the medical profession, rather than the Church.”²¹¹ According to *The New York Times* reporters, two more churches in Chicago that year decided that they would be requiring certificates for “clean bills of health” before marriage licenses would be offered. Taking the duty one step further, in 1913, one church that had previously adopted eugenic marriage restrictions decided that if the church was going to assume authority over who can marry whom, it would also be within their sphere of responsibility to educate the children of their parish before they need apply for nuptial papers. Thus, Mount Morris Congressional Church was the first to introduce eugenics explicitly in church class.²¹²

The churches that the *Los Angeles Times* reported on in the same years were not as accepting or supportive of eugenic laws and science. The bishops at the Methodist church in Oklahoma City asserted that the betterment of the human race would only be found through the “regeneration by the Holy Ghost for the maintaining of a new and

²¹⁰ “State Rather than Church Supervision.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jun 2, 1912.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² “Eugenics in Church Class.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct 20, 1913.

nobler race.’”²¹³ This language reaffirms the eugenic goal of a superior American race, though it sees religion as the means to the end in place of eugenic science. Eventually, the state did take control of this decision and the duty to regulate the marriage of the fit no longer belonged to religious institutions. However, certain ministers and preachers who were anxious about the changing culture but also eager to find solutions to diagnosable social ills gravitated towards eugenics. Some joined forces with the American Eugenics Society (the group whose goal was spreading eugenic propaganda through educational instillations,) to become traveling eugenic preachers, decrying the unfit “specimens of humanity” and warning their flock of the hidden impurities in people’s secret pasts.²¹⁴ It can be concluded that religious figures as they were depicted in newspapers, although not presenting a united front in how they approached or navigated the intricate scientific aspects of eugenic thinking, shared the belief in betterment of the human race, and from this shared space, leaders in both sectors were able to unite in their Christian duty to the future of the race and the nation.

Conclusion

These newspaper articles, when viewed as a collection of material artifacts that can stand together to represent a group of people, a culture, and a society, become unfathomably important. A close reading of these reports, stories, and opinions reflects not only past events but also the people and ideas that were important at that time. When investigating how white middle-class women engaged with the discourses of eugenic thinking, an analysis of news media and their coverage of the eugenic movement can

²¹³ “Clergy Against Eugenics.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), May 7, 1914.

²¹⁴ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 1.

shed light upon what a woman might have known, learned, thought or did as she negotiated the emerging ideas of this burgeoning, new, pseudoscience of better breeding. It is evident that newsprint media acted both as a method for the dispersion of national ideas about race and gender and women's roles as mothers and wives as well as a point of communal reference to honor the work of those women who embody national ideas of normalcy on the local level. Newspapers serve as a method of social reinforcement of who and what is important in early twentieth century America, and how women can best function as valuable citizens of the state.

Newspapers as a print media source are wide in scope and diverse in content. The articles in both the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* that engaged with eugenic concepts and concerns addressed both national news and more local reporting. Newspapers thus functioned as means for the dissemination of national American ideas about race and gender roles and celebrated the biopolitics of women at work locally as it influenced the nation. Through a close reading of this collection of selected news articles, it is clear that white middle-class women engaged with eugenic ideas and became valued citizens because they were entrusted, as American wives and mothers, to make decisions about which people were best suited to take on the role of safeguarding the American race.

An understanding of *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* as representations of American popular culture and the society that existed in the United States at the turn of the century renders this collection of news articles intrinsically valuable to understanding how and to what extent white middle-class women navigated and participated in eugenic discourses. These newspapers reveal not only that women

became valuable to the state when they acted as eugenic reproducers and caretakers, but also which type of women were entrusted with this responsibility—those who were truly legion to the “native stock”—white and middle-class. The biopower that this select group of women held as actors within the eugenic movement, as future wives, as mothers, as students and as teachers, ensured their worth as citizens in the United States. By closely reading how newspapers addressed the international crisis of World War I and matters of national security in conjunction with local news of schools and churches and theater, it becomes clear that women’s choices in terms of marriage, sex, and child rearing had a profound impact on and were closely related to matters of the state. It is this close relationship between the woman and her citizenship within the state that makes her role as an actor within the biopolitics of the eugenic movement so crucial and worthy of recognition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Regulating Intimacy

Most families living in rural America at the turn of the century would have attended the state fair held every year. The fair was a fun and communal place to celebrate the best of the American agricultural lifestyle: the crops, the animals, the food, and at this point in time, the people. At most state fairs across the nation in the early 1900s fairgoers could expect to find eugenic exhibits where contestants who vied to be selected as the “most fit” specimen of the human stock were evaluated and awarded. These exhibits rivaled farmers’ competitions for the best bred cows and pigs or the largest cucumber or pumpkins in popularity. The contests which examined humans like any other prized product of the true American farm family took on two different forms: first the Better Babies contests, which then inspired more complex Fitter Families contests.

The first Better Babies contest was held in 1908 and the event quickly garnered support from the newly established Federal Children’s Health Bureau and remained popular into the 1930s. The national attention the contests received sparked the interest of important eugenic leaders who then helped to establish the first more elaborate Fitter Family contests in 1920 with funding and support from the American Eugenics Society (AES).²¹⁵ At both styles of eugenic contests, women performed the roles of doctor, nurse, mother and wife, and were intrinsically vital to the success, popularity and propagation of the events. Eugenic exhibits were established and well attended at state fairs across America by the mid-1920s and were a unique and important space because

²¹⁵ Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and The Family in the United States 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 150.

they witnessed the coming together of a wide variety of women from multiple spheres of the eugenics movement.²¹⁶

This chapter will attend to this racially homogenous gendered space, which provided the noteworthy convergence of many women. Nationally renowned white clubwomen and federal female officials working alongside female representatives from the AES, female professors and doctors, and female volunteers helping locally to organize the contests and of course, the female fair participants were all present. As shown in the way other scholars have used intimacy to open-up new avenues of historic scrutiny and understanding, the concept of intimacy can also be an illuminating approach when studying eugenic contests at state fairs.²¹⁷ Through this lens, we can better understand how state fairs broadened the eugenic circuits of knowledge among white middle-class women and also obscured the perceived division between what was public and what was private in American society.

