Ghosts of Eugenics’ Past: ‘Childhood’ as a Target for Whitening Race in the United States and Canada

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While in modernity childhood was increasingly invested with emotional and intellectual energy, it also became a site of scrutiny and intervention, so that philosophers, scientists, and humanitarians pursued the improvement of humanity and the human condition through management of ‘the child’. In the first half of the twentieth century, such attention settled on children deemed to present both problems and opportunities for the improvement of the race, as eugenics came to dominate discussions of human progress. This paper examines the significance of childhood as a resource for human futures and technologies of ‘eugenics’ insofar as they target children: specifically, the development of intelligence testing, institutions of separation, and involuntary sterilisation in the United States and Canada. In these discourses and technologies of eugenics, childhood appears as a reserve of human potential which, appropriately regulated, may be harnessed to ‘build a better future’. The paper also considers the perspective of survivors of these practices who experienced their childhood and future possibilities as having been expropriated from them by the state. By considering these governmental and personal registers side by side, the paper sheds light on the perceived social utility of childhood, as well as the particular character of loss experienced by those whose childhoods were subject to state intervention.

Keywords: Whiteness; critical childhood studies; racialisation; eugenics; survivor memoir; biopolitics.

Introduction

In Anglophone [post]colonial countries such as Australia, the United States (U.S.), and Canada, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed an enthusiasm to improve the human race, conceived along ethno-nationalist and ableist lines. Such ‘improvement’ involved some fairly ‘innovative’ medical and legal interventions into the lives of people deemed to be genetically degenerate, and so who were understood to be contributing to the human species, and the nation, in adverse ways. This enthusiasm for the need proactively to ‘better the species’ was supported across a variety of discourses and institutions: in popular culture literature and activities, as
well as science, medicine, education, and academia, and across a political spectrum from elitists such as Theodore Roosevelt (Kline, 2001) and Alfred Balfour (Jacyna, 1980) to social progressives such as Tommy Douglas (McLaren, 1990) and Erskine Caldwell (Holmes, 2003). The push for medical intervention developed from an anxiety among an emerging professional middle class that too many of the ‘wrong’ sorts of people were procreating, whereas birth-rates of the ‘right’ sort of people were in decline (Wray, 2006). This historical juncture brought together anxieties about race, gender, age, ability, class, and nation in a novel constellation, and in that constellation cultural leaders read society’s destiny in the promise of eugenics, or the science of breeding. The burden of this interventionist push fell largely upon working class and poor women and children, about whom a good deal of moral panic had already been circulating (Kline, 2001). Through these interventions on them a new articulation of race and production of whiteness was developed and refined: as connected to the purification of ‘the nation’, and of a citizenry equipped to demonstrate the white nation’s perfection.

This paper examines this articulation of whiteness as it was developed through elaborations of the meaning of childhood in eugenics discourses and practices. From the early Enlightenment, understandings of childhood were advanced in tandem with modern conceptions of humanity and subjectivity. As emotional and intellectual energy was invested in ‘childhood’ during the modern period, childhood also became a site of scrutiny and intervention, so that philosophers, scientists, and humanitarians pursued the improvement of humanity and the human condition through management of ‘the child’ (as opposed to ‘the adult’, understood as completed and unchanging)—both conceptually and through practices focusing on actual children. I will explore this elaboration of ‘the human’ through ‘the child’ here in connection with eugenics discourses and practices, as well as survivors’ accounts of their subjective experiences of childhood and childhoods lost. Through this interaction of discourses, childhood emerges as a ‘resource’ valued in so far as it is able to articulate a viable future. As representative of human futures, governments see childhood as a site of management, expropriation, and intervention, just as for survivors, childhood is experienced in memory as a site of profound loss that cannot be mourned, and which may act as a barrier to the capacity to build a future life.

Survivors of forced sterilisation in Canada provide the accounts to which this paper turns. Some have been published already on the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada website (http://eugenicsarchive.ca), and I also refer to Leilani Muir’s memoir, *A Whisper Past: Childless After Eugenic Sterilization in Alberta* (2014). Muir survived eugenic policies only repealed in Alberta in 1972 and learned of her own sterilisation only after attempting to conceive a child. She later became the first successful litigant in a series of suits taken against the province’s practice of involuntary sterilisation of children in state care who had been deemed to be ‘feeble-minded’. I had the opportunity to interview Leilani and her friend (and fellow survivor) Judy Lytton (née Faulkner, no relation) before Leilani’s unexpected death in 2016.¹ I

¹ Ethics approval was obtained for these interviews by application to the University of NSW Human Research Ethics Committee (#HC13235). Notably, however, Judy and Leilani were members of the board governing the research project with which I was involved at that time, the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Community-University Research Alliances [CURA]) funded project, Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada. Both Leilani and Judy were enthusiastic to publicise their stories, and each had also engaged very publicly in discussions of their traumatic experiences at the hands of the province of
had found myself in Edmonton, Alberta, working on the racialisation of First Nations children, and ‘whitening’ of Aboriginality through the figure of the so-called “half-caste,” “quadroon,” or “octoroon” Aboriginal child in Australia. I do this work as a non-Indigenous settler-colonial Australian animated by the lived contradiction, in the country where I grew, between the fetishisation of a certain normative ‘white childhood’ and problematisation of Indigenous childhood. In Canada, however, I was interested to find a very different formation of ‘white childhood’ through my interactions with people who, living in poverty as children, had been sterilised because they were considered ‘not quite white enough,’ or as ‘white trash.’ A comparative study of national projects to whiten race through the use of children that is more ready-to-hand would compare the Stolen Generations in Australia to Aboriginal children removed to Residential Schools in Canada. Yet meeting and talking with Leilani, Judy, and other survivors of coerced sterilisation convinced me that the racialisation of poor white children is an important, if neglected, element of a broader use of ‘the child’ to purify the whiteness of the settler-colonial nation – an element that interacts complexly with the removal of Indigenous children from family and culture. The present paper therefore will elaborate this use of childhood as a vector for the whitening of the nation through the sexual sterilisation of children considered insufficiently ‘white.’

