

TO IMPROVE THE RACE: EUGENICS AS A STRATEGY FOR RACIAL UPLIFT,

1900-1940

By

Michell Chresfield

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Approved:

Professor Sarah Igo

Professor Anastasia Curwood

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## I. Introduction

In a sermon entitled “Exalted Manhood,” Rev. Revels Alcorn Adams, evangelist in the African American Episcopal Church, warned his congregants that they were in the midst of a new era of “physical degeneracy, mental defectiveness, moral decadence, and religious apostasy.” Despite fears that human defectives, consisting of some 50 million morons, represented a harsh burden on the nation, Adams was confident that other states and the national government would follow Virginia’s lead and enact legislation to prevent the propagation of the unfit through sterilization. Adams’ message mirrors that of other sermons given by clergymen during the early decades of the twentieth century who sought to use the science of eugenics to solve the many social ills confronted by their communities.<sup>1</sup>

Francis Galton coined the term eugenics in 1883. Derived from the Greek term *eugenes*, meaning “of good birth,” eugenics used theories of heredity to ensure the production of the “better” segments of society.<sup>2</sup> Eugenics became immensely popular in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eugenics’ popularity was motivated by early twentieth-century concerns about the low fecundity of the better segments of society, increased anxiety about the financial burden of increased immigration, and the possible breeding and perceived over-breeding of the feebleminded, immigrant, and black populations.<sup>3</sup> The movement was also buttressed by an increased faith in scientific knowledge cultivated in the Progressive Era’s turns to science and expertise to solve social ills. In the American context, eugenics not only encouraged the better populations to reproduce (positive eugenics) but advocated intervention in the way of sterilization and segregation legislation to prevent those deemed less fit from

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<sup>1</sup> “Rev. Adams Warns Against Sins of Babylon,” *Negro Star*, July 6, 1928.

<sup>2</sup> “Better” was a common term used in eugenic parlance and was rhetorically linked to a raced, classed, and gendered ideal.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation’s Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 1.

propagating (negative eugenics).<sup>4</sup> Eugenics followers came from the field of the natural and biological sciences but the philosophy also filtered into popular culture through child rearing texts, fitter family contests, as well as eugenic novels and films, and legislation. Eugenics was used to limit the abilities and opportunities of large groups, namely, women, the mentally ill, sexually diseased, and racial minorities.

Adams belied that eugenic theories could be used to right the wrongs of the Negro race was common amongst uplift leaders who looked to this new scientific philosophy as the key to bettering the social and political position of the Negro. A self-described student of practical and theoretical sociology, social economies, eugenics, and pathology, Adams' wrote editorials in the *Negro Star* on the many hereditary theories he believed would achieve the biological stock of the race.<sup>5</sup> In one editorial titled, "The Stream and the Source" Rev. Adams laments the lack of attention that married couples pay to the laws and traits of heredity. Adams reminds his readers that heredity was important because it was like "sowing through ancestry, and reaping through posterity."<sup>6</sup> He clearly believed that children would be the future of the race and that social ills could either be overcome or exasperated through procreation.

Adams' sermon reflects prevalent concerns in early twentieth century America about biological soundness of future generations. Turns of the century marriages were considered the instruments of social change because of how both men and women drew upon their participation in this institution to legitimate their participation in other aspects of American life. Many black middle class couples used their marriages as the backdrops against which they performed their

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3-7.

<sup>5</sup> "Rev. Adams Commended by Rev. J.T Smith," *Advocate*, April 14, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> Revels Alcorn Adams, "The Stream and the Source," *Negro Star*, November 9, 1934.

moral and social reform, doing so in gender specific ways.<sup>7</sup> Adams' sermon not only illustrates concerns about marriage but underlying concerns about sexuality, gender, the "fitness" of offspring, and who could participate in the American citizenry.

Adams' sermon is also a useful entrée into understanding how blacks conceptualized eugenics as one particular form of racial uplift. Against the backdrop of ever cementing racism, African American leaders of the early twentieth century developed the ideology of racial uplift in order to develop a positive black identity and achieve racial equality. Organized by members of the African American elite who believed they were representative of the race's potential, uplift espoused an ethos of self-help and service to the black masses."<sup>8</sup> For African-American activists engaged in the process of racial uplift, the means to achieve equality were as numerous and divergent as industrial education, political enfranchisement, material wealth accumulation, and even marriage. Underscoring all of these projects was a belief on the part of the black elite that the masses' ability to display proper Victorian ideals about morality, sexuality, and general comportment would signify African American's integration into the American citizenry.

Becoming full participants in American life was the chief concern of uplift activists. To achieve this goal activists not only advocated for the moral reform of the masses, but they were also concerned with the moral and biological future of the race, which they viewed as the ultimate proof they had overcome the moral degradations of slavery. This paper is concerned with eugenics as one of many currents of uplift ideology. Racial uplift's incorporation of eugenically inspired ideas not only depicts uplift's concern with Victorian respectability, but also concerns about black family structure. Furthermore, eugenically inspired uplift was a terrain

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<sup>7</sup> Anastasia Curwood, *Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages between the two World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

through which uplift activists challenged racist notions of black depravity and sexual deviance that fueled institutions like Jim Crow and segregation, both of which were rooted in scientific theories of black inferiority. For Adams, and other activists who adopted eugenic like discourse, marriage was *the* eugenic solution for deterring immoral sexuality, good health, and better members of the race.

That eugenics became inflected in theories of scientific racism that used biological determinism to deny rights to ethnic minorities is one of the most shameful marks of the eugenics movement. Due to eugenics' association with the atrocities of Nazi Germany, marginal groups are largely underrepresented as participants within the movement. Because of eugenics' reinforcement of scientific racism and social Darwinism, it appears paradoxical that African Americans could have supported any of its theories considering the impact of eugenics on African American life. This paper's primary concern is exploring this paradox while expanding the account of African American participation with eugenics. I argue that, while there were aspects of eugenics that supported the theory of biological determinism, eugenics' broader concern with increasing the quality of the citizenry through the increased breeding of the better segments of society served as an organizing issue for racial uplift activists who had their own concerns about the future of the black race. Furthermore, I argue that some black leaders believed that biological improvement achieved through eugenic means was one strategy to achieve greater social and political participation. This study examines how African American elites grappled with the theories of eugenics, some of which supported the idea of possible racial inferiority, and how they molded eugenic ideas to fit their own agenda.