When using intimacy as a lens to examine how these competitions extended eugenic circuits of knowledge, the physical space of the fair provides an important entry point to that analysis. Within close spatial proximity—the eugenic examining buildings and exhibits were often small—women involved with the eugenic movement at all levels and with various backgrounds were present and engaged. This assemblage of women were diverse in their levels of training and education and therefore presented the opportunity for them to both teach and learn the most important matters of eugenics: marriage, children, thus more broadly, creation of ideal families. Because these fairs were

²¹⁶ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 159.

²¹⁷ See Lisa Lowe, “Intimacies of Four Continents” in *Haunted by Empire*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 192 for further discussion of intimacy.

racially exclusionary and gendered in nature, the women who became privy to these informal channels of communication were predominantly white and middle-class. The women who shared in the space provided by state fairs felt themselves separate from and superior to all “lower races.” Thus, a woman’s allegiance to the dispersed network of eugenic information throughout the nation she gained access to at the fair situated and stabilized her biopower within the eugenics movement both locally and nationally.

A second application of intimacy as a lens of analysis reveals that these contests further complicated any assumed lines drawn between what information was thought to be of the home and what was of public concern. An understanding of intimacy as it refers to the national importance of “familial or conjugal relations,” highlights the closely bound ties between women’s reproductive habits and the nations’ future stability that was emphasized at the state fair.²¹⁸ Effectively, these contests took part in the biopower of regulating marriage and family life. In these competitions the most private details about a child’s or a family’s health, history, heritage and intelligence were made public and this publicity became important to a woman’s understanding of herself as a good mother and a good American. With this constructed identity of what it meant to be a citizen reinforced by the intimacies of Better Babies and Fitter Families contests at the state fair, white middle-class women felt stability in their place of power.

This chapter will begin with an examination of the history and origins of the Better Babies contests and explain what such an event entailed. This will lead to a discussion of the more involved Fitter Family competitions that grew out of the earlier Better Babies versions. To paint the most vivid picture of what it might have felt like to

²¹⁸ Lowe, “Intimacies of Four Continents,” 192.

attend the Fitter Families competition this section will discuss the other eugenic exhibitions that were set up in and around the contest centers to further the educational purpose of these contests. Select visual images from these events will be analyzed to more aptly illuminate the intimacies of these contests, what the people looked like, how they interacted, and how their interactions were both private and local, while also public, and national in nature. By the 1930s, eugenic competitions to evaluate the “fitness” of a family were a permanent and expected event within the state fair in forty different states across America. This national popularity magnifies the important need to examine these gendered spaces as a site where intimate eugenic knowledge was exchanged and shared between women from multiple spheres of the movement in a setting that blurred the lines between what was public and what was private—between matters of the family and matters of the nation.

Better Babies Contests

Better Babies contests emerged in America as a tool to promote infant and mother health care and education.²¹⁹ In the early twentieth century, the infant mortality rate in the United States was remarkably high. Some countries in Europe that had similar pronatal movements as the one that emerged in America had a true “population crisis” as a result of their infant mortality rates. In the United States, however, actual fear of a declining population was unfounded. White middle-class birth rates *were* dropping, but simultaneously the birth rates of immigrant, non-white and white working class populations were on the rise. Plenty of babies were being born, but not into the “best”

²¹⁹ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 150.

families. American pronatal reformers sought to increase (mostly white) human reproduction to combat the perceived threat of “race suicide” that seemed inevitable if change did not occur quickly.²²⁰ Historian Alisa Klaus suggests “American reformers were less concerned about the number of future citizens than about the quality and composition of the population.”²²¹ It was within this context that an urgent need for race betterment through improved pronatal care became apparent to white, middle-class American women.

Historians disagree on the exact details concerning the origins of the United States Federal Children’s Health Bureau but all credit two settlement leaders and leading social reformers of the time, Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley with the idea. Protecting every American’s “right to childhood” became for these two women a moral and practical endeavor that should be undertaken by all citizens and their government. Kelley wrote, “The noblest duty of the Republic is that of self-preservation by so cherishing all its children that they, in turn, may become enlightened self-governing citizens... For if children perish in infancy they are obviously lost to the Republic as citizens. If, surviving infancy, children are permitted to deteriorate into criminals, they are bad citizens; if they are left devitalized in body and mind, the Republic suffers the penalty of every offense against childhood.”²²² The Children’s Health Bureau thus had as its goal to create a stronger nation by protecting the “right to childhood.”

²²⁰ Alisa Klaus, “Depopulation and Race Suicide: Maternalism and Pronatist Ideologies in France and the United States” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York, NY: Rutledge, 1993), 201.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Kristie Linedmeyer, *“A Right to Childhood”: The U.S. Children’s Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1955), 10.

The Bureau had many supporters and various other aims more specific than the “right to childhood.” The National Child Labor Committee played a significant role in the establishment of the Bureau with the hopes of ending child labor, as well as the work of settlement house leaders and a vast network of clubwomen.²²³ Another extremely important voice in favor of the establishment of the federal agency came in 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt held the “White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children.” At this conference, Roosevelt expressed his concern for the future vitality of the “American family” and the “purported erosion of Anglo-Americans standards of living.”²²⁴ Although Roosevelt focused his interests on ensured support to better just a certain type of people and the Bureau’s mandate included the improving “all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of people,” many of the maternalist reformers fighting for the Children’s Health Bureau held similar concerns for the degenerating native stock as their President, and garnered much support from his constituents. The establishment of Children’s Health Bureau was thus rooted in not only “baby saving” but also for the maintenance of the American family and the democratically functioning republic that relied on the best citizenry. In 1913 the Children’s Health Bureau was officially established.