To begin to comprehend the child’s part in the elaboration of conceptions of whiteness, I will examine its biopolitical formation in the discourse and techniques of eugenics in the U.S. and Canada: through the invention of the designation ‘moron’ and consequent institutionalisation and sterilisation of children sorted to that category. As will be shown, this categorisation is continuous with a preceding European epistemological tendency to produce ontological order by differentiating beings according to progressively more abstract and minute categories. ‘Race,’ already a latecomer to this discursive practice, involved sorting peoples according to global region and skin pigmentation and other physical traits that then become a marker for the attribution of certain (hierarchical and derogatory) intellectual, cultural, and personal characteristics. The invention of the ‘moron’ extended this discrimination of race further by constructing a group of people whose difference was not marked through pigmentation, and whose supposed biological inferiority placed them in an ambiguous category that transgressed formerly stipulated racial boundaries, moving from the epidermis to the mind.

I argue in this paper that much of the discursive work of differentiating ‘white trash’ from normative whiteness focused on the figure of ‘the feeble-minded child’, understood as an excess signalling the proliferation of deformity and degeneration of the white race. ‘The child’ became a key locus of intervention in these cases not only because sociologically children are more isolable and malleable than adults, but moreover, because of an investment in the idea of ‘the child’ as symbolic of social futures that lends children to be more liable to such interventions. After analysing the discursive and practical interventions in childhood to purify whiteness through the

Alberta. For a more extensive account of Leilani’s and Judy’s involvement in the Living Archives Project, see Wilson (2018).

I place these terms in quotation marks to signal their historical usage, and to acknowledge these terms’ offensiveness.

I turn to a comparison of the eugenic management of First Nations children in Australia and Canada in a companion paper that is yet to be published, provisionally titled ‘Breeding out the Colour’: ‘Childhood’ as a Target for Whitening Race in Australia and Canada.
eradication of the feeble-minded child, in the final section of the paper, I will consider the character of loss experienced by targets of eugenics in terms of the significance of childhood as encapsulating human futures.

**Eugenics, ‘the Child,’ and the Refinement of ‘Whiteness’**

A peculiar anxiety promotes the project to refine whiteness in settler-colonial societies. This anxiety heeds an ever-present threat of contamination by the *Indigene*, whose presence is feared, resented, disavowed, or at best tolerated and contained (see McClintock, 1995; Jackson, 1998; Watson, 2002, 2009, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2005, 2015). Concerns about race purity have been articulated variously by settler-colonial nation states: from the ‘one-drop-rule’ in the United States, which ensured that progeny of mixed race unions were always assigned the racial identity of the ‘lower status’ parent; to Apartheid laws in South Africa, which attributed rights according to one’s belonging to the classification of ‘white’, ‘coloured’, ‘Indian’, or ‘black’; to the various policies regulating migration broadly referred to as the White Australia Policy. This concern to govern race is characteristically ‘modern’: as Robert Bernasconi (2001), Mark Larrimore (2009), and Emmanuel Eze (1997) have each argued, the delineation of the species according to a biologically elaborated conception of ‘race’ first emerges with Kant’s anthropology, under the influence of the taxonomic theories of Linnaeus and Buffon. That project arose in the context of colonisation, and the conquest of lands and peoples through the slave trade. A theory that placed Africans and Indigenous peoples on a lower rung than Europeans supported such practices, and the need to maintain these peoples in a condition of servitude suited a modern emphasis on the governance of life rather than simple annihilation. That is, a social relation of superiority to these populations was constructed not only by means of coercive power, but also through complex of psychological, conceptual, and social systems that produced and continues to reproduce racialised differences (see Fanon, 1967/2008).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this distinction between ‘governance of life’ and ‘annihilation’ as forms of control was elaborated under the purview of the nation state in terms, following Francis Galton, of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ eugenics: respectively, the cultivation of practices, habits, and social entities (marriages, families, civil institutions) thought to promote the fertility of the ‘fittest’, verses practices that prevent from breeding the kinds of people believed to be of low quality (see Levine & Bashford, 2010; Wilson, 2018). In the United States and Canada both forms of eugenics were brought into play, to address anxiety regarding, not so much the growth of African-American and Indigenous populations, but of immigrant and poor, rural white communities: groups of people who troubled the category of whiteness and appeared as its excess, but who also could not easily be sorted to another category. They were prefigured in colonial British America as ‘lubbers’ — formerly indentured white servants who found community with escaped black slaves — and by poor whites in the antebellum South, whose labour was devalued and superfluous due to the availability of slaves (Wray, 2006).

This anxiety may be understood as a result of such populations’ relatively liminal status: their performative ambiguity, or failure normatively to enact ‘whiteness.’ Showing themselves to be ‘unfit’ to prosecute the colonial mandate of whiteness, poor, rural whites were understood to have been “outclassed in the race for land” (Wray, 2006, p. 78/214). Moreover, by fraternising with natives and freed slaves, they failed to perform the appropriate boundary work to defend whiteness (Wray, 2006).
Their frequently large families could be seen as unruly in contrast to the reproductive parsimony of the white middle class, but, perhaps more disturbingly, also signified reproductive success. An emerging educated and professionalised middle class had begun further to refine a conception of whiteness that needed to protect itself from contamination at the margins, and eugenics provided a scientific discourse through which to differentiate and purify a morally upright conception of whiteness through a racialisation of class. To be clear, the techniques of racialisation deployed here appeared more sophisticated than, but were continuous with, the racialisation of slaves and Indigenous peoples precipitated in the context of earlier social and economic change. Poor whites (as well as blacks) were policed through anti-miscegenation laws, were portrayed according to their moral difference as nomadic, promiscuous, and lazy, and were even distinguished physically as having a yellow or dusty complexion (Wray, 2006). As non-white races were already assumed to be inferior, the effect of extending these techniques to poor whites was to racialise them. This rendered them as biologically inferior and produced in them vulnerability to social shunning, violence, and premature death (see Wilson Gilmore as cited in Weheliye, 2014).

