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“Better Babies, Better Mothers, Better City”: Eugenic Maternalism, the Babies Welfare Association, and the Urban Better Baby Contest

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers the term “eugenic maternalism” to conceptualize how eugenic thought and practice was disseminated through Progressive Era materialist reform work. Focusing on the Better Babies Contests hosted by the New York City Babies’ Welfare Association from 1913 to 1916, I argue that the BWA Better Babies Contest provides an opportunity to broaden our understanding of the ways eugenic logic permeated maternalist discussions of child welfare. The contests incentivized mothers and children to participate in educational programming at local community centers, enlisting families in the project of assimilation. Within these spaces, eugenics operated as a reciprocal process of environmental reform, negotiated between reformers and immigrant women. Both participants and organizers acted within a eugenic framework in which their ability to control the environment would determine their future hereditary potential and capacity for citizenship.

KEYWORDS: eugenics, public health, gender, reproduction, child welfare

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As chief of New York City's Division of Child Hygiene, Dr. Sarah Josephine Baker was skeptical about "race suicide." The term, first coined by sociologist E. A. Ross, referred to the differential birthrates of native-born Protestant Americans and Catholic immigrants in the United States. In a 1911 article in the *New York Times*, Baker argued, "The real race suicide is not because more babies are not born, but it is because we are not saving the lives of those who have been born." She argued that the solution was preventing infant mortality, not increasing the birth rate. Baker encouraged readers to consider the "changing character of our population." Pointing to the living conditions resulting from the unprecedented rise of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, Baker explained, "The result is they are not physically able, by reason of the congested life in crowded cities, to hand down to children the amount of vigor which they themselves largely possess, and their children are not as strong as the children of our native American stock."¹ Rather than increased birthrates of supposedly undesirable populations, it was the environment—in the form of poor sanitary conditions, a lack of hygiene, and poor nutrition—that caused race suicide.

Baker challenged the core issue of supposed race suicide, rejecting completely the idea that white, native-born women were birthing fewer children than immigrant populations was a concern. Rather, she argued, both immigrant and native-born populations had the same hereditary potential to make proper citizens. The problem was mothers' ignorance of the proper methods of child care and domestic hygiene, which, if left unchecked, would prevent mothers

¹ S. Josephine Baker, "Deliberate Waste of Life," *New York Times*, June 14, 1911.

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from properly raising their children and would continue to contribute to high rates of infant mortality. For Baker, it was the quality of environment and level of domestic education that separated immigrant populations from native-born whites.

During her tenure at the Division of Child Hygiene, it adopted several educational initiatives that taught immigrant mothers and young girls sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition in the hopes of lowering infant mortality. In 1913, the division started experimenting with baby contests, most likely inspired by a “babies’ health contest” described in the *Women’s Home Companion*, which launched their own Better Babies Bureau that same year.² Drawing on the successes of rural contests that operated within agricultural fairs, the magazine hoped to provide informational templates that could be replicated across the country. Like Baker, the *Women’s Home Companion* equated physical health with ideal citizenship. Such a contest, they argued, “brings home to the commonwealth a realization of its responsibility to children. . . . The existence of the State depends upon its babies.”³

The New York City Better Baby Contests ultimately proved popular, not just for the participants and organizers but also for the middle- and upper-class observers who read about their exploits and successes in the daily newspaper. The contests primarily targeted immigrant communities, offering educational opportunities, free medical care, and monetary prizes. Newspapers and billboards throughout the city advertised local contests and displayed happy,

² The Babies Welfare Association (BWA) used the *Women’s Home Companion* Score Cards for contests run in 1913–14, before both organizations adopted score cards created by the American Medical Association.

³ John J. Biddison, “Better Babies,” *Women’s Home Companion*, March 1913, 26.

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smiling babies. Speaking to reporters in 1914, Baker argued, “Race suicide does not threaten the United States so long as foreigners emigrate to this country.” She assured the reporters, “People are as interested in babies as they ever were. In fact, they wish to give their children better advantages than they themselves had.”⁴

Like the contests that inspired them, these Better Baby Contests used the allure of spectacle to attract mothers throughout the city to submit their children from ages three months to five years old to medical experts for physical examinations. They were organized by the Babies Welfare Association (BWA), a preventative care network created by the city’s Division of Child Hygiene, comprising over one hundred philanthropic, religious, and government organizations.⁵ At these events, public health educators distributed literature to participants and onlookers, gave free lectures for all, and offered large cash prizes for the babies who demonstrated the most improved health or were deemed overall most physically fit. By 1915, twenty thousand babies had participated as contestants or patients at the health stations and five thousand had been submitted for judging, and the BWA had offered over seventy lectures to mothers and organized a variety of special mothers’ classes.⁶ Unlike the contests highlighted in the *Women’s Home Companion*, however, these Better Baby Contests were held at public schools, settlement houses, and social welfare organizations in immigrant neighborhoods.

⁴ “Aliens Saving Country,” *Washington Herald*, July 20, 1914.

⁵ “Prize Mothers and Their Babies Hold the Key of Greater New York To-Day,” *Evening World* (New York), June 25, 1914.

⁶ *Report of the Babies Welfare Association of New York City, 1912–1915* (New York: Department of Child Helping of the Russell Sage Foundation, 1915).

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The BWA first began experimenting with baby contests in 1913. That April, it hosted a small “Baby Health Contest” at a local public school. After it met with success, the BWA aimed to expand the contests through the city, calling on its organizational members to help “further this new move in the interest of eugenics.”⁷ Like Baker, the BWA understood environmental reform as a eugenic practice. Yet the actual contests themselves rarely, if ever, mentioned eugenics explicitly. Rather, the contests encouraged immigrant mothers to abandon the traditional childrearing practices of their homelands and adopt American cultural and hygienic norms in order to “insure better babies and a better race.”⁸ BWA baby contests reflected the ways eugenic logic permeated maternalist discourses of child welfare. The contests were intentionally created to further a particular kind of eugenics, in which education and reform would establish productive and reproductive fitness for immigrant women and girls, measured through the ability to adhere to American cultural and hygienic norms.⁹

The contests incentivized mothers and children to participate in BWA educational programming at local community centers, enlisting immigrant families into the project of assimilation. As such, BWA Better Baby Contests offer historians of medicine an opportunity to broaden our understanding of eugenic thought and practice. Here, eugenics operated as a

⁷ Babies Welfare Association of New York, “Weekly Bulletin of the Babies Welfare Association” (New York: Babies Welfare Association of New York, 1912), Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at the New York Academy of Medicine (RBMC), New York.