This paper seeks to reconcile various voids in current scholarship on eugenics and racial uplift. Authors of the eugenics movement have offered nuanced ways of looking at eugenics

within the United States, yet they are overwhelmingly concerned with how eugenics was used by mainstream white Americans to reify biologically rooted theories of racial inferiority. Beginning with Daniel Kevles' groundbreaking work, *In the Name of Eugenics* (1985), which traced the origins of the British and American eugenics movements, there has been a surge of scholarship on this topic. After Kevles published a second edition of his manuscript in 1995, scholars have expanded our knowledge of eugenics' influence by focusing on lesser known but important physicians and movement supporters at the state level. Diane Paul, Gregory Michael Dorr, and Wendy Kline trace the development of the eugenics movement within the United States by investigating eugenics' scientific theories as well as state-level implementation through eugenically inspired legislation like compulsory sterilization and segregation.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Dorr, who considers how black institutions of higher education incorporated eugenics into their curriculum, these narratives limit their consideration of African Americans to their role as objects of eugenic initiatives. The unwillingness to see African Americans as both subjects and objects within this movement omits from consideration a group whose engagement with eugenics illustrates the malleability of eugenic ideas. This study places African Americans at the center of the eugenics movement, a movement so popular and pervasive that it has come to set the early decades of the twentieth century apart from the rest. In doing so, my study hopes to draw attention to the tensions surrounding eugenics' function as both a road map to improve the hereditary status of black Americans and as an explanation for why the Negro's condition would never improve.

Like the historiography of the American eugenics movement, the 1990s also marks the

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<sup>9</sup> For more on how eugenics was incorporated into American society see, Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Diane Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995); and Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

ascendancy of scholarship on racial uplift. Studies on the movement and ideologies of racial uplift emerged as part of an effort to historically contextualize the black bourgeoisie. Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* (1995) marks the ascendancy of this new literature looking at individuals, service organizations, and the marriage institution to determine how race and culture have informed conceptions of gender and sexuality. While initial studies mediated between the various forms of uplift, later scholars have focused on particular uplift initiatives and leaders often splitting on whether or not they viewed racial uplift as assimilationist or subversive in nature.

Kevin Gaines, Allison Berg, and Martin Summers posit that the sexual and gender values that influenced marriage; such as piety, submissiveness on the part of women, thrift, and patriarchal values were normalized by the dominant [white] society. As a result, the black bourgeoisie sought to simultaneously distance themselves from the black masses by their adoption of white notions of respectability, while attempting to codify this behavior for the black masses. Although both Gaines and Berg examine practices and ideas relating to reproduction and marriage, the authors do not see these discussions as relating to the wider eugenics movement.<sup>10</sup> Instead, they call this concern a manifestation of a conservative turn in racial uplift away from inalienable rights towards a class and gender based hierarchy that would allow black elites to achieve status and political participation by positioning themselves atop this new hierarchy. For Gaines this hierarchy marks an assent to racist conceptualization of the Negro's problem by projecting onto "other blacks racialized ideas of black pathology."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, neither author mentions the word eugenics in relationship to African Americans as participants in the eugenics movements, only as an ideology they operated against. These scholars attribute African American concern with reproduction to what Gaines calls "bourgeois evolutionism." This evolutionism marked the internalization of ideas of race which remained implicated in this new hierarchy that black elites formed. *Uplifting the Race*, 21-23.

<sup>11</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 75.

Conversely, scholars like Daylanne English and Michele Mitchell focus exclusively on African American engagement with eugenic principles and ideas. However, both focus on positive eugenics (i.e. fitter family contests) while ignoring the more restrictive practices of negative eugenics (sterilization). For Mitchell, the black elites' concern with "eliminating poverty, alleviating morbidity, promoting mainstream gender conventions, eradicating vice, reducing illegitimacy, and ensuing robust production of morally upright, race-conscious children," and desire to codify the behavior of the masses was as much a reaction to the political marginalization of blacks as it was a reaction to concerns over the biological survival of the race.<sup>12</sup> According to English, W.E. B. Du Bois' description of the "Talented Tenth" in, "gendered sociobiological terms as 'exceptional men' and the 'Best of the race,' who must 'guide the Mass away from the contamination of the Worst,'" illustrate patriarchal and biological beliefs about how the race could improve.<sup>13</sup> While both scholars acknowledge the hegemony of mainstream society, they posit that black uplift thinkers appropriated and furthered eugenic ideas for their own ends while reacting with and against the prevailing notions of normal family structures.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, these authors propose that black activists exhibited agency in their decision to form patriarchal identities and through their general concern with the proliferation of the race.

This study builds upon the work of Mitchell and English by looking at how racial uplift incorporated eugenics, yet departs from this scholarship by giving more attention to the theories of eugenics to determine why some members of the black elite deemed them important enough to follow. Additionally, this study complicates scholarship on the racial uplift movement by

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<sup>12</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>13</sup> English *Unnatural Selections* 41

<sup>14</sup> Daylanne English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in Modern Americanism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 16.

illustrating how it was contested, always changing, and at times contradictory. Lastly, it adds to the existing scholarship on racial uplift that looks at how participants exhibited agency in both accepting and abandoning a plan determined to be ill suited for their goals.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections: the first, looks at scientific literature by black scholars and examines how intellectuals grappled with what they believed to be the deteriorating biological condition of Negroes and the explanations put forth for their condition. The second section examines advice manuals aimed at a more middle class or aspiring audience. This section is meant to showcase how some African Americans wrestled with the various theories of biological transmission and the implication of these transmissions for the future of black America. The third section looks at articles from the *Chicago Defender*, one of the longest running and widely read black-weekly newspapers, and suggests that eugenic discourse travelled beyond elite circles.<sup>15</sup> Together, these sections suggest that African Americans participated in and shaped eugenic discourse across a variety of mediums and attempted to put eugenic ideas to the service of solving what they believed to be the problems of the Negro race.

## **II. Scientific Discourses on the Biological Condition of the Negro**

Throughout the early part of the twentieth century various members of the black intelligentsia conducted studies to determine the moral, physiological, and psychological condition of black Americans. Most studies were commissioned to understand the poor health and social conditions of blacks and in doing called attention to the sources of racial inequality. In explaining the poor station of American blacks, researchers utilized current biological and social scientific theories to appeal to a wider audience. Recognizing that the masses did not

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<sup>15</sup> The third section of the paper examine articles quelled from a search using the term “eugenic” during the period 1900 to 1940.

exhibit behaviors that were by their standards acceptable, African American scholars walked a fine line in their studies: attempting to appeal to the benevolence of whites while also combating the idea of inherent inferiority. These studies demonstrate the extent to which eugenics was successfully absorbed into the intellectual community by illustrating how scholars grappled with the theories of eugenics and their implications for African Americans and racial progress.