These socio-cultural settings formed the discursive core of institutionalised positive eugenics in Canada and the U.S. Propaganda cultivated both enthusiasm and fear in middle-class citizens, garnering community support for eugenic population management. An event that signalled this cultural trend was the Panama Pacific International Exposition, hosted by San Francisco in 1915. Featuring the first public showing of the National Conference on Race Betterment, this conference was felt to epitomise ‘world progress’. Indeed, one of the most popular exhibits of the fair was the Race Betterment booth. Exposition directors dedicated an entire week to the theme of ‘Race Betterment’, culminating in a didactic play, a common propaganda medium of the time. Redemption: A Masque of Race Betterment, “centered on the struggle of the white race to rise above disease and degeneracy” (Kline, 2001, p. 17). Extravagantly staged with an audience of five thousand, it was a morality play with no pretence of subtlety. One of its chief characters is called ‘Neglected Child’, and much of the drama circulates around the deliberations of ‘Womankind’, who must resist debauchery and pledge herself to save the future of the race (see Kline, 2001). This and similar cultural events succeeded in promoting the public’s investment in race purity.

The project to improve the species through racial training was broadly celebrated, culturally, scientifically, and politically. Some states of the U.S. promoted genetics and race as decisive attributes of fitness for marriage by issuing certificates attesting to the bearers’ racial purity. Likewise, in the 1910s, parents capitulated to a standard of beauty calibrated to ‘racial fitness’ by entering their children into ‘better baby’ competitions (or ‘Scientific Baby Contests’), the first of which was held at the Louisiana State Fair in 1908 (Kurbegovic, n.d.). Doctors and nurses took measurements of children’s weight and height, head, chest and abdomen circumference, and compared these to standardised metrics for physical development that were coming to be relied upon by the medical profession, tallying results onto a scorecard. ‘Fitter families’ competitions later emerged from this movement in the 1920s (Selden, 2005).

These ‘positive eugenics’ strategies were supported by more coercive practices in ‘negative eugenics’ — indeed, positive and negative strategies fit hand in glove, in that the same techniques of standardised testing that identified ‘better babies' and
‘fitter families’ also earmarked for active exclusion from the gene pool those deemed racially unfit. This motive to eliminate ‘genetically weak’ members of the population was driven by other anxieties, less available to scientific scrutiny. ‘Loose morality’ of working-class women was a chief concern at that time, and was connected to a disruption in gender dynamics among the middle class, as jobs for professional men had become scarcer, and women better educated. Coupled with the political activism and greater independence of middle-class women seeking the franchise, a desire for the restoration of social order came to rest on working-class women and children, who were vilified as portents of social degeneration. Enlightened middle-class women could unite with men in condemning the moral incontinence of the poor and decrying the cruel fate of their children. Despite criticism they had received for their interest in self-actualisation and education for women rather than motherhood, these ‘new women’ were able to deflect social censure from themselves onto working-class women by participating in eugenic discourse and practice: Feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner used their ‘progressive’ writings to promote ‘social responsibility’, with a distinct emphasis on race betterment through the duty of motherhood in white middle-class women, and restraint in reproduction for those without means and who did not epitomise whiteness to a sufficient degree (see McClintock, 1995; Seitel, 2003). Indeed, most workers conducting surveys for the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor were women (Wray, 2006). Just as women had performed much of the boundary work that had sustained colonial structures through home-making, enforcement of gender norms among Indigenous workers, and a moral purification of an otherwise brutal system (McClintock, 1995), women during this period enforced social difference between working- and middle-class whites through a process of racialisation. Characteristics of poverty became essentialised, heritable, irreversible, and physically indelible, and middle-class women were invested with the power to read for these marks of degeneracy by visiting and observing poor households.

Within this movement, the figure of the child came to be especially meaningful both as an ideal into which the future of the race was invested, and as a sign of race degeneration — or what President Theodore Roosevelt had in 1905 called ‘race suicide’. The health and wellbeing of children came to be a specific focal point of the concern for race hygiene, and by the 1920s President Herbert Hoover was explicitly linking the ‘health of the child’ to the ‘strength of the nation’. Hoover convened a White House conference on Child Health and Protection, for which he developed a ‘Children’s Charter’, or declaration of the rights of the American child. This convergence between a legal discourse of protection and rights, and a medical discourse of care, hygiene, nourishment, and inspection, settled on the figure of ‘the child’ as bearer of the nation’s prospects. Yet it settled on actual children differentially, according to their social class, and corresponding to the vicissitudes of ambivalences contained by that figure.

We can understand how this inequality is constructed if we look to analysis of the figure of ‘the child’ in modernity. As I have argued elsewhere (Faulkner, 2011a; 2011b; 2013; 2015; 2016), the modern conception of the child is ambivalent to the point of bifurcation, personifying human promise and plasticity as well as the frailties,

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4 Sociologist Edward A. Ross first coined the phrase in 1901, and Roosevelt subsequently used it in a speech called On American Motherhood (March 13, 1904). The text of the speech can be found at [http://www.nationalcenter.org/TRooseveltMotherhood.html](http://www.nationalcenter.org/TRooseveltMotherhood.html). See also Kline (2001). Ross had first used ‘race suicide’ in an address to the American Academy of Political and Social Science (Kühl, 2002, p. 115, n. 9).
imperfections, and dangers that are hypothetically latent within humanity’s essence. This is because, as yet unrealised, ‘the child’ signals human possibilities, and is invested with whatever hopes and fears are salient at that historical juncture. At issue, then, is the child’s cultural significance as a site through which societal traits deemed to be problematic are either purified or amplified. For instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s account of childhood in Émile (1762/1974) takes heed of what he perceives to be children’s special vulnerability to corruption, as well as their capacity — under controlled circumstances — to embody humanity at its most virtuous. The promise of ‘the child’ is that it may be conceptually segregated from society, scrutinised under the laboratory conditions of the philosophical thought experiment. By separating Émile from the vagaries of what was, in his eyes, contemporary debauched culture, Rousseau was able to preserve within the child a timeless essence natural to all men, yet easily ruined by society with them. As a figure of western imagination, ‘the child’ is, in this regard, both a site of nostalgia for a more perfect past — a goodness emanating from natural anthropology — and a lens through which hope for a better future is focused — that is, a future that the best and wisest are able to direct through management of the child.