⁸ Women’s Home Companion Better Babies Bureau, “How to Hold a Better Babies Contest” (New York: National Congress of Mothers and the Women’s Home Companion, 1914), RBMC.

⁹ Jamie Marsella, ““An Army of Little Mothers’: Progressive Era Eugenic Maternalism and the Medicalization of Motherhood,” *J. Gilded Age Prog. Era* 23, no. 2 (2024): 213–30.

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reciprocal process of environmental reform, negotiated by elite white women reformers and white-ethnic immigrant women.¹⁰ Though they may not have recognized the lessons on environment and heredity that accompanied the contests as being explicitly tied to eugenic theories, both participants and local organizers acted within a eugenic framework in which their ability to control their environment would determine their future hereditary potential and their capacity for citizenship. Though little archival evidence remains from their perspective, the existing record provides insights into how they engaged with contest organizers.¹¹ For contest participants, the contests, prizes, and accompanying educational programming presented the opportunity and incentive to receive child care information from medical authorities and display their individual prowess as mothers and the physical and cultural fitness of their communities.

Judged with standard scorecards created by *Women's Home Companion* and, later, the American Medical Association (AMA), Better Babies Contests were hosted locally by BWA organizational members, including settlement houses, churches, and philanthropic organizations, and made available in various languages, including Yiddish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, and

¹⁰ As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, race is both a conception and a perception. The fluidity of conceptions of whiteness through the history of the United States reflects the ways the power of whiteness has been wielded by and for different groups at different times. Within this article, I refer to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as *white-ethnic immigrants* to denote the ways whiteness became stratified in the late nineteenth century to separate European immigrants from so-called “native-born” Americans. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture,” in *Race and Immigration in the United States: New Histories*, ed. Paul R. Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2012), 131–47.

¹¹ Insight into the BWA Better Baby Contests has been made possible through the digitization of the *Evening World*, made accessible by the NEH. Neither the Division of Child Hygiene nor the Babies Welfare Association have accessible papers or collections.

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Italian.¹² In this way, the Division of Child Hygiene recognized the eugenic authority of community leaders in addition to their own. The contests, therefore, paradoxically emphasized standardization and Anglo-American norms while remaining geographically and culturally bounded within individual, local communities.¹³ Members of the BWA understood assimilation as a central goal of their work. Yet their collaboration required constant negotiation of which cultural and ethnic practices could be accommodated and exactly which racial and ethnic groups were malleable enough to assimilate. Of course, the process of assimilation for some came at the intentional expense of others. As gender scholar Kyla Schuller has argued, the very category of the universalized woman, an idea frequently articulated by maternalist reformers, is itself an instrument of racial science, which framed the ability to be influenced by education and environment as a telltale sign of the supposedly civilized races.¹⁴

While eugenic programs came to be known by midcentury for their emphasis on limiting the reproduction of the supposedly unfit through sterilization and anti-miscegenation statutes, eugenic notions of heredity remained in flux in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly among progressive reformers.¹⁵ As Marouf Arif Hasian has argued, “Eugenics was

¹² Examples of language adaptation can be found in the New York Academy of Medicine’s digitized New York Milk Committee Ephemera Collection. The New York Milk Committee was a subcommittee of the Bureau of Child Hygiene and a BWA member. “Educational Materials,” New York Academy of Medicine, <https://digitalcollections.nyam.org/islandora/object/digital%3A1317>.

¹³ Babies Welfare Association of New York, “Weekly Bulletin” (n. 7).

¹⁴ Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Kathy J. Cooke, “The Limits of Heredity: Nature and Nurture in American Eugenics Before 1915,” *J. Hist. Biol.* 31 (June 1998): 263–78.

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popularized in part because of its very ambiguity,” leaving space for individuals to express concerns on a wide number of social issues, including immigration, shifting gender roles, and sexual behaviors.¹⁶ Even among mainline eugenicists, there were debates on exactly what sorts of reforms fell within the bounds of eugenics. Historians Kathy J. Cooke and Daniel Kevles have demonstrated that controlling the environment through sanitation and hygiene reform, while contested, remained central to many early eugenic reformers.¹⁷ For example, Ellen Swallow Richards, the first woman chemist and founder of sanitary engineering, first proposed the term “euthenics” as “an essential preliminary” to eugenics. Richards viewed euthenics as both a theoretical and a practicable science that could create the conditions needed for other forms of eugenic reform to succeed. Importantly, Richards desired euthenic practitioners to be experts both in sanitary science and public health as well as in “relating science and education to life.”¹⁸ In her 1910 book *Euthenics*, she asserted, “Perhaps the most progressive movement of the times is one led by women who see clearly that cleanness is above charity, that moral support must be given to those who know but do not dare to do right, and that knowledge must be brought to the

¹⁶ Hasian, Marouf Arif, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Charles E. Rosenberg, “The Bitter Fruit: Heredity, Disease, and Social Thought in Nineteenth Century America,” *Perspect. Amer. Hist.* 8 (1974): 189–235; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Ellen Swallow Richards, *Euthenics, the Science of Controllable Environment: A Plea for Better Living Conditions as a First Step toward Higher Human Efficiency* (Boston: Whitcomb & Barrows, 1910), ix.