W.E.B. Du Bois, who started his teaching career at Atlanta University in 1898, began training sociologists in proper statistical methodology and commissioning studies on behalf of the university to publish the “truth” about the race.<sup>16</sup> Although most scholarship depicts Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as adversaries in their approach to racial progress, both men believed poor health to be a major obstacle standing in the way of Negro advancement. Washington used his influence as president of Tuskegee University to push studies on the health and well-being of the Negro; he would also edit many of these studies himself.

#### **A. The Negro Problem**

In 1903, Du Bois and Washington along with other noted intellectuals such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, Wilford Smith, and H.T. Kealing contributed to an anthology of social scientific studies edited by Washington titled, *The Negro Problem*. *The Negro Problem* addressed social ills such as licentiousness, poor education and vice to determine if those characteristics inherent were innate to African Americans. In his essay “The Characteristics of the Negro People,” H.T. Kealing, noted African American intellectual and leader within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, discussed the biology of the Negro. Although Kealing was not a scientist, he drew upon the theories of acquired and inherited traits

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<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2003), 56.

to argue against the inherent inferiority of the Negro.<sup>17</sup> Kealing concluded that, “The inborn qualities are ineradicable; they belong to the blood; they constitute individuality and comprise the Negro’s religiosity, integrity, and imagination; they are independent, or nearly so, of time and habitat.”<sup>18</sup> There were also other traits, negative in nature, pressed upon the Negro through environmental experience that were dangerous precisely because they were transmissible from generation to generation. In Kealing’s opinion these traits constituted the Negro’s shiftlessness, business unreliability, and untruthfulness.<sup>19</sup> Despite the presence of negative traits, Kealing ascribed to the belief in a common human nature that placed all of human kind on equal footing. Furthermore, if not for those acquired negative characteristics, specifically those developed in slavery, blacks would present no differences at all. Kealing is emblematic of uplift activists who used the discussion of social problems to address the victimization of the American Negro. Although Kealing was primarily concerned with slavery as a cause of the Negro’s problems other activists used poverty, a lack of educational opportunity, or disenfranchisement to explain the Negro’s social position.

### **B. The Health and Physique of the Negro**

Adopting a more social scientific position than Kealing, Du Bois commissioned a 1906 study through Atlanta University titled, *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*, in which he explored the principal problems for blacks at this time, namely high mortality rates and a high susceptibility towards illness. Du Bois shared with other uplift leaders the belief that it

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Baptiste Lamarck advanced the theory of acquired traits. Comprised of a first and second law, Lamarck’s theory states that “a change in environment causes changes in the needs of organisms living in that environment, which in turn causes changes in the needs of organisms living in that environment (the first law) and that all traits were heritable (the second law)” “Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829),” University of California Museum of Paleontology, accessed March 5, 2011, <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/lamarck.html>.

<sup>18</sup> H.T. Kealing, “The Characteristics of the Negro People” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Essays by Representative American Negroes*, ed. Booker T. Washington. (New York: James Pott & Company, 1903), 163.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

was imperative to combat diseases that were thought to be particularly damaging to the black population: namely syphilis, venereal disease, tuberculosis, and complications due to childbirth.<sup>20</sup> With limited access to health care and a large percentage of the population in poverty, the death rate amongst blacks was particularly high in the early part of the century. The Atlanta study named syphilis and tuberculosis, commonly called consumption, as the leading causes of death amongst blacks with rates of 20.5% and 17.5% respectively.<sup>21</sup> Du Bois devoted both his Atlanta study and a previous study published in 1899 to exploring the reasons for high mortality and linked these diseases to disproportionate poverty rates amongst blacks.<sup>22</sup>

Du Bois and Kealing were not the only ones to look at social problems and attempt to determine their causes. As mentioned previously in this paper, white eugenicists were equally alarmed by the social problems they saw overtaking society and advocated intervention to alleviate these concerns. Unlike white eugenicists however, black eugenicists were more resistant to attributing the presence of a social problem to the inherent inferiority of their subjects. After hearing the findings of the Atlanta Conference the president of the American Charities Organization concluded that, “sickness [was] the chief cause of poverty among colored persons.” The conceptual link between sickness and social status became such that living in poor social conditions was *prima facie* evidence of someone’s poor health, and vice versa. As a result, the body, particularly as it concerned the racial and physical makeup of the individual, became the site upon which eugenicist directed anxieties about racial and class differences. Additionally, the rhetorical links between race, class, and biological fitness allowed white eugenicists to use the poor health of blacks to explain their political and social condition. Yet, Du Bois and the co-

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<sup>20</sup> The study named syphilis, consumption, venereal disease, and childbirth as the leading causes of Negro mortality.

<sup>21</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois ed. *The Health and Physique of the Negro American* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1906), 88.

<sup>22</sup> W.E.B DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1899).

authors of the Atlanta report pushed against this notion by placing the economic and political oppression of blacks at the center of their health studies. Citing studies in Russia and England in which communities were divided by resources, the study cited a similar relationship of poor health and poverty in these countries that was also present in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Instead of inherent weakness, the authors of the study contributed the poor health conditions of the Negro to the lack of proper training, bad water, unskilled labor, and the participation of black women in wage labor, the neglect of children, ignorance, and improper education.<sup>24</sup> The theory that biological conditions could manifest themselves physically was a powerful rebuttal to claims that blacks were inherently inferior.

Although some race leaders explained the position of the Negro by pointing to systematic discrimination, others were not ready to completely dismiss the idea that some blacks were inherently inferiority. For example, Dr. Herbert A. Miller in his study, “Some Psychological Considerations on the Race Problem,” printed in the same Atlanta study in which Du Bois argued against using the Negro’s position to signify his inferiority, argued that “the cause of the backwardness of the so-called lower races is variously attributed to the influence of environment of all sorts, and to natural incapacity.”<sup>25</sup> While Miller recognized the importance of environment, he believed that inherent traits had more influence on individual behavior than environmental factors. For Miller and those like him, blood represented the innate and formed the basis for environment and training. Although Miller believed that there was an argument for inherent traits to be made, he found that,

To conclude, from the manifestations of immorality among the  
Negroes, or from their failure to recognize certain social

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<sup>23</sup> Du Bois, *The Health and Physique of the Negro*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert A. Miller, “Some Psychological Considerations on the Race Problem” in *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*, ed. W.E.B. Du Bois, (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1906), 53.

conventions, that the Negro is incapable of morality or of adaptation to the social demand, is a conclusion based upon inadequate evidence. Morality and social adaptation are the result of the interpretation of the value of a situation, and not a necessary development of inherent capacity. Therefore, not until different races have had the same history can any valid conclusion be drawn as to their relative psychophysical capacity if mere observation is used.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, Miller called for more empirical studies on the capacity of the Negro in order to make the case for inherent inferiority.