Five years prior, the first contest that blended the discourse of child health development and eugenics took place in 1908 at the Louisiana State Fair run by Mrs. Mary DeGarmo, a former schoolteacher, before the formal establishment of the

²²³ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 134.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Bureau.²²⁵ A progressive woman, taken by the call of “baby saving” that swept the nation in light of the high infant mortality rates, DeGarmo developed the “Scientific Baby Contest,” as she named it. Many of the problems DeGarmo saw around her that negatively impacted the health of children were unhealthy environments and unclean milk. With the assistance of local pediatrician Dr. Jacob Bodenheimer, DeGarmo recorded the physical and intellectual development of each contestant meticulously for scoring. Measurements were taken of “height and weight, circumference of head, chest and abdomen, as well as length of arms and legs.”²²⁶ With the growth of the broad reaching child welfare movement in the United States after 1910 and the dawn of the Children’s Health Bureau, the focus of many reformers turned away from improving unsanitary environments and unclean milk and towards the institutionalization of child welfare and to programs to educate mothers.²²⁷

In theory, the Better Babies competitions were held in the productive and progressive light of education. However, the ideas expressed by Roosevelt concerning the Anglo-Saxon American family illuminate how in practice the contest reflected a socio-economic and racial bias. The children submitted by their parents into such contests were judged on the basis of their hereditary characteristics, including some that were clearly racist and elevated the importance of typically white, Anglo bodily norms—such as size and shape of their ears, nose, and lips—as well as indicators of nutritional status and other aspects of prenatal and medical attention which intersected with matters of

²²⁵ Steven Selden, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families: Archival Recourses and History of the American Eugenics Movement” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148, no. 2 (2005): 206.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

socioeconomic status.²²⁸ In this way, these contests could be viewed as utilizing a pseudoscience aimed towards celebrating an idealized “physical perfection of children” instead of being rightfully designed to focus on saving the lives of infants.²²⁹ The contest winners were overwhelmingly those babies who manifested the physical and mental characteristics that President Roosevelt called for as being representative of the truest “American family.”

Better Babies contests were also held in Iowa beginning in 1911 under the guidance of Mary T. Watts and Dr. Florence Sherbon.²³⁰ Watts was the director of the Iowa Parent Teacher Association and Dr. Sherbon had earned a nursing degree from the Iowa State Hospital where she later worked as a nurse and as superintendent of the Training School in the 1890s.²³¹ Upon earning her medical degree in 1904 from the Iowa State University, Sherbon solidified her interest in the medical ideal of child and maternal health and spent the rest of her life working as an educator, reformer and doctor to carry out this goal.

Perhaps a seemingly odd venue at first glance, agricultural state fairs became the primary host for Better Babies contest. Upon further review the connection is more apparent. Historians have credited that the disparity between the care provided to livestock and that given children evident in an agricultural fair is what inspired Watts to begin judging babies in the same fashion. For years, farmers had brought the offspring of selective breeding—the plumpest hogs, the fastest stallions, and the biggest pumpkins—to

²²⁸ Klaus, “Depopulation and Race Suicide,” 202.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Selden, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families,” 210.

²³¹ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 135.

the fair to be judged. Why not judge the “human stock” to select the most eugenically fit people?²³²

Putting the principles of scientific management to work, the contests were run like an efficient assembly line. Before the event, infants were separated into groups based on age (12-14 months and 24-36 months), sex, and place of residence. Those categorized as city babies lived in places with 10,000 inhabitants or more, and those remaining were rural entrants. Once registered, the parents—most often the mothers—came to the contest venue at their scheduled slot. Upon entering, the babies were taken away from their families to another booth where a nurse recorded further notes on the babies’ health through a more thorough visual exam. Next, psychologists observed the infants looking for signs they could stand, walk, speak, how they manipulated balls and blocks, or how they responded to questions that asked them to imitate common household pets, “how does the doggie do?” and think about spatial reality with questions like “who is the baby in the mirror?” With these mental tests completed, the babies were then undressed and their clothes were set aside, and each donned a uniform white dressing gown. Then the babies were weighed and measured, examined by an optometrist, a pediatrician and an otolaryngologist, then weighed and measured a second time before being awarded a bronze medal on a blue ribbon. Each infant began with 1000 points, and was deducted specific values for any misconduct or poor showing throughout the examination. Specific examples of deduction worthy defects are “unevenness of the head, scaly skin, ill

²³² “Topic: Fitter Family Contests,” accessed March 17, 2014, http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/topics_fs.pl?theme=8&search=&matches=

deportment, decayed teething, abnormal ear size or shape, or enlarged glands.”²³³ The underlying prejudice of the contests, which excluded African American and immigrant infants from most contests, tacitly endorsed the cult of native-born, white superiority. Within this competing group of infants, victorious babies were not simply “better,” (because every contestant was better than other races in America,) they were “*super*” babies. The contests rewarded those with the time and resources to take part in such an alluring event. Inevitably, the infants who most adhered most closely to the norms embedded in the score cards—derived from white, middle-class standards—triumphed.²³⁴

The success of their first contest spurred Watts and Sherbon to organize the American Baby Health Organization with both women as the officers. The popularity of Better Babies contests skyrocketed after 1911 when *Woman’s Home Companion* popularized the competitions through co-sponsorship. In 1913, Watts wrote to Julia Lathrop at the Children’s Bureau about the contest’s popularity and made a point of noting that they often make a concerted effort to include “Eugenic Expositions” associated with the contests.²³⁵ Watts felt it was important that the Bureau understand how unique their message was and how successful they had been in sharing it thus far.