Yet the idea of ‘the child’ also concentrates anxiety and fear about the prospects of humanity, symbolising as it does the most unruly and undisciplined elements of humankind. As it circulates discursively, ‘the child’ attracts contempt as much as praise, and to be labelled ‘childlike’ or ‘childish’ characteristically renders one less powerful. Indigenous peoples are regularly infantilised, for instance, so that they may be subjugated and managed. Indeed, as Toby Rollo (2018, p. 309) has argued with reference to the infantilisation of black slaves, a ‘child/human binary’ structures racialisation, connected as it is historically to the father’s absolute paternal right, under Roman law, to discipline (or even extinguish) his children. ‘The child’, in this way, whether it is associated with innocence or unruliness, is conceptually imbricated with exposure to violence. Moreover, insofar as childishness signifies proximity to nature and animality, association with it supports a representation of Indigenous (or other racialised) peoples as the progeny of original sin. In this cast, ‘the child’ takes on a significance as a harbinger of humanity’s worst propensities, or the seed of social disharmony and vice.

The contradiction of these dual significances is even more pronounced at times of perceived social and cultural upheaval. When a ‘way of life’ and conventional norms appear to be under threat, ‘the child’ is drawn upon to symbolise the perils or potential gains of such change. By the early twentieth century, the contemporary image of the child had already been under construction for two centuries. In the context of the ascendency of the biopolitical modern nation state, ‘the child’ split into a vector of social disease, on the one hand, and, on the other, a fetishised figure of innocence that personifies social health and duty to nation, and obscures the conditions of social difference between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. The rise of child stars such as Shirley Temple helped to exemplify the conceptual connection between ‘childhood’ and the health and purity of the nation discursively elaborated by Roosevelt and Hoover. Moreover, Temple’s innocence could absorb concourse with all manner of American, from sailor and street urchin to black domestic servant. Her famous staircase dance with Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson in The Little Colonel (1935) was the first interracial routine in Hollywood’s history. Yet, as Ara Osterweil argues, rather than transcend racial tensions, the staircase scene stages the very same postbellum miscegenation fantasies and anxieties that had been inflamed by D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915). Where the latter had attempted to scotch interracial desire through depictions
of violence, however, *The Little Colonel* (which borrowed its title from the protagonist of Griffith’s film) purified the stain of miscegenation by laundering ‘adult’ sexual desire and racial violence through an apparently innocent desire for Temple’s infantile body (Osterweil, 2009). The normatively-white child’s body, then, was invested with a power to transform and sublimate social disquiet and the various caesura that notionally differentiate humans.

This purifying function of fetishised white childhood, however, had to be supported by the concealment of aberrant childhoods: specifically, through the psychological testing and medical institutionalisation of children whose situation was more complicated than cinematic representations of childhood would allow (see Hatch, 2015; Veren, 1997). The capacity of ‘the child’ to signify both poles of the race’s prospects — apotheosis and decline — was key to that figure’s capacity to unify multiple discourses and techniques of power.

As a symbol of human potentiality, the child takes on the significance of a field of experimentation for human futures, and is especially critical as a site of intervention for the management of such futures (Faulkner, 2010a; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; Ryan, 2014). Conceived of in this way, ‘the child’ is rendered as a materiality that may be manipulated to actualise human progress once they come to be of age. Understood in their significance as pure conduits for the contemplation of human nature — as humanity *in potentia* rather than in actuality — children become objects for the enactment of change and management of risk. This ‘not-yet’ status renders children ideal targets of biopolitical intervention and transformation precisely because they are conceptualised, according to this rationality, as unconscious, unrealised, and prior to the materialisation of consequences. The management of humanity through these apparently pluripotent beings was conceived of as both easier and more ethical, precisely because children are understood as not-yet-humans. Through eugenics in the early twentieth century, this status of the child as a site of intervention in human futures rendered the bodies of children available to the management and purification of the white race, both discursively and technologically.

Whiteness was written through children’s bodies in a number of respects: from the pure specimen of race advertised through the Scientific Baby Contests, to the working-class and disabled children who were cast out of a future race — labelled, segregated, and sterilised. The seeming semantic *stability* and *plasticity* of ‘the child’ as medium for the significance of race purity together enabled slippage in relation to other signifiers of race. For instance, in debates that pivot on the decisiveness of either nature or nurture in determining character and capacity, ‘the child’ continues to abide as the ‘seed’ of success or corruption. This is underscored well by F. C. S. Schiller, in the *Eugenics Review*, when he engages the question of the efficacy of education as opposed to breeding to cultivate a better society:

> I entirely agree that it is right and desirable to make the best of the *infant material* born into a society and not to let it be needlessly enfeebled and spoilt by ignorant and defective nurture. To see to this is part of the social problem of education in the widest sense. I also agree that the woeful failures of existing societies to achieve this end are highly deplorable. But I cannot quite see that this subject comes strictly under the head of eugenics. Does it not belong rather to the problem of nurture? (Schiller, 1918, pp. 327-28)

Whether it was found that ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’ was the ground for the production of traits or determination of character, the site of intervention was nevertheless the body
and mind of the child. Likewise, sexual sterilisation of ‘problematic’ children was perceived as effective in stymying the proliferation of wrong types regardless of whether the basis of this wrongness was genetic or environmental. The plasticity of the child figure — combined with the endurance of its significance as a vector of both contamination and purification — sustained it as an attractive site of intervention. And where the story about genetics was brought under pressure by the weight of environmental factors, practitioners of eugenics were sufficiently agile to change their rationale rather than alter their commitments to the technologies through which they sought to engineer a better race. They could be agnostic about the causes of degradation while still holding fast to its remedy. And the remedy was the eugenic and behavioural training of children, understood as seed, potentiality, and portent, of a future humanity.