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ignorant.”¹⁹ Richards pointed to the reform work already being done by organizations like the Division of Child Hygiene and the BWA as prime eugenic examples.²⁰

By the 1910s, maternalist reformers had taken up the questions of sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition. This work was frequently done under the guise of “child-saving,” or what Linda Gordon has termed “child-first” rhetoric that justified women’s involvement in social and political issues.²¹ Like mainline eugenics, early twentieth-century maternalism was far from a unified set of political and social ideologies but rather a coherent framework encompassing various positions.²² It is within this ambiguity that the BWA—a sprawling network of philanthropic, religious, and municipal organizations that comprised a wide range of scientific, theological, and political views—took shape. As such, the BWA embodies what I have termed “eugenic maternalism.” These eugenic maternalists collectively promoted and perpetuated public health and child welfare practices with a shared foundational understanding (1) that human physical and moral conditions could be improved by attending to the environment, (2) that women had a specific obligation to utilize their innate qualities to further these reforms, and (3) that education and training in child welfare and hygiene were the primary tools through which to create ideal future citizens. In this way, the BWA baby contests illustrate the ways eugenic

¹⁹ Ibid, 151.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Linda Gordon, “Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *U.S. History as Women’s History*, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Alice Kessler-Harris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 63–87.

²² Sonya Michel and Robyn Rosen, “The Paradox of Maternalism: Elizabeth Lowell Putnam and the American Welfare State,” *Gender Hist.* 4 (Sept. 1992): 364–86.

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maternalism furthered public health and child welfare practices that reflected and popularized environmentally focused understandings of heredity and fitness.

The BWA Better Baby Contest

Though various BWA organizational members ran the contests, their operations were relatively standardized and, importantly for the BWA, predominantly organized by women. Each contest began with a registration period, during which mothers would submit their child to a team of volunteers. Once registered, mothers would hand their babies to a team of nurses and doctors, who conducted physical examinations according to standardized scorecards. The contests were scored in three parts—mental and developmental, physical measurements, and physical examinations—with different criteria for each age category. For example, a physician would score a six-month-old child’s Mental and Development Test by assigning a numeric score out of one hundred based on how well the child “sits alone, plays with simple objects like a pencil or a spoon, grasps for a watch, hears (looks in the direction of unexpected noises), sees (follows objects moving about), irritable, highly nervous.” The physician would then weigh the child, take measurements of their various body parts, and compare them to the average measurements of children in the same stage of development. Finally, the physician would examine the six-month-old to determine whether or not their fontanel was closing at a normal rate and if their eyes were clear of mucus, their nose was not deviated, their lips were not cracked, their spines were not

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curved, and so forth.²³ In areas where a child scored concerningly low, doctors and nurses would speak with the mother about her child's health and potential causes for illness or underdevelopment and would promote BWA-approved solutions for improvement.

In some ways, these contests fit snugly into existing narratives of Progressive Era eugenic social reform, especially those that grappled with the legacies of Better Babies or Fitter Family campaigns nationwide.²⁴ By the time the BWA began hosting contests in 1913, baby contests

²³ "Better Babies Scorecard," *Evening World*, August 7, 1913. See also Women's Home Companion Better Babies Bureau, "Better Babies Score Card" (New York: National Congress of Mothers and the Women's Home Companion, 1914), RBMC; AMA Scorecard, box 13, folder 240, Baby Records, Other Institutions, Papers of Mrs. William Lowell Putnam, 1887–1935, MC 360, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, Mass.

²⁴ Over twenty years ago, Martin S. Pernick called upon historians and public health practitioners to take Better Baby Contests seriously. Pointing to the foundational work of Alexandra Minna Stern, who explored contests in Indiana from 1920 to 1935, Pernick argued that baby contests made plain the complex connections between eugenics and public health, particularly among maternalist public health workers. Since then, many historians have examined eugenic baby contests and their connections to a longer legacy of baby shows in the nineteenth century. Since Stern first examined them in Indiana, more work has been done to examine the relationship between Better Contests (as well as Fitter Family Contests), eugenics, and public health on a global scale. Gerald Thomson and Allison Leadely, for example, both demonstrated the ways that Better Baby Contests in Vancouver and Toronto, respectively, helped to popularize broader eugenic ideas about fitness and heredity among middle-class Anglo-Saxon Canadians through exhibition and spectacle. Marilyn Holt has looked at the role of Better Baby Contests in rural areas, connecting them to a broader history of domestic economics and child welfare in the United States. Laura Lovett has examined the role of idealized motherhood in Dr. Florence Sherborn's eugenic Fitter Family Contests, which judged entire families rather than individual babies, as part of the broader bureaucratization of reproduction in the 1920s. As Susan Pearson has shown, these twentieth-century contests drew on a century-long history of baby shows in the nineteenth century, which served to normalize the exhibition of supposedly "normal" bodies. These scholars make clear the importance that exhibition, excitement, and entertainment played in the popularization of baby shows throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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had been popular among middle-class white women in the West since the early nineteenth century. These baby contests in rural communities were often modeled after livestock and crop contests and were often held in conjunction with farming contests. Along with prizes for the largest crop or the fattest calf, these contests also awarded prizes to middle-class white mothers for raising the healthiest “human crops.”²⁵ After the Civil War, contest organizers mobilized once again to increase the reproduction of Anglo-American women—a direct response to increasing immigrant and Catholic populations in urban areas and Reconstruction.²⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, these contests were most often accompanied by educational literature promoting infant care and racial science.²⁷ By 1915, just two years after the BWA began their contests, the Federal Children’s Bureau took Better Baby Contests nationwide, with printed

Caroline Daley has challenged the idea that eugenics is the most productive lens for understanding baby contests, arguing that this approach limits our ability to consider the “non-eugenic and extra-eugenic aspects of the competition.” This article is indebted to this scholarship and centers its attention on the ways the spectacle and entertainment of early twentieth-century baby contests, while certainly connected to the longer legacy of nineteenth-century baby shows, was inextricable from the eugenic maternalist priorities of its organizers and their understandings of heredity and fitness. Alexandra Minna Stern, “Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana, 1920–1935,” *Amer. J. Pub. Health* 5 (May 2002): 742–52; Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890–1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 131–62.

²⁵ Annette K. Vance Dorey, *Better Baby Contests: The Scientific Quest for Perfect Childhood Health in the Early Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999), 9.

²⁶ Daniel E. Bender, *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), 188–89.

²⁷ Dorey, *Better Baby Contests* (n. 25), 9.