While it is understandable that uplift activists were eager to combat notions of racial inferiority, that some intellectual leaders entertained the idea that some members of the race were in fact biologically inferior reveals points to a fundamental tension in the uplift project. On one level, the acknowledgement that lower segments of the race were biologically inferior was for some black elites a way to establish boundaries between them and the lower classes and assert a place for themselves in the class hierarchy. On another, this discussion points to the internalization of social and scientifically inspired notions of black depravity. At the very least, these discussions illustrate earnest attempts on the part of black elites to understand how the negative characteristics they observed were cultivated and biologically transferred. These leaders were hopeful that understand the source and avenues of transmission might help them eradicate these characteristics in the Negro.

### **III. Advice Manuals and the Negro**

Where scientific literature was concerned with diagnosing the problem of the Negro, advice manuals were designed to remedy those problems by codifying respectable behavior and teaching appropriate moral and sexual values that would help black Americans gain equality. Advice manuals originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with Victorian ideals about the family and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 55.

home. Traditionally written by women, and aimed at a female audience, advice manuals capitalized on the growing white middle class and literate population. Tackling issues of domesticity (housekeeping, childbearing, and cooking), etiquette, social conduct, beauty, fashion, and relationships, advice manuals sought to guide American women towards “normative femininity.”<sup>27</sup> Not only were these guides about teaching the proper ways of womanhood but they also expounded an American idea of family life and the proper female citizen. Perpetuating what Sarah Leavitt calls the “domestic fantasy,” advice manuals were responsible for ascribing both moral and political virtue to the home and creating the ideal for home life that Americans would carry for many centuries to come.<sup>28</sup> Taking advantage of the Progressive Era’s promotion of science’s ability to solve not only medical but social ills, authors often appropriated the word “science” to describe the routinization of household and familial responsibilities prescribed in their texts.<sup>29</sup>

In the twentieth century, African Americans used prescriptive literature much like their white counterparts, as a way to proscribe behaviors they believed would net blacks greater political and social acceptance through their ability to exhibit Victorian mores regarding appropriate gender and family roles. This literature often featured pictures of “Race men and Race women” those who represented the beauty, moral uprightness and achievement of black society.<sup>30</sup> By linking comportment to success and class status, advice manuals appealed to

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<sup>27</sup> Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Girlhood in America: An Encyclopedia, Volume 1*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 41-42.

<sup>30</sup> Pictorial representations of biologically fit individuals are found in eugenic texts aimed at white audiences as well. The showcasing of superior examples of good breeding was believed to encourage families to follow eugenic principles. David Green, “Veins of Resemblance: Photography and Eugenics,” *Oxford Art Journal* 7, No. 2, (1984): 3-16.

literate blacks hoping to elevate their social position.<sup>31</sup> Two noteworthy examples of this advice literature are, *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation* written in 1903 by Mr. and Mrs. John W. Gibson in consultation with Dr. William John Truitt, and Madame Azalia Hackley's *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, published in 1916. Both combined all the elements of the traditional etiquette guide: domestic duties, social conduct, beauty, fashion, biology, sexuality, and relationships with a special call for racial pride. As prescriptive literature, these works stand as paradigmatic examples of eugenic texts due to their explicit discussion of heredity proscription for who should be allowed to procreate.

Well-known, affluent, and respected, Madame Hackley and the Gibsons reflect the high social standing that was common of both black and white etiquette guide writers. While little is known about the Gibsons, some scholars such as Michele Mitchell theorize that Mr. Gibson was either white or a fair skinned person of color.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of his racial background, Gibson, like Hackley, is exemplary of the educated elite at the forefront of the uplift movement. Born Emma Azalia Smith, Hackley was reared in a middle-class family and groomed from an early age to understand the importance of race work.<sup>33</sup> Azalia married Edwin Hackley, an attorney and editor of the *Denver Statesmen*, an African-American newspaper. Her comfortable position in society allowed her to devote time to her vocal lessons. Calling herself a "race musical missionary," Hackley believed music was the medium through which blacks would overcome the boundaries of racism.<sup>34</sup> Both Hackley and the Gibsons believed biology and morality were causally linked.

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<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that Gibson wrote almost exclusively about African Americans and is featured in the book *Progress of the Race* (Naperville: J.L. Nichols, 1912), on a page titled "Three Prominent Educators and Authors" with Booker T. Washington and W.H. Crogman, co-authors and professors at Tuskegee Institute and Clark Atlanta University respectively. It seems unlikely that he would have been featured on this page if he were not black.

<sup>33</sup> "Race Work" is a common uplift term that denotes not just work on behalf of the race, but more specifically work upon the race that would be necessary to gain full citizenship for African-Americans.

<sup>34</sup> Lisa Pertrillar Brevard, *A Biography of E. Azalia Hackley 1867-1922* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2001), 4.

While these uplift leaders were in unanimous agreement regarding the inherent inferiority of the Negro, they did believe that blacks had both good and bad traits that were potentially inherent and definitely transmissible.

#### **A. Golden Thoughts of Chastity and Heredity**

The authors of *Golden Thoughts* believed it was important for African Americans to pay attention to the laws of heredity so that they could prepare their offspring for the rigors of racial oppression, a struggle their children would be in a better position to overcome if they were free from inherited physical or mental defects.<sup>35</sup> In conceptualizing what they called a new “Declaration of Independence,” the authors state that in addition to all men being created equal, these men were also born with inalienable rights that include, “the right to be well born...[and] that whenever any form of existence becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right, nay, the duty of the people to so alter it and to institute a new life...in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect the safety and happiness of mankind.”<sup>36</sup> In order to realize their right to be well-born, (free from emotional or mental defect, morally upright, and educated), it was important for African Americans to understand heredity in regards to the laws of inherited and acquired traits. For uplift leaders, understanding these theories served as a useful tool in the fight for equality. Race leaders recognized that some traits could be inherited and others acquired. The remaining task was to understand which traits were subject to which type of transmissions. Understanding these theories not only allowed leaders the ability to advocate for more equal treatment on behalf of African Americans but, most important to the uplift cause, they could exploit these theories to create better bred children who would be positive representations of the race.