Through the confines of a contest, Watts and Sherbon were able to communicate the important messages of child health and hygiene in a way that the local populations would listen and engage. In 1915, Dr. Lydia deVilbiss from the Kansas Department of Health persuaded Julia Lathrop of the value of using contests by arguing, “Instead of going into the country districts and trying to persuade the farmer folk to do what we want

²³³ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 24.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²³⁵ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 136.

them to do, this plan purposes to put them on their mettle and let them do for themselves what we want them to do in any other way.”²³⁶ In this context, the contests serve as the biopolitics that incorporated ideas of eugenic marriage and eugenic motherhood into the vernacular of rural American life. The contests were a public, social, and federally regulated place where women engaged in the micro-level popularization of the private matters of the family highlighting the importance of both the intimacy of these competitions and the circuits of knowledge that grew through the Better Babies contests.

Charles Davenport of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) caught wind of the successful Better Babies contests and wrote Watts a postcard and urged her to “give fifty percent to heredity before you begin to score a baby.”²³⁷ Just a year later, Davenport offered more intense critique, “A prize winner at two may be an epileptic at ten” he cautioned, hinting at the uncertainty that can arise when looking at an individual removed from the context of his family.²³⁸ It was true that in the agriculture setting the contests were embedded within, the young calves were awarded their ribbons and prizes when they were evaluated on their own and in comparison with their parents. Although it took nearly a decade for the transformation of Better Babies contests to transition to Fitter Families contests, Watts wrote, “It is now demanded that the Better Baby be supported by a Family, fit both in their inheritance and in the development of their mental, moral, and physical traits.”²³⁹ In 1920, using sponsorship and funds from the American Eugenics

²³⁶ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 137.

²³⁷ Harry Bruinius, *Better For All The World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity*. 1st ed. (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006), 235.

²³⁸ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 132.

²³⁹ Ibid.

Society, Watts and Sherbon organized the first “Fitter Families for Future Firesides Contest” at the Kansas Free Fair in Topeka.²⁴⁰

Fitter Families Contests

To enter the contest, a family scheduled an appointment for a specific time and day during the fair. Typically married couples with children entered, no individuals and few childless couples did—unless they were seeking the advice of a eugenic specialist before they committed to each other in marriage. In typical grassroots fashion, most of the tents or small structures where the eugenic testing went on were simply equipped with makeshift desks from old kitchen tables and folding chairs.²⁴¹ Upon arrival, there would be multiple steps that the family would move through before any prizes were awarded.

First, a historian would fill in the “eugenic family history” section of each family member’s individual form, which were identical except for the deletion of the reproductive history section for children under three. Second, families were evaluated based on participation in religious, political, fraternal, or any other organizations, levels of education, and occupations. Included in this social evaluation were details about each individual’s size and condition at birth, illnesses, accidents and vaccines. The test of a family’s mental health was evaluated in “psychometric and psychiatric forms” based on mental test scores and an exam evaluating reflexes, personality, and temperament.²⁴² Physical condition was first evaluated by an “anthropometric” structural assessment, a medical exam of the body (including dental and visual and hearing,) and laboratory tests

²⁴⁰ Bruinius, *Better For All The World*, 237.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 144.

including urine, blood, and a Wasserman test for syphilis. The final section of the examination concluded with an examination of the health habits of the family and focused on nutrition with specifics about how much meat is eaten, and coffee drank, as well as work, sleep, exercise, and recreation habits. Figure 1 shows an image of one of these such individual scorecards from a winning family at the Texas State Fair in 1925.

In total, the experience of being evaluated as a family unit took about three hours.²⁴³ An “expert” graded each section, and an overall individual score was assigned in the end. Winning families inevitably had their pictures published in the local newspaper, while winning individuals were awarded the famous medal inscribed with a verse from the 16th Psalm, “Yea, I have a goodly heritage.”²⁴⁴ Although the “Fitter Families for Future Firesides Contest” could feel quite demeaning when viewed through a presentist lens, eugenic contests continued to be wildly popular and few seemed to find such evaluations humiliating as scores of families flocked to the Eugenics booths at state fairs. Perhaps it helped that an early introduction of grade inflation was employed to ensure that people would keep coming back through positive reinforcement.

²⁴³ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 144.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. 146.

The state fair eugenic competitions also might have maintained their popularity by remaining flexible to changing ideas and notions of what was meant of eugenics. Seen in the factors selected for evaluation, Florence Sherbon's concept of eugenics differed slightly from the likes of Charles Davenport and others at the ERO. In fact, the evaluated points of analysis echoed Richard Dugdale's original understanding of "soft hereditarianism" and the consideration of the environment in human development.²⁴⁵ Most mainstream eugenicists were dedicated to protecting the best "germ plasm" through research on patterns of human inheritance with very little consideration of the effect of the environment on the health and development of a person. However, in the 1920s and into the 1930s, the AES diverged from the pedigree studies of the ERO and focused its attentions on the improvement of the environment families lived in and extended the domain of eugenics to living conditions, diet, family and home life, and even social life more generally. This expansion to more factors not completely grounded in strict hereditary logic could have stemmed from the social reform goals many of the women now involved with the AES held personally or the change may have emerged as a way to broaden the scope of eugenic discourses when newer scientific discoveries began to disrupt some flawed hereditarian ideas. Thus, the popular conceptualization of heredity in the early twentieth century, which incorporated both nature and nurture, was more in accordance with the AES than the ERO. Historian Martin Pernick argues that when most Americans spoke of "good breeding" they meant "the combination of good ancestry and

²⁴⁵ Bruinius, *Better For All The World*, 145.

good upbringing.”²⁴⁶ Watts and Sherbon and the examination conducted within their Fitter Families contests appealed to and embodied this popular conception.