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pamphlets that offered scalable contest templates that addressed the needs of cities and towns nationwide.²⁸

In urban areas, changing demographics due to European immigration and, later, the Great Migration increased anxiety for middle- and upper-class whites.²⁹ In such condensed cities, middle-class white women could no longer avoid firsthand experiences with the working classes, whether through their daily encounters with domestic help, through books and films detailing *How the Other Half Lives*, or through voluntary engagement with reform projects.³⁰ The idea of crossing the physical boundaries that separated classes, ethnicities, and races from each other often served as titillation in newspapers, novels, and nickelodeon films. This titillation was a fundamental element in the success of the urban baby contest. BWA contests were sponsored in part by the *Evening World*, one of the most widely circulated evening newspapers in the United States at the time.³¹ Every week, the *Evening World* announced new contest dates and current winners, published key lectures, and interviewed contest organizers about their progress. As

²⁸ Julia Lathrop, “Baby-Week Campaigns: Suggestions for Communities of Various Sizes,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor Children’s Bureau, 1915).

²⁹ John Louis Recchiuti, *Civic Engagement: Social Science and Progressive-Era Reform in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

³⁰ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues* (n. 29), 122–27; Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

³¹ By the 1890s, the *Evening World* boasted a circulation of 340,000. By 1920, it had grown to a circulation of 359,133. See “New York City Newspapers,” *Editor and Publisher* 7 (July 17, 1920): 25; Chronicling America National Endowment for the Humanities, “The Evening World,” <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/>.

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chief of the Division of Child Hygiene, Baker published a monthly “Better Babies” column in *Women’s Home Companion*, reaching audiences nationwide.³²

As historian Molly Ladd-Taylor has demonstrated, one consequence of the professionalization of doctoring at the beginning of the twentieth century was an increased number of American women who believed that properly caring for a child required expert training. Between 1910 and 1930, women of all classes began to seek out official resources of child care rather than rely on tradition or experience, most frequently found through physicians, women’s magazines, and government pamphlets.³³ For the poor, many of whom were not literate in English and did not have access to a family physician, this created a vacuum in care—a space that women public health professionals, searching for places to practice, were eager to fill.

For educated women seeking professional employment, eugenic maternalism offered opportunities for professional advancement. Cities like New York became sites of refuge as women found positions in settlement work, medicine, and public health. Baker, for example, began her career as a visiting doctor working for the Public Health Department. She ultimately became the first chief of the Division of Child Hygiene and the face of Better Babies Contests

³² S. Josephine Baker, “The Meaning of Motherhood,” *Women’s Home Companion*, November 1913.

³³ Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 33.

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nationwide—a strong example of the Progressive Era “New Woman” most often associated with social reform efforts.³⁴

In addition to publicizing mothering advice, the contests also provided opportunities for professional women to demonstrate their expertise in child welfare and sanitary science. As a federation of “child-saving” organizations, the BWA was home to many of these elite, educated professionals who worked as nurses, public health professionals, social workers, and doctors. Many BWA doctors gave lectures to accompany the contests. A lecture on the dangers of overheating for infants, for example, ended with a call to action: “The only way to learn these tricks is to have some one show you. At the milk stations the nurses show the mothers the best way to dress their babies.”³⁵ Though women did not exclusively provide these lectures, those who did speak were credentialed medical doctors and continually emphasized the attainability of physical and cultural fitness through the scientific management of the home environment. Baker’s lectures, for example, presented her audiences with information that could be replicated in a variety of homes, including cramped tenement apartments. Her approach emphasized both her audience’s duty and its ability to do so—not, however, without consulting a BWA nurse or visiting an affiliated milk station first. A similar lecture from Julia W. Perry, a doctor from Queens actively involved with the New York Milk Committee (NYMC), a member of the BWA, emphasized the importance of physical examinations by NYMC medical staff for young infants.

³⁴ Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Ellen Carol Dubois, *Suffrage: Women’s Long Battle for the Vote* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 130–65.

³⁵ “Start Picking Baby Winners To-Morrow,” *Evening World*, July 8, 1913.

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Perry warned the audience that there were certain health conditions that even the most trained mothers would need help identifying, recalling, “One mother thought that her baby was a winner. It was a beautiful, well developed baby, but she did not notice the slight eczema or little rash on the shoulder. Her baby’s digestion was bad and it need a little change in food.”³⁶ The lectures positioned the Division of Child Hygiene, the NYMC, and the BWA as not only reliable and available medical experts but also *necessary* experts.

Baby contests were a highly effective means of bringing mothers and children to the broader BWA care. They also served a variety of eugenic purposes, including opportunities for community engagement as well as surveillance, in-network referrals, and education. Before the creation of the BWA, for example, an NYMC milk station would have operated in a silo, relying on mothers who came to the station of their own accord and sending nurses to homes to check in on unwell mothers or children in their spare time—a rare occurrence, especially in times of epidemic or during the summers when pasteurized milk demand was highest. With the new federation of organizations and agencies that made up the BWA, however, a milk station nurse could send information about an ill contestant to BWA headquarters, which would contact a participating hospital, reserve a space for the child, and give the necessary travel and contact information to the mother. Similarly, if a mother was unwell or unable to care for her children, the inspector could report the condition to BWA headquarters, securing a hospital stay and temporary care for the children. As a BWA report explained, “It has been accomplished only by the combined efforts of all . . . cooperating, where, in the past, there has been friction, and

³⁶ “Mother’s Enter Three Babies Each for Prizes,” *Evening World*, July 18, 1913.

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supplementing each other's work without petty jealousies and bickerings."³⁷ Despite the flippancy of the report, the friction had hardly been "petty." Like the Division of Child Hygiene, these religious organizations saw the assimilation of newly arrived immigrants and their children as a central goal of their work. Unlike the government, however, Catholic and Jewish organizations also had to first demonstrate that their cultural and religious communities had the same physical and cultural potential as their "native-born" counterparts. For example, one nondenominational settlement house contest prided itself on its progress in eliminating the Italian practice of tight swaddling by placing those babies on display next to unswaddled babies in the hopes of flaunting the superiority of American standards. As one club woman noted, "If we can only manage so that the mothers may see them in competition with the unbound babies the days of the bambinos will be numbered."³⁸ This contest organizer demonstrated a eugenic maternalist understanding of the contest's purpose. She assumed that an Italian child's physical condition was not at the same standard as an Anglo-American child, not because of any inherent physical difference but because of its environment. With the appropriate cultural changes, the child would no longer be a "bambino" but would instead become an American.