The manner in which the materiality of childhood was thus trained involves a double movement of evacuation and reinvestment of significance. The privileged white child of the ‘better babies contest’, on the one hand, is fetishised: rendered as a desirable, magical plenitude, as if it were devoid of the very social and economic relations that produced it (see Faulkner 2010b; 2011b). On the other hand, the eugenic apparatus purifies and renders available the abjected white child as a surplus: a form of ‘bare life’. I concur with Alexander Weheliye, however, that Agamben’s theorisation of this capacity is deceptive: far from transcending race, and other forms of ‘caesura’, the child that is available to eugenic thinking and technologies as ‘bare life’, rather, is an engine of racialisation. As Weheliye argues with regard to Agamben’s claim that the figure of ‘the Muselmann’ is deprived a form of life (political differences that characterise human life as it is lived):

> Far from exceeding race … the Muselmann represents an intense and excessive instantiation thereof, penetrating every crevice of political racialization; how else to explain the very name Muselmann, a racial slur for Muslims? (Weheliye, 2014, p. 55/209)

The ultimately vulnerable figure of the child to the eugenic apparatus — like the Muselmann to the concentration camp — is purified only in the abstract, and only according to a mindset that wants to deny life’s embeddedness in the political. Through that image, however, children who found themselves at each end of the eugenic continuum were produced as either ‘white’ or ‘white trash’: as either material for the nation’s improvement, or as an excess to be contained and expunged.

From ‘Idiot’ to ‘Moron’: The Child in the Discourse of Eugenics

At a level of abstraction engaged by legislators, the idea of the child provides a space for contemplation of the question ‘what sorts of people should be allowed to exist?’… as if one could enact that mandate materially by either making live or letting die actual individual children. At its extreme, this idea can lead to practices that attempt to arrest in their childhood — their ‘not-yet-humanity’ — an individual judged to be intellectually disabled or otherwise ‘deviant,’ so that they may then be prevented from entering society ‘properly’. This was attempted recently in the case of ‘Ashley X’: a girl with “profound developmental disabilities,” whose doctors at the Seattle Children’s Hospital performed ‘growth attenuation treatment’ to satisfy her parents’ desire that she remain in a physically infantile condition (see Wilson, 2018, pp. 93-97). Their

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5 The ‘Muselmann’ is the name given to the concentration camp inmate who is emaciated to the point of absolute affectless-ness, losing the will to live and withdrawing from all others.
reasoning was that, child-sized, she would remain manageable to carry as she aged. Her father’s public designation of her as his ‘pillow angel’, however, together with his avowed desire to ‘nip in the bud’ her precocious adolescence (she literally had her breast buds removed), indicate something more fundamental at work in the wish to produce a perpetual childhood. This extreme example signals a more widespread conception of childhood as a field of experimentation upon the human, and site of intervention in what kind of humans are allowed to circulate, that also motivated twentieth century sexual sterilisation of children.

At that time, positive eugenics worked in tandem with the discursive development of categories of abnormality and instruments of its measurement that would reach into the child’s soul with increasing precision and efficacy. The invention of the “moron” is a striking example of this. ‘Moron’ is a neologism coined by American psychologist and eugenicist Henry H. Goddard in 1910, and borrowing moros — meaning dull, slow, or foolish — from Ancient Greek (Goddard, 1927). By the time this term was in use, other terms already sat under the broader genus of ‘feeble-mindedness’: namely, ‘idiocy’ and ‘imbecility’. These expressions were supposed to have very precise meanings, pertaining to the results of ‘IQ tests’ (then called Binet-Simon tests) expressly adapted to the purpose of limiting the genetic and social circulation of certain types of people.6

Yet the invention of the moron marks a turning point in the pathologisation of human difference in eugenic terms. For, while the previous expressions described very noticeable deviations from the cognitive norm, the moron specifically designated a deviation that without measurement would otherwise remain undetected, and so may ‘slip’ into the gene pool and normal society unobserved. According to the Binet scale, the ‘idiot’ was supposed to have a mental age of two or younger; the “imbecile” between three and seven. At a time when most left school in early adolescence, this new category of ‘moron’ — which characterised those whose mental age was determined to be between eight and twelve years — was a subtle measure indeed. Yet it was the ability to pass unnoticed in normal society that marked, for eugenicists, the moron’s especial danger. Racial normality had by now become so rarefied a state — and whiteness so pure — that the need to exclude deviation was pursued with increasing zeal.

The most significant danger to society the ‘moron’ presented, however, was their procreative capacity. Goddard’s test case for the usefulness of ‘moron’ as a designation was elaborated in his 1912 book The Kallikak Family: A Study of the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness. Goddard takes as his case study a family with two opposing genetic destinies born of one common ancestor, Martin Kallikak, Snr., whose descendants from his legitimate union are ‘normal’, but who fathers a line of ‘degenerates’ through his ‘immoral’ union with an anonymous ‘feeble-minded’ woman. Goddard demonstrates how, after several generations, virtually all progeny of the illegitimate side of Kallikak’s genealogy are classed as ‘F’ (feeble-minded); and his exemplar is ‘Deborah’ — a child relinquished to a ‘training school’ because she had been struggling at school and her mother was overburdened by children.

Deborah tests as a ‘moron’. She is capable, he says, of practical tasks but is challenged by calculations requiring abstract thought. Deborah worries Goddard

6 An adaptation of the Binet-Simon scale, the Stanford-Binet scale, is still in use today.
because she is attractive and good-natured, and so would easily fall prey to immoral social elements."