Besides the Fitter Families examination itself, there were many exhibits of eugenic propaganda that were supplied by the AES that had powerful messages to share with fair-goers and contestants alike. There was the “Mendel Theater,” where puppets were used to demonstrate concepts of heredity for young children, a cage of live guinea pigs, which also were examples of Mendelian principles, and dominant and recessive inheritable traits. Contestants could be approached by a roaming clown who spouted facts about the importance of eugenic fitness, or they could read charts up on the walls comparing literacy rates between “native born,” “foreign born,” and “negroes”—an unmasked display of eugenic discrimination against immigrant and non-white populations.²⁴⁷ Another traveling exhibit sponsored by the AES featured five blinking lights under the heading: “Some People Are Born to be a Burden on the Rest.” A sign under one of the flashing light explained “every 15 seconds \$100 of your money goes for the care of persons with bad heredity...” Another flashing light indicated “a person is born in the United States who will never grow up mentally beyond that stage of a normal 8 yr old boy or girl.” This propaganda evoked the economic and social ills discourses that so often informed the eugenics movement. Every exhibit was meant to educate the fair-goers on the principles and value of the science of eugenics, but also forwarded the racist and classist ideologies and reverence for scientific authority that eugenics depended on.

²⁴⁶ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 141.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144, and, Bruinius, *Better For All The World*, 237.

Verbal descriptions of these propagandist exhibitions and gendered places of intimacy that were otherwise known as eugenic Fitter Families contests can only go so far in actually articulating what this experience may have been like for all the various women participating in the event. The following section will analyze a selection of photographs that can visually communicate the circuits of knowledge that were expanded among groups of women and the intimate connection between the private life of the family as they were bound to the future of the nation.

The Images of Intimacy

The American Philosophical Society, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania now holds the papers of the American Eugenics Society and has digitized many images from the Fitter Families contests from various state fairs around the nation. The visual images are some of the only ways for historians to engage in what the actual fair experience was like for participants, organizers and passers-by. As this study is focused on using intimacy as a lens of analysis to better understand how many different types of women interacted both with each other and the government within the gendered, racially homogenous space of eugenic competitions, the images will serve as a unit of analysis to which that lens can be applied. Visual images of the Kansas Free Fair, home to the first “Fitter Families for Future Firesides” contest photographed in both 1920 (Figure 2) and then again at the 1929 fair (Figure 3) will be the first point of analysis. In examining these two images together with an eye to the intimate, the parts of the contest that changed and the aspects stayed the same within this contested cultural space will illuminate what was most

important, the co-dependent relationship between the health of the family and the health of the nation.



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Figure 2. *Fitter Families Contest at Kansas Free Fair, 1920.* Reproduction by permission of the American Philosophical Society.
(http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=12)

At a first glance, the photograph in Figure 2 reveals people sitting on five small benches waiting outside the first 'Fitter Families Contest' in America in 1920. The "Eugenic and Health Exhibit" shed, dwarfed in comparison to the examination building, is the focal point of the picture. It is clear that benches were purposely placed facing the

exhibit so that onlookers and contestants would not be able to help but read and react to the signs and messages displayed before them. The exhibition shed is fitted with a small porch that functions as a stage to the educational propaganda provided by the AES. Nailed to the pillar on the far left is a large sign titled “Birth Rate,” the information provided below is illegible. However, it can be assumed that this message had something to do with fear that the ‘native stock’ was in danger of being ‘out-bred’ by the lower races. On the right side of the porch is one of the flashing light exhibits typical for the AES designed to visually depict the difference in literacy among the races within the United States, reinforcing the elevated intelligence of the white, American race. These two signs both signal to the participants that what they are engaging in is bigger than themselves, the fitness of their families, or the health of their communities. Calling attention to national birth and literacy rates drew the outside world in close, reminding participants and observers that the work of eugenics as much as it was a part of individual marriages and child rearing was one that engaged intimately with the population on a national scale.

Front and center on the porch of the Eugenic and Health Exhibit sat a large kitchen scale for weighing infants and an announcement for when the next live lecture was to be held. There are two women on the stage, sharing what was seemingly a private conversation—their storefront can speak for itself. Because these two women are so near to the interior of the building, it can be presumed that they are involved with the leadership or organization of the contests. Beyond the steps of the Eugenic Health Exhibit porch the crowd looks exhausted, perhaps from the heat of a long day, perhaps from the thrills of being examined as a family. Some look at each other, some look at the ground,

some even look at the camera. In total there are fifteen women in the photograph, the two on stage and the rest sitting on or standing near the five “Topeka Parks” labeled benches. There are only three men in the picture. One man is sitting with a woman, presumably his wife, another leans against a tree and a third stands with his back towards the exhibit, perhaps even by chance captured within the frame. The women sit in groups, none sit alone. There is some age variation, one group of three look like they are a family, a mother and two daughters. Some women seem to be young wives in the thirties, some much older in the fifties. Every person in the photograph is well dressed (both the men and the women wear hats, except for the younger girls,) and everyone is white. In the body language of the people photographed there is a sense that they are sitting at the intermission of a very long play, bored of waiting and ready for the end to reveal itself. There is communal aspect of their waiting; as if these women felt that they had to stand together to reinforce their importance of what they were doing—ensuring the best families for “future firesides.” The female majority that the literature suggests existed at these exhibits is thus reflected in this photograph. What may not have received as much analysis in the past, which an examination of this photo brings to light, is that while there were female doctors, nurses, educators, federal officials, and clubwomen, there was also variation within the group of female participants. Using the lens of spatial intimacy, which calls for the inclusion and acknowledgment of all participants who were present in the same space to most fully understand the history of the event, it becomes important to remember that female contestants at these competitions were not just mothers, but sometimes daughters, girlfriends, aunts and grandmothers. This variance in age and roles

played within a family expanded the reach of the circuits of knowledge through which eugenic knowledge traveled within communities and throughout the nation.

As a point of comparison, Figure 3 shows the same exhibit photographed nine years later which can be examined in order to detect any difference, change, evolution or progress in the contests.