Yet organizations run by white-ethnic women, especially Catholic and Jewish organizations, frequently pushed back against this narrative. A 1905 report from the St. Vincent de Paul Hospital, for example, argued that Catholic charity was far more effective than "barren" secular philanthropy, claiming that "representatives of humanitarianism" were motivated by

³⁷ Babies Welfare Association, "Report of the Babies Welfare Association of New York City, 1912–1915" (New York, 1915), 7.

³⁸ "Greenwich Village to Exhibit Bambinos," *Evening World*, August 15, 1913.

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“sentiment and feeling rather than reason and religion.” Equating reason and intelligent self-interest with religiosity (and, specifically, Catholicism), the report further articulated the expertise and skill of Catholic sisters, claiming that their simple yet profound presence in their communities had “broken down barriers of bigotry and prejudice against the Catholic Church. . . . The many hardened sinners and indifferent Christians that have been converted by intercourse with these noble and refined women, God only knows.” Once off the streets and in the hospitals, visitors were impressed not only by “the attractive form in which religion is presented” but also by the hospital’s “thorough organization” and “most improved methods” in hygienic knowledge. According to this logic, it was their reason *and* their religion that made their charges capable of benefiting from a hygienic environment, as well as the sisters’ expert authority, which ensured that “the spiritual care is no less perfect than the physical.”³⁹

Like Catholic sisters, Jewish benevolent women also directly connected motherhood, domesticity, and philanthropy to notions of fit citizenship. Jewish club women were motivated as much by the Jewish tradition of charity as they were by self-preservation. As a result, Jewish hospitals and health organizations also had to explicitly negotiate multifaceted Jewish identities in a distinctly American context, “where Jewish cultural, ethnic, and religious continuity required active maintenance” in the face of anti-Semitism.⁴⁰ Established, native-born Jewish women felt responsible for ushering the new wave of immigrants into assimilated society. As

³⁹ *A Monument of Charity for the Destitute Sick: St. Vincent’s Hospital* (1905), Catholic Charities Collection, subseries 26, box 23, folder 10, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York, Yonkers, N.Y.

⁴⁰ Melissa Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 30.

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one 1895 article in the *American Jewess* explained, “The ideal mother holds within its embrace all the motherless, homeless ones of earth, and prays in the name of her own for their protection. Only in such an ideal motherhood, made manifest in the actual, is there hope for the nation in the days to come.”⁴¹

Maternalist educational initiatives held a particular significance for these benevolent women, who saw them as an opportunity to maintain authority in a philanthropic landscape that was becoming increasingly hostile to religious institutional care.⁴² In New York City, the creation of the Division of Child Hygiene in 1908 brought increased scrutiny to these religious institutions, including the Foundling Asylum and the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, both of which eventually became members of the BWA. The Angel Guardian Home, another Catholic orphanage, for example, offered guided tours throughout the BWA’s Baby Week in 1914 as one of the entertaining amusements that accompanied the Better Babies Contests.⁴³ That same year, the Hebrew Educational Society in Brooklyn hosted a Better Babies Contest, reporting over 548 attendees.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ella E. Bartlett, “Ideal Motherhood,” *American Jewess*, September 1895, 281.

⁴² Reena Sigman Friedman, *These Are Our Children: Jewish Orphanages in the United States, 1880–1925* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1994); Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York’s Welfare System, 1820–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁴³ “The Babies Happy Home,” *The Tablet* (New York), May 20, 1916.

⁴⁴ Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Charities, “First Annual Report of the Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Charities and Reports of Affiliated Societies” (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Charities, 1914), RBMC.

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Bounded within their local communities, the BWA Better Baby Contests reveal the ways different organizers and participants often held conflicting or contradictory conceptions of physical and cultural fitness. In this process, the contests promoted physical and behavioral standards that expanded the definition of “American” to incorporate competing cultural and religious practices while simultaneously fortifying physical and cultural boundaries against those deemed unassimilable. As the contests delineated the fit from the unfit, they infused understandings of good motherhood with eugenic logic.

The Power, the Strength, and the Glory

The BWA baby contests were a site of convergence between the interests of elite white women who operated as doctors, nurses, and volunteers and the mothers and girls who participated. As such, the contests embody a particular paradox of eugenic maternalism, which emphasized science and expertise as the foundational justification for separate spheres ideology that relegated women to domesticity and childrearing. As the BWA network grew, the Division of Child Hygiene aimed to define the roles and responsibilities of everyone participating in child care—especially mothers and children. Organizations like the BWA framed eugenic practices as an opportunity for women initially deemed unfit to prove their worthiness through their ability to assimilate to white, native-born cultural and hygienic standards. In this way, baby contests standardized expectations not just for the baby but also for the mother, who was required to maintain the conditions for a eugenically fit child. Yet few participants (or the organizers) embodied the ideal woman constructed through these contests. Though the doctors, nurses, and other professionals working the contests justified their presence with maternalistic arguments

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about public service, they were nonetheless professional women with careers that took them far from the domestic sphere. Additionally, many of the women participants also worked outside the home in low-paying wage work.⁴⁵ In fact, several Better Baby Contests were hosted at day nurseries, relatively controversial organizations among reformers that provided child care for low-income mothers while they worked. While maternalists considered wage earning by women unacceptable by middle-class standards, they also recognized day nurseries as an opportunity for women and children to become “Americanized” under the watchful influence of reformers.⁴⁶

Like day nurseries, baby contests provided reformers with similar opportunities for assimilation at a far wider assortment of care sites. Contests rewarded the capability to improve rather than innate perfection in the hopes of encouraging mothers to return to partake in the lectures, films, and other educational events associated with the contests before, during, and after the initial registration period. As Baker explained, “The type of baby contest or health conference that is most valuable from the educational and public-health point of view is what might be known as a ‘baby improvement contest.’”⁴⁷ Improved health was the primary goal, made more enticing with monetary incentives. Each BWA contest awarded two rounds of prizes: First, prizes would be awarded to the babies who scored the highest in each age category. After

⁴⁵ Department of Commerce and Labor Bureau of the Census, “Statistics of Women at Work” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907).