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<sup>35</sup> Prof. and Mrs. J.W. Gibson and Dr. W.J. Truitt, *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation* (Cincinnati: W.H. Ferguson Co., 1904), 19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Most of *Golden Thoughts*' discussion of heredity focuses on explaining the differences between acquired and inherited traits. *Golden Thoughts* defines acquired traits as those mental, moral, and physical characteristics that result from the environmental factors that parents impart upon their children, whereas inherited traits were permanent and settled qualities of ancestors which reappear in future generations.<sup>37</sup> While both types of traits could be found in a well-born individual, social scientists and reformers were interested in which characteristics were more dominance, especially in regards to the transmission of negative traits. Consequently the authors searched for theories of heredity that absorbed ideas of both environment and biology, seeking a theory of heredity that allowed, "not only for the reappearance of general form and structure [inherited traits] but of individual peculiarities [acquired traits] as well."<sup>38</sup> While the authors recognized the presence of what would later be referred to as genetic traits, they also recognized the impact that environmental aspects had on development and reproduction.

To develop their own most complete definition of heredity, the authors devoted an entire section to outlining the theories of Francis Galton, Charles Darwin, and August Weismann. That the authors would devote attention to the founder of eugenics and the two scientists that provided the movements' most salient scientific concepts is not coincidental. This section is exemplary of the authors' consciousness of the eugenics movement and the belief that eugenic theories might be employed in the service of African Americans. After weighing the usefulness and veracity of the theories, the authors concluded that Weismann's theory was the most sensible explanation of how characteristics were transmitted. Weismann's theory of inheritance states that the germ cells (hereditary material) are not affected by anything the somatic cells (bodily cells) learn or any abilities gained via environmental conditions. According to Weismann, the hereditary

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<sup>37</sup> Gibson et. al, *Golden Thoughts*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

transmission was confined to what he termed the germ plasm.<sup>39</sup> Weismann's theory directly challenged Lamarck's theory of acquired traits, which proposed that the effects of the environment could permanently alter the germ plasm, in other words, traits acquired through the environment were transmissible.<sup>40</sup> Lamarck's theory advanced a notion of heredity that would produce immediate change in the characteristics of future generations versus genetic variation across long expanses of time suggested by Weismann's theory. The Gibsons' embrace of Weismann should not be taken to signify unanimous acceptance of his theory. Although Weismann's theory was gaining traction, the scientific community remained split amongst Neo-Darwinians (those who embraced Weismann's theory), and those calling themselves Neo-Lamarkians.

Despite their endorsement of Weismann, the relationship between heredity and environment was far from settled for the authors of *Golden Thoughts*. In a section entitled, "Environment Versus Heredity," the authors explored instances of blacks exhibiting superior intellect and moral uprightness to conclude, "That environment has much to do with it we admit, but do not our inherited instincts and traits create and maintain our environment, and limit our personality?"<sup>41</sup> In this instance the authors seem to suggest that inherited traits should be immune to negative effects deriving from an unhealthy environment. This point is further exemplified by the Gibsons' skepticism that education might be used to overcome inherent weaknesses, "We are accustomed to the thought that education will overcome our natural bent, that post-natal culture will do everything, that which we have inherited may be thrown off as a loose garment. Not

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<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Tordjman, "The Scientific Origins of the British Eugenics Movement 1859-1914" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1990), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York, Scribner, 1970), 100.

<sup>41</sup> Gibson et. al, *Golden Thoughts*, 32.

so.”<sup>42</sup> While it is clear that the authors favored heredity and believed in the limited influence of environment, they were reluctant to dismiss the importance of environment altogether.

Furthermore, the Gibsons’ acceptance of Weismann’s germ plasm theory did not necessitate their full rejection of Lamarckism. Later chapters of *Golden Thoughts* illustrate this point with the authors’ focus on maternal impressions, a subset of Lamarckian theory.<sup>43</sup> Writing about the importance of pre-natal care, the Gibsons tell a cautionary tale of a young mother frightened by a lizard in her eight month of pregnancy, this freight caused her child to be born with a thick skin connecting its neck and back that resembled the skin flap of a lizard.<sup>44</sup> In the end it is probably fair to conclude that the authors’ acceptance of any one theory was not absolute. The Gibsons’ recommendation that their think soberly about their inherent abilities yet take care to maintain a moral and peaceful family environment illustrates the flexibility of uplift leaders in regards to eugenic theories. In attempting to develop directives appropriate for the masses, the Gibsons borrowed freely from those eugenic theories that worked for them and discarded those that didn’t.

### **B. The Colored Girl Beautiful**

The other best-selling guide for black Americans, Madame E. Azalia Hackley’s *The Colored Girl Beautiful* was published in 1904. Composed of talks given to the women of the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, the head of the school, encouraged Hackley to make her advice available to a wider audience. *The Colored Girl Beautiful* covered a range of topics including: advice about dating, public decorum, and the objectives of motherhood. Like the authors of *Golden Thoughts*, Hackley also examined the biological nature of prenatal influences.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>43</sup> Maternal impression was the belief that negative environmental exposure and experiences had a direct effect on the offspring.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 143.

The themes of *The Colored Girl Beautiful* mirror those in many mainstream (white) advice manuals in that both espoused heavily class based ideas about the virtues of motherhood, modest public decorum, and appropriate behavior with members of the opposite sex. For example, in a passage on the public decorum of black women, Hackley believed that, “It is exceedingly vulgar to air one’s opinions in the street cars, railroads cars, or any public place. A person who really knows anything does not parade his knowledge or opinions”.<sup>45</sup> This message parallels the advice of Emily Post, another twentieth century etiquette writer who warned her readers to, “not expose [their] private affairs, feelings or innermost thoughts in public,” warning that such an exhibit would constitute “knocking down the walls of [their] own house.”<sup>46</sup> That Madame Hackley’s writings encouraged the same behaviors as white domestic advisors is a testament to the pervasiveness of ideas about family life and decorum present across racial boundaries. Additionally, her focus on these values and her belief in black Americans’ ability to exhibit behavior emblematic of good moral and social decorum signifies Hackley’s belief that assimilation would help black’s “earn friends for the race.”<sup>47</sup>

Aside from the espousal of canonical ideals of Victorian values, *The Colored Girl Beautiful* stands as an example of eugenic thinking. In a chapter entitled, “The Colored Mother Beautiful” Hackley maintains that although black and white mothers have the same “gray matter” that dictates their mental capabilities, the colored mother must study more about the laws of heredity and child culture to prepare the child for its race battle, unhampered by inherited mental or physical tendencies.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, much like her racial uplift contemporaries, Hackley did

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<sup>45</sup> E. Azalia Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful* (Kansas City: Burton Publishing, 1916), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> “Child culture” refers to those possessed traits of a child, either inherent or acquired. Hackley argued that by understanding the material against race mothers had to work, they would be in the best position to positively influence the outcome of their children. *Ibid.*

not believe that one's biology predetermined one's destiny. To illustrate this point she argues that a colored mother "through the exercise of will power may conquer inherited tendencies and even command nature as other women are doing."<sup>49</sup> Although Hackley never explicitly stated which hereditary theory she believed, her writing suggests that she most likely a Lamarckian in that she stressed the importance of environment on the rearing of a child. Subsequently she encouraged her readers to make books available to their children, for parents to be the first teachers, and to expose the child only to things that would stimulate the mind in positive ways avoiding all negative influences.<sup>50</sup> Although Hackley doesn't explicitly implicate the lower classes in her directive literature, the general tone of the book with its encouragement of homes with books, dressing to suit one's complexion, and the avoidance of uncouth gestures indicates distinctively middle-class inflected ideas about appropriate comportment directed at those aspiring to a higher social position.