Here is a child who has been most carefully guarded. She has been persistently trained since she was eight years old, and yet nothing has been accomplished in the direction of higher intelligence or general education. Today if this young woman were to leave the Institution, she would at once become prey to the designs of evil men or evil women and would lead a life that would be vicious, immoral, and criminal, though because of her mentality she would not be responsible. There is nothing that she might not be led into, because she has no power of control, and all her instincts and appetites are in the direction that would lead to vice. (Goddard, 1912, p. 12)

Importantly Goddard equivocates between ‘child’ and ‘young woman’ here. Deborah was twenty-two years old at the time this account was written, but Goddard infantilises her so as to accentuate her reported deficiencies and vulnerabilities. The child’s nonage, or ‘not-yet-ness,’ renders her irresponsible and liable to others’ immorality; Deborah, too, is represented as vulnerable in precisely this regard, so that attribution to her of this childlike status (‘Here is a child…’) effects a disturbing equivocation between adulthood and childhood that incapacitates Deborah as ‘woman’ while, as a ‘child’, she is sexualised. Furthermore, a conclusion that Goddard barely acknowledges, but which escapes at the last moment from his insistence on Deborah’s relative infancy, is that she may not only be prey to others’ appetites, but may even have a sexual desire of her own.

The “moron,” in this sense, presents a greater social problem than other grades of feeble-mindedness precisely because it epitomises an uncomfortable ambiguity between ‘child’ and ‘adult’ — an ambiguity that risks upsetting the social order, and so must be kept under tight control.

This ambivalence regarding ‘the child’ concerns the future society that figure is supposed to bear within it, as well as adults’ responsibility to keep children safe — but also to keep society safe from bad children, who cannot be responsible for themselves. Despite his clear affection for Deborah, Goddard also views vice as inherent to her being: as part of her origins, and so also part of her destiny. She is as much a danger to society as society is to her. Unlike Émile, the assiduous control that raises Deborah cannot train her to be a good citizen: she is blighted, and is a blight upon humanity.

Goddard dismisses fairly quickly what he calls ‘the lethal chamber’ (Goddard, 1912, p. 101) as a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ Deborah is made to exemplify, in order to persuade his reader of the more humane combination of sterilisation and segregation, or ‘colonisation’ — i.e., their removal into colonies (Goddard, 1912). Some years later, however, Goddard admitted to limitations of the classification of intelligence along such lines. Notably, in his 1927 article ‘What Is a Moron’?, Goddard defends the kindliness of intention with regard to the choice of the terms ‘idiot’, ‘imbecile’, and ‘moron’, before problematising their certain application, and their implication for how someone may contribute to society (Goddard, 1927). Goddard’s misgivings are borne by his observation that children sent to training schools on the basis of intellectual defect prove in the longer term to be capable of living independently (Goddard, 1927).

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7 The moral register of Goddard’s (putatively scientific and objective) discussion of the Kallikaks is striking and brings to the fore the contemporaneous framing of anxieties about social decline in terms of race and class. The book is a moral tale: Kallikak senior’s downfall is due to a moral failing, which is also tethered to his having liaised with a lower-class woman.

8 Goddard did not invent sterilisation as a means of dealing with the ‘problem’ of feeble-mindedness: Indiana was the first state to legislate sterilisation of the ‘unfit’ in 1907.
But also, he notes, 45% of soldiers had tested as ‘moron’ — thus the question is raised, is something wrong with the Binet test? Does a ‘low IQ’ score indicate something other than feeble-mindedness? Is it even possible to determine an individual’s capacity for agency according to intelligence testing?

Notwithstanding Goddard’s second thoughts, sterilisation continued to be advocated for and practiced by professionals well into the twentieth century. Alongside immigration and miscegenation laws, legislation to address the scourge of genetic weakness among the white population was introduced in thirty-three US states and two provinces in western Canada from 1905 (Pennsylvania), and stayed on the books in some states until the early 1980s. Although eugenics lost its hold on the popular imagination following the Nazi deployment of those ideas, many children born into poverty in North America still found themselves at training schools, subject to intelligence testing, and on that basis sexual sterilisation. Although a list of eugenic traits relating to mental health and intellectual development were supposed to assign someone to sterilisation, in Alberta it was enough to reside at an institution to be sterilised. And such children were often institutionalised for circumstantial reasons rather than because of limited cognitive ability: for instance, their parents were overburdened, or they were found to be living in a state of ‘neglect’ — a subjective and culturally specific term that is often a proxy for poverty.

Alberta’s legislation in particular singles out children as privileged targets for sterilisation, by defining the ‘mentally defective person’ subject to sterilisation as “any person in whom there is a condition of arrested or incomplete development of mind existing before the age of eighteen years” (cited in Wilson, 2018, p. 67, emphasis added). The legislation also applied to acquired as well as genetic traits, so did not pretend to address eugenics in its literal sense: sterilisation merely removed unfortunates from social circulation. Subsequent amendments to the legislation increased the scope of eugenic interventions by defining targeted traits with the vague term ‘mentally defective’, under which all manner of behavioural anomaly could be filed, and by relaxing consent requirements (Wilson, 2018, pp. 65-69). While all who had found their way into a training school or institution for the mentally defective were prone to coerced sterilisation, Alberta also deployed mobile clinics to visit schools, and so was able to target children more effectively than other jurisdictions.

**The Child’s Stolen Childhood: The Technology of Eugenics**

While eugenicists targeted childhood as a resource through which to forge a better future, for survivors of these experiments, childhood continues to be felt as a site of profound loss. Their childhoods were sacrificed to the biopolitical regulation of race in at least two respects. First, their childhoods provided the material upon which eugenic policies and practices worked. Material for the imagination, through which a better race could be conceptualised and engineered biologically, but; second, they served as objects through which eugenicists could contemplate an imperfect future: and thus as material for a rhetoric of disgust, that would galvanise community support for a science of breeding. The processes that interpellated these biopolitical targets into the eugenic machine denied them the kind of life that might meaningfully be designated as a ‘childhood’.