⁴⁶ Sonya Mitchel, “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies towards American Wage-Earning Mothers during the Progressive Era,” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of the Welfare State*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 292.

⁴⁷ S. Josephine Baker, *Child Hygiene* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1925), 243, The RBMC.

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that, however, mothers were encouraged to apply the information they received from the lectures, films, or demonstrations they attended and resubmit their babies for “the most improved” award after three or four months. These programs discussed a wide array of child welfare topics, including how to clothe a child in different weather, how to properly feed an infant at different stages of development, understanding the first year of infancy, what to do when a mother had trouble lactating, and the importance of prenatal care for pregnant women. Often, the award for “most improved” baby was larger than that of a first-time winner.⁴⁸

Winning rewarded the mother and child with not simply a monetary prize but also public acclaim. This, too, was intentional. As Baker explained, “The main benefit from the baby contest is its publicity value.”⁴⁹ The contests and their winners were covered extensively in the *Evening World*, which provided insight into the experiences of the women participants, though they were often presented from the perspective of the contest organizers. Throughout the contests’ three-year run, the *Evening World* crafted a narrative of the contests as equally titillating as informative, emphasizing the most unusual contestants while promoting the most idealized.

Like BWA promotional materials, the *Evening World* columns promoted the contests as a place where perfection was not expected and improvement was encouraged. In typical fashion, however, the stories were sensationally reported. In August 1913, for example, the *Evening World* reported the registration of two babies who “were obviously not up to the standard. One had a twisted foot and the other, a babe of ten months, was woefully undersized for its age.

⁴⁸ Babies Welfare Association, “Report of the Babies Welfare Association” (n. 37).

⁴⁹ Baker, *Child Hygiene* (n. 47), 243.

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When the registration officials asked the mothers why they desired to enter babies that obviously could not prove prize-winners, they replied that they hoped through entering the contests to learn how they had failed in the care and upbringing of their offspring. . . . They felt though that if they could attend the lectures given in conjunction with the contests they could glean further helpful information as to what their babies needed. This being one of the principal objects of the contests, the registration officials were greatly pleased and lost no time entering the little ones.”⁵⁰

As the *Evening World* sponsored the contests, its coverage provides insight into how the Division of Child Hygiene wanted the BWA to be viewed. Its portrayal of these two anxious mothers helped establish that the contests were open environments for learning and improvement and the idea that good mothers could and *should* improve their child’s health and well-being through improved sanitation, nutrition, and domesticity. Importantly, while the news feature acknowledges that the children’s conditions may have been a result of their mothers’ failure to act or lack of knowledge, it argues that it was not the result of their biological ineptitude or an uncorrectable hereditary defect.

The contests’ standardized scorecards also created new opportunities for contest participants to provide scientific evidence of their capacity for fitness. Though the contests were predominantly frequented by white-ethnic immigrant women and children, several volunteers were quoted by the *Evening World* expressing surprise at the interest of women of all classes and ethnicities. One contest volunteer (the boundaries of which covered almost half of Midtown Manhattan) was quoted as saying, “A significant fact in connection to this first contest is that

⁵⁰ “Rush of Entries on Final Day,” *Evening World*, August 30, 1913.

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parents of all classes have entered their children. The rich and the poor and the middle class are all represented. . . . The prizes are more than welcome, they are a great incentive, a nucleus of interest, but the desire for valuable, practical information is what is bringing those earnest mothers here in crowds.”⁵¹ Mrs. Clarence Burns, the president of Little Mothers’ Aid, was also quoted as saying, “We are assured of an interesting contest because our contest boundaries include residents of many nationalities and all will be represented from the Americans of three or four generations back to the lately arrived immigrants. The entrants, too, I am sure will include representatives of many different social classes.”⁵²

It is difficult to determine how many upper- or middle-class white women actually participated as contestants. While it is possible that a small proportion of them did, it is highly unlikely.⁵³ Regardless of actual numbers, however, it is significant that the *Evening World* chose to emphasize this particular element of the contests. Simply the *idea* that these contests objectively evaluated babies across class and ethnicity suggested that participants shared a common physicality that could be measured and compared accordingly. As a committee member told the *New York Tribune*, “The mothers should understand . . . this is not a charity, but merely a service the community should do its members as a measure of intelligent self-interest.”⁵⁴ This

⁵¹ “Start Picking Baby Winners Tomorrow,” *Evening World*, July 8, 1913.

⁵² “Perfect Babies Found in First Contest,” *Evening World*, July 11, 1913.

⁵³ From 1914 to 1920, the New York Academy of Medicine reported that almost 20 percent of patients at dispensaries citywide were “not of the lower classes.” The Dispensary Situation in New York City, “Summary and Recommendations” (New York: Public Health Committee of the New York Academy of Medicine, AMA, 1920).

⁵⁴ “Death of Babies Cost 40,000,000,” *New York Tribune*, June 29, 1914.

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intelligent self-interest marked an integral element of determining physical and moral worth by displaying both the rationality to seek guidance and the capacity to adopt the eugenic behaviors necessary to improve.

According to the Division of Child Hygiene, their programs proved so successful that Baker later lamented a new class inequality. In a 1918 article in the *New York Tribune*, for example, she complained, “Who but the babies of the very rich are weighed and examined by experts every week during the first year of life? The babies of immigrants and the very poor—but not these of small and moderate incomes, because they do not avail themselves of the free clinics.” Drawing on the rhetoric of wartime, Baker implored the readership to “do their bit,” adding, “It doesn’t matter who you are, you must do this, and try to make your neighbors do it.”⁵⁵ Her concern for the middle class conveys more than a simple frustration from the powerful stigma of charity and its effects on middle-class behaviors. Instead, this article reveals the ways that the division’s broader eugenic efforts were aimed across class and ethnicity, “from the carefully guarded blond darling in her suburban home to the little dark-eyed foreigners fresh from Ellis Island.”⁵⁶

Despite the *Evening World*’s claims, evidence suggests that the contests remained far more racially and ethnically segregated than the paper claimed. As the BWA was an association of organizational members, its contests inherently relied on organizational members’ relationships with the communities they served. Contests were held in public schools, settlement

⁵⁵ “Citizen Mothers—Have Your Babies Tested!,” *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1918.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

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houses, and neighborhood associations and run by volunteer teams associated with the individual locations. Each contest had clear neighborhood boundaries, with several covering large swaths of Manhattan, encompassing multiple neighborhoods. The boundaries, registration dates, prizes, winners, and other necessary information were published by the *Evening World* multiple times a week. The newspaper highlighted the importance of neighborhood ties and bragging rights for contest participants and judges alike. As one newspaper article proclaimed, “A west side kiddie must win the title ‘champion baby of New York!’ That’s the slogan of the Chelsea Neighborhood Association.”⁵⁷ Registration for the contests required parents to provide ethnicity-identifying information. Winners, therefore, championed not just their neighborhood but also their ethnic community.