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Figure 3. *Eugenic and Health Exhibit, Kansas Free Fair (1929).* Reproduction by permission of the American Philosophical Society.
(http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1563)

In 1929, the same “Eugenic and Health Exhibit” billboard is prominent on the rooftop, but now right beneath it is the clear endorsement of the contest by the nationwide

organizational funders with another sign reading, “American Eugenics Association.” The AES sign is so closely nestled in with the eugenics exhibit title that their mere physical proximity reinforces the importance of the fit family on a national scope. On the left side of the porch, the old educational billboard about the birth rate has been replaced with a large board with dead guinea pigs crucified upon it in patterned way to express the process of Mendelian inheritance. On the right, the literacy comparison between races has been exchanged for a sign labeled, “Good Environment.” The sign nailed to the central pillar on the porch provides the agenda for the day in terms of lectures and presentations. Another sign defines eugenics and still another specifies what is meant by “positive eugenics.” Although some of the information and propaganda has changed, the general organization of the exhibit remains quite similar to the contest held nearly a decade before.

What has changed is that instead of five there are now fourteen benches for people to relax on—and that is exactly what people are doing. There is nothing happening at the moment at the Eugenic Exhibit, yet eighteen women, three of whom are quite young girls, and six men who seem connected with the females either as fathers or husbands sit calmly on the benches. There is no one standing on the front porch, but it also doesn’t seem as though people are turned towards each other and chatting, rather, they are all are looking straight ahead—as if they are all listening to something. Hypothetically, that they *are* actually listening to someone is an option—since 1920 there were some improvements to the technology of the exhibit. In 1929 the photograph shows that two large loudspeakers were mounted to the each corner of the roof, and potentially eugenic propaganda could be playing to a silent, respectful and eager crowd of people.

Only the youngest girl in the photograph, perhaps five years old, turns around in her seat and looks the photographer right in the lens. All twenty-four people in this photograph are also white, and this can be qualified without exceptions or hesitation.

The two photographs depict a remarkably consistent eugenic exhibit, the most important changes being that more people are there in 1929 and the nature of the propaganda is different. These changes speak to the growing popularity of the movement and the competitions at the fairs in general, as well as the blending of eugenic and environmental ideologies in the popular understanding of heredity and how to raise the “best” humans.

What remained the same in terms of the message of the propaganda exhibited was the connection between the family and the nation. The biopower women negotiated concerning ideas about marriage and children affected the size and make up of their families, and also their nation. The 1929 addition of the loud speakers was not only a sign of modernized technology, but there is an underlying implication that the message they have to share was important and must be heard by all. Although there is no photograph of the female doctors and professors and nurses, we know they are within the building to the left, the contest building, analyzing, negotiating, confirming and denying the eugenic fitness of others. Consistently, in both photographs there are more women than men. This affirms the claim that typically these state fair contests were a gendered space.

Men could bring their cattle and their crops to the fair to exhibit their perfection, and have that glory reflect on their skills as farmers and as men. Women brought their family. Women’s worth was, literally, judged based on how healthy their families were,

how fit they were, how well nourished, and how white. A woman who practiced good “practical eugenics” ought to be able to control all of those mitigating factors through educated, informed spousal selection and scientific motherhood. This was how she proved her worth as a woman and a member of American society. The Fitter Families contests functioned within this constructed paradigm that the private and the public were separate. Yet, here at the state fair, the “private” parts of familial life (marriages, sex and methods of parenthood,) were intimately bound to the nation as a whole.

Figure 4 is the last image that to be analyzed and shows members of a 4-H Girls Club at the Anderson County Fair in Iowa who entered into a eugenic contest.



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Figure 4. 4-H Girls Club, “Winners in Preliminary Contest with Examiners” (including Mary Watts), Anderson County, Iowa 1925. Reproduction by permission of the American Philosophical Society. (http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=25)

The white girls are photographed together as a group, all in uniform dresses, half the women standing behind their seated sisters. In the back center stands Mary Watts, the very grandmother of the Fitter Families contests. The title of the picture reads, “Winners in preliminary contests with examiners,” presumably the two men standing on either side of Mrs. Watts are her fellow examiners. 4-H clubs originated as an educational program where children could learn how to be productive members within their community through the art of animal husbandry, learning the skills of responsibility and self-sufficiency by caring for another life. In this photograph the girls are pictured without their prized goats and sheep, because in this year, it is not their animals’ but their human fitness that was being evaluated. These young white women negotiated eugenic biopower within their homes, in their schools, and now within their social and educational clubs publicly at state fairs.

This photo speaks even louder to the earlier discussion of the widening circuits of knowledge that are made possible when multiple age demographics of women become intimately engaged with the biopolitics of the eugenics movement. Here, at the state fair, the next generation of moral, strong, good, women were being evaluated to determine which individuals had the potential to become the most ‘fit’ mothers. Just like the animal stock held and judged in the corrals and stalls at the same fair, these photographed young women are being considered based on their hereditary pedigrees and physical performance. At their young age, before becoming mothers themselves, these women are engaging in the eugenic ideologies of ideal womanhood and motherhood.

All three of these images from the state fairs help to better situate the idea that eugenic fitness contests were a gendered space where knowledge of eugenic biopolitics circulated among women in an intimate setting.

Conclusion

Within the United States, the voices that could be heard in the early twentieth century concerning the fitness of the American family and the health and vitality of its children most loudly came from people within formal positions of power, like Roosevelt and Kelley. President Roosevelt's statement at the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children where he expressed his concern for the "vitality of the American Family" can be put in conversation with social and political reformer, Florence Kelley's stance to protect the rights of all children to enter "the republic as citizens."²⁴⁸ Although not entirely compatible, these two voices both become a part of the Better Babies and Fitter Families contests. A close analysis of the intimacy of Better Babies and Fitter Families contests can relocate some of that political power on the national level within the actions and engagements of everyday, white, middle-class American women.