Early in *The Colored Girl Beautiful* Hackley proclaims her ultimate goal in the uplift of the race to be the "better breeding" of black children. Hackley imagined a well-bred child as healthy, prideful in appearance, speaking in a controlled manner, educated, and possessing pride in their race.<sup>51</sup> With this emphasis on better breeding is it no surprise that Hackley devoted much of her etiquette guide to speaking about the importance of black motherhood, which she called the "glory of the race."<sup>52</sup> Hackley's last and longest chapter, "The Colored Mother Beautiful" illustrates not only the pervasiveness of eugenic thinking in Hackley's writing, but also the great confidence she placed in the black mother's ability to overcome predisposed conditions. Early in the chapter Hackley lays out the load placed upon black mothers, "The colored mother beautiful

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5-10.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 89.

carries a burden—the weight of the future generation of handicapped persecuted people.”<sup>53</sup> This statement is a clear reference to the common belief in uplift ideology that black women bore a huge responsibility to the race. The centrality of women to uplift programs was not only because of their social organization, but also had a biological component: because black women bore children, and were largely, if not solely responsible for child rearing, black mothers had direct influence over the future of the race.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the very worth of a black mother was related to this ability. According to Hackley, “A colored mother is a success as she measures up to her relation and obligation to the race.”<sup>55</sup> It must be noted that Hackley ignores the role of men in rearing children, offering no corresponding chapter on parenting directed at men. This omission is most likely attributable to Hackley’s concern with women’s roles, yet it would be a mistake to treat this omission as indicative of Hackley’s belief that only women were responsible for rearing children, or that she believed the only role career for was motherhood. Quite oppositely, she differs from many of the other writers examined in that she supported women working outside of the home and acknowledged that doing so might be equally as fulfilling as motherhood.<sup>56</sup>

While some might come away from both readings accusing Hackley and the Gibsons of making self-contradictory statements, I argue that these instances demonstrate the multiplicity of voices in both the eugenics and racial uplift movement. Although the hereditary theories provided both the Gibsons and those in the mainstream eugenics movement with a scientifically justified basis for action, not every group or individual for that matter drew the same conclusions from those theories. White eugenicists influenced by Weismann’s theory turned their attention to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 90

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 48.

<sup>55</sup> Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> According to the authors of *Golden Thoughts*, a woman “naturally longs and desires the office of mother if she were a true woman.” Gibson et, al, *Golden Thoughts*, 50.

preventing the reproduction of the unfit, taking from his theory the belief that the environment had a negligible effect on the fitness of progeny, black eugenicists, like the Gibsons and Kealing adopted the same theory yet concluded that social programs to rehabilitate the Negro masses were all the more necessary. Their writings suggest a belief that African Americans had equal footing with the rest of the races, individuals were born good, environmental conditions caused social degeneracy, this degeneracy was not heritable to subsequent generations, and finally being well born could be preserved if parents were invested in the moral and intellectual development of their children.

#### **IV. Eugenic Discussions within The Chicago Defender**

As discussed earlier, scientific writings investigated black social problems while etiquette guides were aimed at prescribing solutions. The *Chicago Defender* takes up both of these tasks but is perhaps most valuable for its coverage of how literate blacks, both middle and working class, grappled with the eugenics movement, its theories, and most importantly eugenically-inspired legislation. With two-thirds of its readership outside of Chicago, it is likely that the *Defender* enjoyed a wider readership than both the scientific and etiquette literatures.<sup>57</sup> The paper often addressed sexuality and marriage, issues of particular importance to African American leaders. Additionally, the paper devoted a number of articles to sterilization and the legislation of eugenically inspired marriage laws. These topics appeared in the *Defender* articles with relative frequency throughout the early 1900's. Judging by the numbers of articles addressing these topics, it is reasonable to conclude that members of the literate population had some cursory knowledge of the eugenics program.

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<sup>57</sup> Mary Elizabeth Stoval, "The Chicago Defender in the Progressive Era," *Illinois Historical Journal* 83, no.3 (autumn 1990): 159-172.

In 1912 the *Defender* ran the article “Who’s Who and Why” about none other than Charles Darwin, not the scientist who developed some of the major evolutionary tenets of eugenics, but Major Darwin, Charles’ son, president of the International Eugenics Society and noted eugenicist in his own right. The article reported that the first Darwin’s theories had been evaluated by those in the scientific community and “[were] recognized as something practical in the social life of the human race.”<sup>58</sup> The author believed the first annual International Eugenics Conference to be indicative of eugenics inauguration and adoption in American ideology. The article concluded with the author expressing his belief that, “the improvement of the race, the promotions of its happiness, and the prevention of many moral errors depend very largely upon a recognition of such laws as that of heredity.”<sup>59</sup>

The *Defender*, often heralded as “The World’s Greatest Weekly,” was the first black newspaper to run a weekly health column.<sup>60</sup> Albert Wilberforce Williams, health editor from 1911 to 1929, authored the new health column titled, “A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation.” Williams, a Harvard-trained doctor, allowed readers to write in asking for advice on various health issues. Although he refrained from giving his readers specific medical advice, running a disclaimer at the top of each column indicating his unwillingness to do so, Williams’ column became known, somewhat controversially, for its frank discussions of sexual health and hygiene issues.<sup>61</sup> The column covered a wide range of topics such as: sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea and tuberculosis, birth control, impotence, and sterility. Dr. Williams’ candid treatment of venereal disease stands in sharp contrast to how

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<sup>58</sup> “Who’s Who and Why” *Chicago Defender*, September 14, 1912.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> The only other newspaper to have a health column at that time was the *Chicago Tribune*. With the addition of the health column, the *Defender* raised the black news publications that would go on to commit their papers to covering social, health, political, and economic issues pertaining to African Americans.