Childhood in the modern western tradition is conceptualised specifically as existing outside economies of use or exchange. Childhood is supposed to be a space protected from adult worries, responsibilities, and activities; and children, precisely by
means of this social segregation, are supposed to maintain the community’s collective innocence. This sacred function is prohibitive of children who lack the resources to perform it, however, and for a child to enter into the everyday systems of exchange that regulate adulthood — to perform work for money; to dress or behave in a sexualised manner; to make a public/political statement, etc. — verges on profane (Faulkner, 2011a, b, c, 2015). This significance of childhood thus regulates and sorts children, such that those without the material or social support to embody innocence are problematised. Where eugenic systems are in place, such regulation potentially becomes violent. There are, to be sure, burdens placed on children across the eugenics continuum to uphold the mandate of a fetishised childhood innocence, and even the most celebrated are exploited when asked to exemplify that ideal (Shirley Temple worked, even if the ‘effect’ of that labour concealed it as such). However, I want to examine next the specific character of loss experienced by survivors of eugenics, whose childhoods were utilised as sites of genetic intervention.

To have been instrumentalised by a project of race betterment has tangible effects on one’s subjective experience of childhood in memory. I found it striking, in hearing survivor testimony, how much witnesses emphasised their sense of a loss of childhood alongside elaborations of apparently more tangible injuries suffered in state care. In drawing this paper together, I want to attend to this loss, to find room for its expression, because it can at face appear nebulous, even sentimental, and so is easily dismissed within academic contexts. Yet, loss of childhood was clearly a distinct dimension of the experiences of being abused, beaten, abducted, forced to undergo medical examinations and procedures, to labour, and survive in extremely unpleasant conditions. Loss of childhood added a subjective dimension to these losses, affecting the totality of survivors’ experience. They each also needed to find ways to survive that loss and to suture a stable identity together in the absence of the relationships and social structures in which ‘childhood’ is culturally embedded.

Children undergoing sterilisation were frequently told they were undergoing a routine appendectomy. They were never informed about the state’s plan for them, just as their potential desire to parent children in the future was never discussed or acknowledged. Survivors also consistently note the hard work and punitive treatment that characterised their time spent in the institutions, and that they were denied the recreation and education they knew other children were afforded. Roy Skoreyko was a ‘poor white’ boy who lived at the Michener Center in Red Deer, Alberta, from the age of ten years, and told his story to Nicola Fairbrother for the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada project. Roy’s account brings into relief the subjective effects of having spent one’s childhood being treated as if you do not matter and are special to no one. Roy commences his account of what it was like at the Michener Center with the memory of a particularly cruel staff member, who used objects to hit Roy and other children:

He thought I guess that he was better than anyone else. And if we told our families what happened they wouldn’t believe us because the people who worked there would say it never happened, so we couldn’t really, really say anything. There was nobody that stood up for us when he did those things. (Fairbrother, 2014b)

Roy also describes the transition from being with his parents to the daily degradation of institutionalised life, providing a vivid portrait of what life was like for those children:

The first day, when I moved into Michener Center I was about ten years old, my parents dropped me off there, and man, it was so hard for me to leave my family.
that… [pause] All they did, was give me some other clothes, I couldn’t wear my regular
clothes. They gave me jeans and all that, and a shirt, and they would just drag you
and put you in the dayroom there, and we all had to line up and go into the dining
room to eat, lined up to go into the shower and take a shower, and when you lined up
to go take a shower you had to walk down the hallway, no clothes on at all, and people
could see you, you walked down the hallway there to the shower room… it was scary
’cause the doors were always locked and it just goes like this and, “bang!” would be
shut […] It was scary because the doors were always locked […] there was a lot of
things that went on that shouldn’t have. (Fairbrother, 2014b)

One day Roy was told he was going on ‘a trip’, but instead was taken to be sterilised.
In retelling this event, he conveys a sense of stoicism imbued in children absolutely
denied personal agency. But in so doing, he registers powerfully the injustice of that
experience:

[…] there was nothing much I could do, but still I feel offence and a little bit
disappointed that that was done, because, you know, they took control of our body,
and they did it, and they didn’t ask us. There was a lot of things that went on there that
shouldn’t have, you know. (Fairbrother, 2014b)

Roy affirms the reality of his grief as something that belongs to him as a constitutive
experience, and which therefore should never be forgotten or trivialised: “You know, a
lot of people say you gotta forget about the past, and I always tell people no you can’t,
because it’s like it’s burnt inside of you” (Fairbrother, 2014b). Childhood, in this sense,
cannot be understood merely as stage of life to be measured, calculated, and
controlled according to Piaget’s conception of development or a Binet scale. Rather,
the childhood the loss of which is described here is a transcendental element of the
self — a touchstone, resource, or more authentic ‘I’, reflection upon which the adult
self continues to draw for emotional sustenance. In this light, the very processes
through which children were rendered available to the eugenic apparatus can be
understood as destructive of a ‘childhood’ these subjects could otherwise have drawn
upon as a resource of their own. Through the community brought together by the
Living Archives project, however — and through remembering and recasting their
childhoods in their own words and according to the lives that have had since leaving
the institutions — survivors are able to rework the core self the state had wounded.
Today Roy draws on his childhood experiences as a disability advocate, and is proud
of the work he has done to make a difference to the lives of people with disabilities.