Along with each picture of a prize-winning baby, the *Evening World* frequently published their ethnicities along with their names and neighborhood ties, juxtaposing their cultural differences while celebrating their physical and mental capacities. For example, one article from July 1913 featured a physician who had been volunteering at a Brooklyn baby contest. He told the paper, “I am really surprised at the unusually excellent condition of the great majority of these children. I have examined fifty of them, and their normality is far above the average.”⁵⁸ Another article a month later emphasized the contests’ “unusual cleanliness” despite “how poor the parents, or whether real mother or little sister is the person in charge of the child.” The article focused on one mother who brought her baby to be registered: “The mother was very poorly

⁵⁷ “Mothers Enter Three Babies Each for Prizes,” *Evening World*, July 18, 1913.

⁵⁸ “Perfect Babies Found in First Contest” (n. 52).

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dressed, but the child might have come from Fifth avenue for all its tidy rompers and immaculate waist showed.” They concluded with a quote from the contest secretary, who assured readers, “There hasn’t been more than one out of the more than three hundred babies that have been registered that I would not be willing to touch or fondle.”⁵⁹ Throughout its sponsorship, the *Evening World* emphasized the contrast between “normality” and “cleanliness” of the participants with their ethnicities and tenement homes. While the contests helped publicize eugenic maternalist ideals to participants, the paper shared them with readers across the city.

Neighborhood ties also connected participants to contest organizers. Contest registration was most often handled by a team of volunteers with existing ties to their local community. At Public School 91 in 1913, for example, registration was organized by women who regularly volunteered at the school and would be familiar to many mothers of young children in the area.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, at the Greenwich Settlement House, contest registration was handled by women who were actively involved in the settlement’s larger work and would therefore be known throughout the community.⁶¹ This level of familiarity between participant and organizer helped eliminate potential barriers to entry with which many immigrant women were likely to be concerned. Mothers who did not speak English, for example, could rest assured that the contest volunteers already had experience working with them and their communities. At the Lenox Hill

⁵⁹ “Proud Mothers Break through the Rules to Get a Chance for Their Prize Babies,” *Evening World*, August 1, 1913.

⁶⁰ “Perfect Babies Found in First Contest” (n. 52).

⁶¹ “Greenwich Village to Exhibit Bambinos” (n. 38).

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Neighborhood House, this took the form of multiple contests to accommodate language differences.⁶²

At any BWA Better Baby Contest, a recently arrived immigrant or working-class mother could reasonably expect to see their child or another from their community recognized as a prize-winning baby, with attention and commendation from government officials and important neighborhood figures. In September 1913, for example, Congressman Goldfogle presented awards at the prize ceremony for a contest held by the Little Mothers' Aid in the East Village. The ceremony awarded bank books to the mothers of four young winners: Thomas Moore, for ages three to nine months, identified as Irish; Jack Halpern, for ages nine months to thirteen years, identified as Hebrew; Helen Walz, for ages eighteen months to three years, identified as German; and Zelma Zenovitch, for ages three years to five years, identified as Hungarian.

Distributing fifteen dollars in deposit slips to the mothers, Goldfogle announced,

I want to congratulate these mothers on such very fine and excellent babies. . . . The physical and mental development of the children is of the highest importance to the city, the State and the nation. I believe that these beautiful children will grow up to be the flower of the citizenship of New York. . . . There are many who may say that unfortunately this section [of the city] produces helpless, weak and anemic people. But look around at these healthy, well-formed, finely developed babies! They will grow up to be the power, the strength, the glory and the might of this American nation.⁶³

⁶² Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Annual Report 1917, series 1, box 3, Yearly Reports, Hunter College Archives, New York.

⁶³ "Mothers Shed Tears of Joy as Their Babies Receive Prizes Won in the East Side Contest," *Evening World*, September 9, 1913.

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The congressman's words highlight the importance that pride played in contest ceremonies as well as the ways that physical fitness and citizenship became interchangeable with eugenic fitness. In this way, the BWA Better Baby Contests served as highly publicized sites to demonstrate the eugenic fitness of white-ethnic mothers. Though the contests were organized to suit the needs of their local communities, the vast network of BWA contests ultimately served to reveal and sustain the boundaries of eugenic acceptability, expanded to incorporate white-ethnic women and children. As Baker would reiterate to reporters a year later, "Race suicide does not threaten the United States so long as foreigners emigrate to this country."⁶⁴

Like the contests themselves, the neighborhood boundaries of the contests were explicitly tied to an expanded view of whiteness.⁶⁵ An examination of forty-six first-place winners in thirteen different baby contest locations reveals that winners came from various neighborhoods and ethnicities, including families who identified as German, Scottish, Irish, Italian, American, and Russian-Jewish. The *Evening World* also reported Hungarian, Greek, Belgian, and Lithuanian participation.⁶⁶ Within a few weeks of the contests' inception in 1913, however, the

⁶⁴ "Aliens Saving Country" (n. 4).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Alan M. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ In order to understand the demographics of the baby contests within the individual boundaries, I analyzed a list found in the *Evening World*. With the last names and addresses provided, I was able to identify family members in the 1910 census, which provided self-reported ethnicities, places of birth, and occupations (if any). It is unclear, however, what relation these relatives had to the individual child in question. Despite this, I believe this analysis provides a strong insight into the neighborhoods and ethnic groups that were participating and winning BWA contests.