<sup>61</sup> Geraldine Rhoades Beckford, *Biographical Dictionary of American Physicians of African Descent 1800-1920* (Cherry Hill: African Homestead Legacy Publishers, 2011), 354-355.

this topic was treated by other black leaders, particularly the authors discussed in the previous section. While those authors were more likely to shun explicit discussion of sexual issues for fear of violating Victorian codes of decorum and taste, Williams most likely believed his background as a doctor necessitated that he discuss these issues more explicitly. Despite this difference, moral restraint remained very central to Dr. Williams' column as chastity and sound moral living provided for him the best preventatives to sexually transmitted disease

While most scholarship on mainstream eugenics excludes any discussion of venereal diseases and its perceived hereditary effects, Williams and other black activists devoted considerable attention to addressing this issue.<sup>62</sup> In a November 1913 article under the subtitle, "Insanity, Heredity and Venereal Disease," Dr. Williams devoted his entire discussion to the causes and health effects of gonorrhea and syphilis. Alerting his readers that syphilis was "responsible for the kind of insanity popularly known as softening of the brain... [which is] incurable by any means known to the medical profession." Dr. Williams went on to state that he intended his column to be a warning to men and women so that, "Every man and boy ought to know that by immorally associating with bad women or every woman and girl should know that by yielding to temptation to associate or go with immoral men, they are exposing themselves to the probability of contracting this disease which may result...in softening of the brain or incurable insanity."<sup>63</sup> Dr. Williams' emphasis on syphilis's ability to cause insanity is not unique considering the intellectual and political climate of the time. Although eugenicists did not

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<sup>62</sup> Williams devotes two articles explicitly to the study of venereal disease, but addresses it in two additional articles relating to its threat on the marriage institution and its ability to cause impotence and sterility. See, Albert Wilberforce Williams, "A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Insanity, Heredity, and Venereal Disease," *Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1913; "Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Impotence and Sterility," *The Chicago Defender*, November 8, 1913; "A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Venereal Disease," *The Chicago Defender*, Feb. 14, 1914; "A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Eugenic Marriage Law," *The Chicago Defender*, April 11, 1925.

<sup>63</sup> Albert Wilberforce Williams. "A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Insanity, Heredity, and Venereal Disease," *Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1913.

explicitly take up venereal disease, they were greatly concerned with mental illness, particularly the proliferation of the “feeble-minded.”<sup>64</sup> Because the mentally ill were usually under the care of the state, eugenicists feared that unchecked reproduction on their part was creating a growing strain on the society. In 1907, Indiana became the first state to pass a sterilization law aimed at preventing the development and spread of mental illness.<sup>65</sup> By the 1920s, several states including California (which had the biggest program), North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia were conducting sterilizations of the feeble-minded.<sup>66</sup> Dr. Williams warning against unsafe sexual intercourse thus served to bridge black elite concerns about morality and sexual health with eugenic concerns over mental health and state resources.

Not only was illicit sexual activity bad because of the negative impact on one’s own health, but writers like Williams and Rebecca Stiles Taylor argued that illicit sexual activity was a threat to the soundness of the marriage institution. Taylor was an important figure in the women’s club movement. As a frequent contributor to the *Defender* she wrote a column on women’s concerns titled, “As A Woman Thinks”. Taylor believed that the elevation of the Negro, both hereditary and otherwise, would be realized faster through sound marriage unions as opposed to education alone.<sup>67</sup> In one edition of “As A Woman Thinks” that ran on July 17, 1937, Taylor talks specifically of marriage and education and mirrors Rev. Adams’ concern with picking healthy marriage partners. Taylor used this column to voice her support for teaching children how to pick mates in such a way that would allow them to pick their “moral, physical, and intellectual

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<sup>64</sup> The feeble-minded were defined by antisocial behavior, low IQ scores, sexual promiscuity, and social dependency. This subsection of the mentally defective was especially fearsome to eugenicists because unlike those classified as imbeciles, they could pass for normal and therefore be able to reproduce with normal people. Source...

<sup>65</sup> Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> Alexandra Stern’ *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, (University of California Press, 2005) gives more about the sterilization program in California. Likewise Gregory Michael Dorr’s *Segregation’s Science* gives a similar account of Virginia’s sterilization program.

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca Stiles Taylor, “As A Woman Thinks,” *Chicago Defender*, July 17, 1937.

equal.”<sup>68</sup> Taylor’s column represents the viewpoints of uplift leaders that sought various methods to help well-born individuals come together in successful marriage unions. Uplift activists’ espousal of hereditary interventions not only demonstrates the presence of eugenic thinking in African American culture, but it also illuminates a move towards more aggressive forms of intervention. Some ministers, both black and white, would even refuse to marry couples who had not first gotten documentation that verified they were free from mental or physical defect.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the focus on marriage reflects the middle-class beliefs of race leaders who believed that sexuality should be confined to the marriage institution. Taken together, sexual reform and the support of the marriage institution were seen as necessary for rehabilitating the image of the American Negro and gaining racial equality. Race reform efforts would be based on class-based assumptions about rampant sexuality remedied by purity campaigns, temperance crusades, birth control advocacy, and eugenic theory.<sup>70</sup> The adoption of these programs contributed to class tensions that impeded racial uplift’s program.

While it is not possible to ascertain the percentages of blacks who favored sterilization practices, the sampling of articles from the *Defender* illustrate that opinions were more favorable prior to World War I before shifting to a more negative view in the late 1930s in light of increased knowledge of how eugenic philosophies were employed by the Nazis. Prior to World War I, many blacks touted the advantages of sterilization and other eugenically inspired laws for their ability to curb the prevalence of feebleminded populations. However, once black Americans began to link the Nazi regime with eugenics many began to reconsider the underlying racial tensions of eugenics and wondered how they could support a program that could deem an entire race biologically unfit.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See Preaching Eugenics and Article in Broad Ax?

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

One example of early support for eugenic programs amongst African Americans is Dr. Williams' article titled, "Impotence and Sterility" in which he states that, "It would be better for society that there were more impotent and sterile men of certain classes, such as idiots, criminal insane, confirmed drunkards, epileptics, chronic tuberculars, paralytics, advanced syphilitics, sexual perverts and all those habitually and confirmedly incapacitated for self-support."<sup>71</sup> Likewise, when Georgia attempted to establish a eugenic law to curb the number of feeble-minded people in 1935, writers of the *Defender* encouraged this mobilization citing that "the normalcy of the state constitutes the strength of the nation".<sup>72</sup> Not only did this author advocate sterilization of the body, but he also called for sterilization of the mind because bad bodies reflected bad thoughts.<sup>73</sup> To this end, the author encouraged Georgians to rehabilitate their mental and spiritual outlook and cleanse themselves of race hatred.