Imagined, founded, organized and led by women, it becomes clear why Better Babies and Fitter Families contests were a gendered space. All of these different roles—spectator, mother, contestant, evaluator, leader, federal official and organizer—were positions occupied by middle-class white women. This reality rendered the eugenic competitions an intimate, though racially exclusive gendered space. Within the context of

²⁴⁸ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 134 and Linedmyer, "A Right to Childhood," 10.

these state fairs, white women's engagement was a biopolitics through which discourses of scientific motherhood and practical eugenics were brought to the national level.

Funded and promoted by both the Federal Children's Health Bureau and the American Eugenics Society, Better Babies and Fitter Families contests were endorsed by, and thus closely connected with both governmental and nationally recognized organizations. At their most basic level, these competitions functioned as pronatalist propaganda—encouraging the better and more abundant breeding among the best stock of the American race. The nationally held contests were intended to manipulate peoples', particularly women's, reproductive and child-rearing decisions. These competitions held at state fairs, an institution that was designed for exhibition and entertainment, were integral in normalizing and expanding the eugenic discourse within the family and beyond the home.

This event was also intimate both in the sense that women from different spheres of the eugenic movement were in the same space and also because seemingly private, familial information and relationships were entangled with regulatory matters of the state. Any perceived delineation between home and nation became obscured as winners of Fitter Families contests were painted as the ideal "American family," the progenitors of the "native stock" whose truest blood would save the vitality of the United States. The circuits of knowledge through which eugenic ideas were shared among women throughout America was greatly expanded through eugenic contests and had a powerful impact on how the 'fitness' of an American family was understood. Although we hear the voices of Roosevelt and Kelley, the voices of unnamed and forgotten white middle-class

women who actively engaged with and promoted the eugenic competitions for better breeding became powerful citizens within the movement and the nation by doing so.

CONCLUSION

Listen For The Echoes

If American children learn about eugenics in school at all, they learn of it as a misguided pseudoscience that drove the Nazis to the pinnacle of evil and destruction of human life in their quest to create a ‘master race’ during the Holocaust. A more comprehensive global history of eugenics is not included in curricula, particularly the significant role of the United States in that movement. Although the American eugenics movement did not attain the level of eradication of the “unfit” that took place in Nazi Germany, legislation for eugenic sterilization was lifted straight off the pages of U.S. law books and implemented by the German government. How America forgot about eugenics is astounding in light of eugenics’ popularity in the past; at its peak in the early 1900s, this “scientific” ideology was largely taught without rejection and accepted without qualification in high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the nation. A reading of Tom Buchanan’s venomous voice fearful for the future of civilization in *The Great Gatsby* not only depicts the vehemence with which eugenics was sought after as a solution to stabilize and regulate an uncertain national future but also the mundane and casual way with which racist and classist ideas were exchanged without hesitation or doubt. While writing this thesis, the number of people I spoke with who felt they understood to the role of eugenics in the American context were few and far between. When the word is recognized, the understanding of its real impact and meaning is vague. This reality is frustrating, but not at all surprising. Largely, within the popular memory of America’s history, the American eugenics movement is rationalized, marginalized, abbreviated or just forgotten.

For some, the history of eugenics is a lost history, a non-event simply because it did not exist within their conceptual reality of America's past. Others find ways to rationalize eugenics within the scientific knowledge of the day, understanding, if not justifying, the role eugenics sought to have in stabilizing social unrest and ensuring the security of America. Still more Americans find a way to marginalize this movement as a brief hiccup in an otherwise positive and celebratory understanding of American history. Such a mindset downplays the impact of eugenics within the United States and separates what happened in America from the global context of the emerging eugenic community.

Most importantly to what is discussed in this thesis, the majority of popular understandings of eugenics in America have been abbreviated, simplified and reduced to focus exclusively on the processes of negative eugenics that limit reproduction rather than positive eugenics which encourages procreation. Limiting the scope of the movement to the courtrooms, hospitals, and institutions for the feeble-minded confines the knowledge and power of eugenics to those who were (predominantly white male) lawyers, doctors and psychologists. Eugenics was a social and political movement that moved far beyond those exclusive spheres and was woven into discussions of marital relations, education and parenting. This thesis' exploration into the world of positive eugenics reveals that white middle-class women's engagement with eugenic discourses helped them to gain considerable biopower as citizens of the United States.

The term biopower according to Foucault "brought *life* into the realm of politics as an object of explicit calculation," and emerged to regulate human populations through the "science of demography."²⁴⁹ White middle-class women played a crucial role in this

²⁴⁹ Macey, "Rethinking Biopolitics," 187.

new science of monitoring births and deaths in their cultivation and perpetuation of eugenic thought and practices which are forgotten when eugenic histories are limited to negative eugenics. The most widely circulated and frequently read women's journals of the early twentieth century provided a prime medium through which the biopolitics of eugenic marriage and scientific motherhood were learned, performed and shared among women. The level of engagement that women had with the biopolitical content in these widely read women's journals influenced the popularization of eugenics conversations within communities of white middle-class women on a national level.

National newspapers were influential in the dissemination of eugenic ideas about race, gender and women's roles within society. Functioning as a forum to celebrate the white middle-class women who embodied the biopolitical eugenic ideal of "intelligently" procreative citizens, newspapers were influential in bridging the gap between local discourses of eugenics and the stability of the nation. How women expressed their biopower as citizens was of equal importance to the nation in both national matters of immigration and World War I as it was important to local concerns about marriage, education, and child rearing. The women who embodied eugenic gender roles as a "fit" reproducer and guardian of America's future were assured of their worth as citizens in the United States.