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Evening World reported on the entrance of a Black baby. The newspaper featured Allista, a Black contestant from Hell's Kitchen, announcing her enrollment with the headline "First Little Colored Entrant Pleases," stating, "If joyous good nature could win the prize Allista would run away with it."⁶⁷ This story suggests that African American mothers submitted their children for examination and, more surprisingly, that they were encouraged to do so. That this story made headline news further suggests that Black participation in baby contests would be considered intriguing to contemporary readers and that the inclusion of Black children was viewed positively, at least by the BWA and editorial staff.

Just as in the case of the white participants, the actual numbers of Black participants are unknown. Still, additional context challenges their claims. The *Evening Standard* did not report any African American winners for the duration of the contests, but other sources openly contested the treatment of those who did participate. In 1914, for example, the African American newspaper *New York Age* claimed that Black babies who participated in contests were not awarded prizes regardless of how highly they scored. In fact, the editors were so outraged that they hosted their own mail-in contest for Black children nationwide.⁶⁸ The *New York Age*'s Better Babies Contests provide insight into the experiences of African Americans across the country who submitted their babies to local contests. The newspaper frequently printed letters from parents alongside pictures of babies that explained their interest in participation. Some

See "Prize Winners in Recent Better Babies Contest," *Evening World*, June 20, 1914; "Two Babies Win Perfect Scores on First Day," *Evening World*, August 19, 1913.

⁶⁷ "First Awards of Prizes in Baby Contest," *Evening World*, July 25, 1913.

⁶⁸ "Most Perfect Baby a Negro," *New York Age*, March 19, 1914.

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parents expressed relief at the opportunity to participate in the contests without facing racial discrimination or erasure: “Betty received great honor at the Bailey County Baby Show, but her mother refused to take her to the judges again because they always referred to her as the Italian baby.”⁶⁹ Others expressed gratitude for the ability to contribute to a public demonstration of Black mental and physical fitness. In addition to letters detailing the various merits of their children (“She has a good appetite and sleeps well. . . . She has decided what vocation she desires to follow in life and always speaks of it”), others explicitly hoped the contests would help to improve their race.⁷⁰ As one letter detailed, “We trust that your effort will [be] the means of inspiring our people to take better care of the babies.”⁷¹ Another wished the *New York Age* a “grand success,” hoping that the contests would “aid our race in showing more pride and interest in our future generation.”⁷²

Like with the BWA baby contests, the role of “self-interested intelligence” in determining who was worthy of reproducing was an unambiguous element of the *New York Age* contests. As historian Michele Mitchell has argued, Better Babies Contests were part of a long legacy of Black women’s child welfare activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and eugenic understandings of racial betterment were familiar to many African Americans by the 1910s.⁷³ Gregory Door and Angela Logan’s work on NAACP contests has

⁶⁹ “Photos from All Sections of the U.S.,” *New York Age*, August 19, 1915.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “Instructions about Photos,” *New York Age*, July 29, 1915.

⁷² “Photos from All Sections of the U.S.” (n. 69).

⁷³ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 97.

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demonstrated how baby contests provided a vehicle for Black eugenicists to construct a scientific counternarrative to the scientific racism of mainline eugenics.⁷⁴ Further, Ayah Nuriddin has argued that a key feature of Black eugenics was its emphasis on the biosocial conditions of heredity, which required both eugenic and euthenic interventions to achieve racial uplift.⁷⁵ For the *New York Age*, the eugenic stakes were clearly expressed in one 1915 edition: “If the future of the Negro race is to be predicated on prospects indicated by these babies’ pictures, remarkable things are in prospect.” Quoting a lecture given in conjunction with the contest, the article continued, “Mother intelligence and mother efficiency are the two cardinal virtues essential for the establishment of a desirable heredity and for the preparation of a little child.”⁷⁶

The explicit goals of the *New York Age*’s Better Babies Contests reflect one of the primary purposes of baby contests nationwide—to be seen. As historian Matthew Frye Jacobson has demonstrated, race and racial categories represent not just a concept but also a particular perception.⁷⁷ The explicit goals of the *New York Age*’s Better Babies Contests reflect one of the primary purposes of baby contests throughout New York City—to be seen and, more importantly, to be perceived as eugenically fit. Strategically segregated, the BWA baby contests helped create the perception of a singular white race by omitting explicit references to racial

⁷⁴ Gregory Michael Door and Angela Logan, “‘Quality, Not Mere Quantity, Counts’: Black Eugenics and the NAACP Baby Contests,” in *A Century of Eugenics in America*, ed. Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 68–92.

⁷⁵ Ayah Nuriddin, “Engineering Uplift: Black Eugenics as Black Liberation,” in *Nature Remade: Engineering Life, Envisioning Worlds*, ed. Luis A. Campos, Michael R. Dietrich, Tiago Saraiva, and Christian C. Young (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 186–202.

⁷⁶ “Three Hundred and Ten Photos,” *New York Age*, September 9, 1915.

⁷⁷ Jacobson, “Becoming Caucasian” (n. 10), 147.

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categories or hereditary traits while pointing to indicators of physical fitness central to eugenic logic. Each contest winner, their picture published in the *Evening World* with their ethnicity as a descriptor, joined an array of other healthy, smiling, eugenic babies to create one large, composite picture.

Conclusion

BWA baby contests constructed a vision of race that blurred categories between white ethnicities while sharpening the lines surrounding them. BWA Better Baby Contests helped reify the tenets of eugenic maternalism and translate them into actionable practices for professional and lay white-ethnic women caretakers. Determining which ethnic groups would be deemed capable and, more importantly, worthy of assimilation was a crucial consequence of BWA programming. By 1915, the Federal Children's Bureau began to publish and distribute the BWA's standardized scorecards, turning BWA Better Baby Contests into fully scalable templates for cities and towns across the country.⁷⁸ Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that the contests were so popular throughout their short duration, nor that the legacy of the scientific baby contest continued to carry social and political weight throughout the first half of the twentieth century, with Better Baby Contests running in parts of the country well into the 1950s.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Lathrop, "Baby-Week Campaigns" (n. 28).

⁷⁹ See, for example, "Do You Know Gertrude E. Conant? The Mother of the Better Babies Clubs Which Have 10,000 Children Scattered over Arkansas," *Extension Service Review*, December 1994, 186.

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