Discussions of sterilization and eugenics more broadly changed tide in the latter years of the 1930s. In January of 1936 the *Defender* ran an article, in which the author describes South Carolina's eugenically inspired sterilization law for "unfit" adults as "aping on Hitler's oppression."<sup>74</sup> The fear of Hitler's race purity propaganda being transported to America was propounded by a report stating that Hitler had ordered his black subjects sterilized.<sup>75</sup> That blacks in the United States not only took seriously that report but also rethought what was to some a perfectly acceptable remedy to unwanted populations is exemplary of the fact that black Americans were by no means unanimous in their acceptance of eugenics. When African Americans were confronted with the same eugenic tools they once supported, employed to

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<sup>71</sup> Albert Wilberforce Williams, "A Weekly Talk on Preventative Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygenics and Sanitation: Impotence and Sterility," *Chicago Defender*, November 8, 1913.

<sup>72</sup> "Georgia Mentally Disturbed," *Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1935.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "South Carolina Move Against Race," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 11, 1936.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Chevous, "Says Hitler Ordered His Black Subjects Sterilized," *Chicago Defender*, March 26, 1938.

regulate their own fecundity, many took the opportunity to rethink sterilization and in many instances eugenics in general.

If the 1936 article represents the onslaught of negative opinions on sterilization, the 1940s marks its apogee. Take for instance a 1940 letter to the editor of the *Defender*, John H. Sengstacke. Identifying himself only by the initials B.R.P, the author hoped the editor might publish his words so that readers would be informed of the, “propaganda going on throughout this country to the effect that the Race is increasingly too speedily, and as a result, it is the intention of certain elements to ‘bring’ us down.”<sup>76</sup> Describing himself as a migrant worker able to pass for white, B.R.P claimed to have witnessed at least three hundred instances in which mixed-raced people were being sterilized without their knowledge.<sup>77</sup> This trend illustrates two very important aspects in both mainstream and African American society: a shift from positive eugenics which proposed incentives for the “fit” to reproduce to negative eugenics, which favored preventing the reproduction of the so-called “un-fit”. Secondly, B.R.P’s observation of so many sterilizations, although probably exaggerated, is most likely attributable to a real rise in sterilization programs in the United States, most of which gained increased support following the 1927 Supreme Court legalization of the mentally incompetent in *Buck v. Bell*. *Bell* is viewed as a watershed moment in the history of American sterilization because it made constitutional the compulsory sterilization of the mentally ill.

Despite the landmark decision of *Buck v. Bell*, eugenics’ popularity declined with the onslaught of World War II as the full extent of Hitler’s atrocities, namely the mass extermination of Jews living in German occupied territory, garnered attention in both the American and international press. These realizations caused both mainstream and black eugenicists to largely

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<sup>76</sup> “B.R.P Letter to the Editor,” *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1940.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*.

abandon the formal eugenics movement. Yet as scholars of the eugenics movement point out, the sciences did not abandon its commitment to developing scientific theories to explain observed differences amongst the races.<sup>78</sup> Nor did some abandon their belief that certain individuals possessed negative traits that were heritable, and worst yet, that these same groups were reproducing at a higher rate. Besides being disillusioned by the eugenics promotion of “fit” people, black leaders turned from racial uplift to civil rights as their preferred method of organization. Maintaining a similar leadership amongst the middling class, specifically the clergy and other educated members of the black elite, civil rights also allowed grass roots activists, many of which were working class citizens to become more engaged in the race struggle. As legal strategies replaced biological strategies as the surefire way to achieve equality, black leaders focused less on moral betterment and more on enfranchisement.

## V. Conclusion

In the American context, “Eugenics emerged as the central national ideology—one that influenced public policy, juridical discourse, medical care, popular culture, literature, and aesthetic theory”.<sup>79</sup> However, eugenics for black Americans as well as mainstream society did not just constitute an interest in heredity; both groups favored state sponsored intervention so that the dream of better populations could be realized.<sup>80</sup> For some African American elites, their enthusiastic acceptance of eugenic conceptions was complicated by the full range of eugenic interventions on the state level and the realization that many of these interventions were based on

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<sup>78</sup> The acknowledgement that although eugenics fell into disrepute but many of its core ideas survived has inspired scholars like Diane Paul to argue for chronologically longer trajectory for eugenics. Paul joins scholars like Wendy Kline who argue that after the end of mainline eugenics, ideas were reformulated with an increased attention to population control and family planning well into the 1950s and 1960s. They argue that the class and race tensions present in the first wave of eugenics persisted. See Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> English, *Unnatural Selections*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Michele Mitchell refers to this belief as “racial destiny” which, “connoted a hierarchical scale of humanity typically crested by “Saxons”—as opposed to “Teutonics,” “Celts,” “Gauls,” or “Aryans”—before the Civil War.” *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 19.

theories that disfavored the feeble-minded as much as the Negro. African Americans' acceptance of eugenic ideas did not necessitate their turning a blind eye to the ways in which mainstream eugenics contributed to racist conceptions of the community. Rather this made them more sensitive to the undemocratic and socially oppressive ways that eugenics could be integrated into the community, even though they also supported many of these measures.

By looking at scientific and etiquette literature in addition to the articles from the *Defender*, one gets a picture of African American participation in eugenics movement driven by their ability to draw upon eugenics biological theories to develop a doctrine of racial uplift that encouraged blacks to engage in more deliberate and conscious breeding so better members of the race could result. What is further apparent is that while eugenics' influence amongst black elites was driven by the desire for racial progress, it can only be imagined as such because of eugenics' embodiment of a national ideology that linked morality and biology. The difficult reality encountered by uplift leaders was that they could not fully utilize a movement that also problematized their existence. While they could buy into social hierarchies in which African Americans of a certain class status could participate, race leaders could not support the wider movement of eugenics, which ascribed the Negro, the same ill born place as the immigrant or the feeble-minded. This resulted in a movement of leaders who realized the absence of true allies on both sides. Separated from mainstream eugenicists because of their inability to fit the racial conception of the citizenry and rejected by the larger black segment of the population because of their class biases, racial uplift as realized through eugenics would prove problematic because racial oppression would prove a more formidable opponent than societal degeneracy.

This moment of African Americans engagement with eugenics is, I argue, an example of how black leaders explored various strategies without fully exploring their implications.

Eugenics' saturation into how early twentieth-century Americans viewed the relationship between morality and biology must have seemed like a good agenda at the time, yet as the *Defender* articles make clear, as eugenics began to cement as a movement and activists turned their attention to more aggressive interventions, blacks stopped seeing eugenics as a means for race betterment but as a potential tool of racial extinction.