The practice of eugenic contests was the epitome of positive eugenics. By examining the state fairs through the lens of spatial intimacy it becomes clear that the Better Babies and Fitter Families contests were intrinsic to the widening circuits of knowledge surrounding the biopolitics of eugenics which further normalized and popularized the practice of popular eugenics. The involvement of governmental and

national organizations in these intimately exposing contests helped to further obscure any preconceived division between what was a private and what was a public matter. Better Babies and Fitter Families contests became a place where white women could exhibit their fitness, reproductive biopower and thus reaffirm publicly their worth as citizens of the nation. Without a close examination of positive eugenic campaigns—the calls to educate young women on the best practices for selecting a husband and raising children to be the most fit future Americans—the powerful role of white middle-class women within the movement is lost. The popularization of the eugenic messages white middle-class women consumed and engaged with reinforced racial discrimination and class biases that secured these women as members of the supreme American race and excised working-class, non-white, and otherwise “lower” populations as ‘others.’ These ‘others’ were not considered fit to reproduce while the “fit” race was encouraged to do so as a matter of citizenship to America, especially the women.

We must focus our efforts on the study the eugenics movement beyond the parts that sought to restrict reproduction and work to include the aspects of the movement that functioned to encourage eugenic breeding. By doing so, we can better acknowledge the influential if not transformative role that white middle-class women’s biopower played within the movement. This more inclusive study of eugenics complicates a perceived end to the movement. When only negative eugenics are examined, the end of the movement in America came when eugenic marriage laws, segregation laws, sterilization laws, and immigration laws were overturned. These formal political and legal ends to the movement only tell part of the story. The sexist, racist, and classist aspects of discriminatory eugenic ideology wrapped up in positive eugenics can not be overturned

as easily with the passing of a bill. The dispersed nature and everydayness of positive eugenics is unnerving; eugenic discourses were accessible, familiar and popular in women's journals, the news and were celebrated at the "Eugenic and Health Exhibit" at state fairs across America. Perhaps it is this pervasiveness of the eugenic movement that Americans are often uncomfortable with, and thus seek to forget.

The act of forgetting, or pretending to forget, is a dangerous one because it not only allows Americans to live without the guilt of acknowledging a painful past, but also because this lapse in memory serves to downplay connections between historic eugenic ideology and current issues where again Americans are trying to control populations.

Since the mid-1960s, America has been one of the main actors funding, designing and organizing efforts to monitor and curtail the number of people in the Third World.²⁵⁰ Recent movements to empower women and bring about economic growth in Third World countries have been of great interest to Western feminist Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as well as International Financial Institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF.) These groups claim women's high fertility rates, particularly poor women of color, as the roots from which Third World nations' poverty and environmental degradation stem from. Often, the women in these countries are understood to be reckless, uneducated "baby producers," whose role in

²⁵⁰ Betsy Hartmann, "The Changing Faces of Population Control" in *Policing the National Body: Sex Race and Criminalization* ed. Jael Silliman and Anannya Bhattacharjee (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 260. I have decided to follow Hartmann and Wangari's use of the term Third World although I am aware of the limits of the term.

overpopulating the global community has wreaked havoc on the nation's environment and caused problems in public health and sanitation.²⁵¹

In naming overpopulation as the cause of women's low status and poverty, Western feminist groups, among others, justify introducing new reproductive technologies that focus on reducing fertility rates internationally. The power and control of pharmaceutical companies that these Western organizations command has resulted in the use of banned contraceptives or the use of new, un-tested, potentially harmful reproductive technologies on Third World women.²⁵² This practice is not only dangerous and discriminatory, but locates national issues solely on overpopulation and ignores the hegemony of Western countries in determining the global economy—an oversight that proves to be highly problematic. Many of these nations' histories include slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism and now are fighting to compete in the Western dominated global market. Within this market, Third World countries are often trapped within the demands of "structural adjustment policies" imposed upon national economies by the World Bank and the IMF, which prove to be the true creators of mass hunger and destructors of the environment.²⁵³

When feminist NGOs and other IFIs come to Third World countries with their own agendas and Western ideas for implementing reproductive technology, they are blind to the hegemony that created the social inequities that exist based on race, class, and gender. Reproductive interventions as solutions to women's oppression in Third World

²⁵¹ Esther Wangari, "Reproductive Technologies: A Third World Feminist Prospective," in *Feminist Post Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Postcolonialism & Repression* (New York, NY: Led Books, 2002), 309.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 303.

countries fall short when explaining causes of the problem.²⁵⁴ The supposedly “rash,” “uncivil” lifestyles the citizens of these nations practice, particularly females, act as a scapegoat for the Western influences in the “power structure of the Third World” that oppress women and perpetuate poverty.²⁵⁵

I do not claim to say that there is a clear or direct line between the history of white middle-class women’s involvement in the American eugenics and the modern feminist work for nonwestern population control through family planning in Third World countries. That would be over-simplistic and unfounded within the research I have done. What I do want to acknowledge is that these global feminist organizations working to bring reproductive technology to Third World nations, can be blind to their own acts of oppression, “their abuses, class biases, gender biases and racism embedded in the application of these technologies.”²⁵⁶ Where as eugenics located its discourse in the protection and security of the nation through the preservation of the American race, these global feminist organizations call upon the protection from overpopulation of a “global village” by reducing birthrates among poor women of color as “fast and as cheaply” as possible through the mass provisions of long lasting contraceptive methods.²⁵⁷ Critics argue that this work is misleadingly done under the guise of international aid to assist the economy and work for the emancipation of women. This thesis has attuned us to listen for the echoes of eugenics in current discussions of population control and be aware of

²⁵⁴ Wangari, “Reproductive Technologies: A Third World Feminist Prospective,” 310.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 305.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 299.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 300 and Hartmann, “The Changing Faces of Population Control,” 260.

how reproductive technology can increase the ability of a privileged race, class, or gender to make decisions about “who will live and who will not.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Wangari, “Reproductive Technologies: A Third World Feminist Prospective,” 304.

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