Another survivor interviewed for the Eugenics Archive project, Ken Nelson, who was
‘white,’ but not ‘white enough,’ describes having been dumped at the Provincial
Training School for the Mentally Defective in Red Deer at the age of eight, when his
adoptive parents could no longer care for him. “There was four to a room, and I had
one bed, there were three other beds. I spent most of my time crying, because I
wanted my mum and dad” (Fairbrother, 2014a). He describes the training school as
harsh, impersonal, and arbitrary. Despite his supposed incapacity, Ken and other
children were made to care for ‘low grades’ (as opposed to ‘high grade morons’). This
work was both menial and complex: he describes having to clean up faecal mess, but
inmates also had to feed and supervise children with profound disabilities. In this way,
the national eugenic project exhausted not only these children's bodies but even the
childhood that is supposed to serve as the foundation for a future self. Survivor
accounts often emphasise how they were able to resist these mechanisms and find
an agency in their own subjectivity — the evaluations and reflections they formed in
relation to these experiences. Ken’s agency shines through in the trouble he takes to
remember staff members who treated him with humanity.
When asked how he feels about having been sterilised, Ken is laconic: “It doesn’t bother me. It’s just one of the things that happened” (Fairbrother, 2014a). He represents the sterilisation as just one event within a period of his life over which he had no control. The broader context, however, is that he was able to become a social parent, and his relationship with his step-daughter, Crystal, is strong. She is alongside him as he is interviewed, and contributes her own reflections: “I’m honestly completely disgusted with how our government could let things like that happen. I feel sorry that my dad had to actually go through sorts of stuff like that… yeah… I feel like a little piece of him was stolen” (Fairbrother, 2014a). Ken’s loss is mitigated by his pride at having raised a daughter from infancy, and thus having circumvented the system that would steal from him. In this sense he has won.

Leilani Muir and Judy Lytton, also positioned as ‘white trash,’ spoke to me in 2015. As with Roy and Ken, they each described having been left at ‘the institution’ because they were unwanted rather than because they had been identified as ‘feeble-minded’. Nonetheless, they underwent testing, training, a punishing schedule of work and medical scrutiny, all of which culminated in the event of being deceived into having what they both called ‘the operation’. It transpired for Judy that she did not want to have children: having been abandoned due to her severely crossed eyes, this rejection by her mother discouraged Judy from wanting children of her own. By the time she left the institution, Judy was already aware she had been sterilised: she knew the doctor had lied to her as she had already had an appendectomy. So when she met a man she wanted to marry, Judy kept quiet about the operation in case disclosure would mean he no longer wanted her. Judy’s instincts were sound. When it became clear she could not bear children, her husband asked for divorce. Judy has been happily re-married since 1982 to a man she met at church. She is an ‘aunty’ to many of the children in her community (Lang, 2014), and has spoken out about Alberta’s practices of sterilisation publicly, and through research collaboration with the Living Archives project.

Leilani’s trajectory was in some ways more complicated and painful than Judy’s. For a brief time, she felt her childhood had begun only once she entered the Provincial Training School for Mental Defectives in Red Deer. Her mother had abused and overworked her at home, and so she felt comparatively protected at the institution. Leilani’s loss concerned her sterilisation: she desperately wanted children, and was unaware that capacity had been removed. When she married and was trying to conceive her examining doctor told her the surgeon who had performed the sterilisation had made ‘a mess’ of her ‘down there’ (she described it as scorched earth). Leilani persevered by babysitting and fostering children, and applied to adopt a baby.

Within days of the adoption coming through, the agent contacted her to advise their application had been denied once it surfaced Leilani had been an inmate of the Provincial Training School. The injury of having been wrongfully sterilised thus compounded, Leilani was so distressed she incinerated the clothes and toys she had collected for her baby.

In the years that followed Leilani dedicated herself to publicising and litigating what Alberta had done to children in the Provincial Training Schools. As a participant in the Living Archives project, she was clear in her objective to defend children’s right to
participate in decisions affecting their lives, especially where adults have the power to override that capacity:

I never had anyone speak up for me as a child, and I think there should be someone out there to speak for the child. You got your social workers, you got the teachers, the parents, you got doctors — they're speaking about the child, but who's speaking up for that poor child? Nobody. So this is why I want to get out there and help, to change the philosophy of the way they do it... Because the poor child never gets a say.

Leilani dedicated her life story to “all the children in the world who have suffered abuse in any way.” Speaking with her, I gathered Leilani felt a strong sense of responsibility for and identification with children who, like her, were not loved or in control of their lives. For Leilani that project of connecting with these children in imagination, and of speaking on their behalf, performed a healing function — perhaps reconnecting her to the childhood self she calls in her book 'the invisible child'. In this regard, Leilani went some way towards re-appropriating the childhood the state had used as a resource for a politics of eugenics.

Conclusion

In western cultures, children are supposed to be treasured and nurtured, and adults’ sense of self and resilience is developed in childhood through relations with loved ones. Each of the survivors above were deprived of that stage of life — or, rather, it was expropriated from them for the state’s use: as ‘genetic refuse’; ‘white trash’. By giving voice to their loss, and by reclaiming their equal part in humanity, these women and men were able to negotiate with this loss, reconstructing a core to rework their lives and identities according to their own subjectivity. While Roy Skoreyko reclaims his humanity through his advocacy for people with disabilities, Ken Nelson was able to foil the state’s effort to prevent him from becoming a parent. Judy Lytton lives a rich and socially-connected life in spite of the state’s designation of her as ‘mentally defective’, and contributes to the community in myriad ways. The work Leilani Muir performed to reconnect to her loss by imagining present-day disadvantaged and abused children signals the importance of the notion of childhood to her experience of a coherent self: a self with a temporal trajectory encompassing past, present, and future.

Cultural theorists can draw lessons from Leilani’s methodology by connecting past to present and future, to draw attention to ways in which children with disabilities, refugee children, children living in poverty, and First Nations children, remain privileged sites for political intervention, racialisation, criminalisation, and abandonment. As a site of investment of resources, time, education, and love, modern childhood has become a dense locus of meaning and value: a cache of human capital as well as affection. It is thus availed as an attractive and potent target of intervention into populations, yet the personal costs of such intervention are thus also intensified. The events of last century are not yet past not only because child survivors of involuntary sterilisation still live, but also, children continue to be targets of purity projects: psychological testing, prenatal screening, or whatever the next technology of biopower will be.

Author Note

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