# The Biopolitics of Childhood in the Long American 19th Century

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# Chapter 1

# Jacob Riis, Luther Burbank, and the Training of the American Child



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# 1 Jacob Riis, Luther Burbank, and the Training of the American Child

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Jacob Riis is known today primarily as a photojournalist and activist in the immigrant districts of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, whose work helped pass housing legislation mandating improved ventilation and plumbing at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. But behind these practical ideals for sanitation and building safety lay broader understandings and assumptions about human health and development. In fact, Riis, like many reformers and social activists of the period, was invested in environmental change as a means of creating broader population change across generations in the US. The rapidly increasing and changing population of New York's immigrant districts offered him a particularly fruitful focus for this work. His first book and bestseller, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), laid the groundwork for detailing the deleterious effects of buildings on bodies and advocating for tenement reform as a means of improving not just present lives, but future generations.

In his second book, *Children of the* Poor (1892), which focuses on the effect of poverty on the primarily immigrant children of the tenement districts and on the activities of various aid organizations in New York and the US, Riis picks up on the popular cultural discourse of inheritance more directly. Here, he veers into a discussion of environment and heredity in a chapter titled "What It Is That Makes Boys Bad":

> What this question of heredity amounts to, whether in the past or in the future, I do not know. I have not had opportunity enough of observing. No one has that I know of. Those who have had the most disagree in their conclusions, or have come to none. I have known numerous instances of criminality, running apparently in families for generations, but there was always the desperate environment as the unknown factor in the make-up. Whether that bore the greatest share of the blame, or whether the reformation of the criminal to be effective should have begun with his grandfather, I could not tell.
>
> (135–136)

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Riis professes uncertainty about "this question of heredity," but both of the focal points of his reformer's eye—the "desperate environment" and the idea that the "reformation" of the grandfather would directly influence the grandchild—are grounded in environmental change and the idea that such change can be passed down through generations. In this passage, Riis most strongly adheres to this euthenic, or environmental, understanding of generational change, but his profession that "no one" has "had opportunity enough of observing" the "question of heredity" leaves open the possibility of other understandings, including those with a more eugenic bent. In this sense, the passage is neatly positioned between the environmental and genetic perspectives on species change that circulated in popular culture at the turn of the century and demonstrates how these ideas could be intermixed in the minds of reformers.

It is not surprising in this context that it is precisely this passage that celebrity botanist Luther Burbank chose to pick up on in his eccentric and decidedly more eugenic treatise on child-rearing, *The Training of the Human Plant* (1907): "It has been said that the way to reform a man is to begin with his grandfather. But this is only a half-truth; begin with his grandfather, but begin with the grandfather when he is a child" (15). This presentation of reform as spanning generations implies that the behavioral changes that reform work effects within the grandfather's childhood will be passed onto the father and from there onto the grandchild, an implication that relies on an understanding of species evolution as taking place within a lifetime, rather than (exclusively) through reproductive practices such as cross- or selective breeding. At the same time, by the time he wrote *The Training of the Human Plant*, Burbank had over three decades of experience with heredity through the relatively short generations of plant breeding, and the book's running analogy of child-as-plant also brings to a head a more pointed argument for selective breeding within the growing and diversifying US population.

Burbank's work, like Riis's, demonstrates both euthenic and eugenic understandings of human development. Though the two had radically different careers—Burbank produced over 800 new varieties of plants on an experimental farm in Santa Rosa, California, while Riis wrote predominantly about the densely populated Lower East Side—Burbank's referencing of Riis's work demonstrates the way that the common language of heredity ran through the work of radically different reformers. In fact, Burbank's discussion of childhood and children in *The Training of the Human Plant* is strongly indebted to *Children of the Poor*, and in 1909, probably on Riis's visit to the Santa Rosa experimental farm, Burbank inscribed a copy of his child-rearing manual to Riis, "with the profound admiration of Luther Burbank" (Smith 194).

Burbank's and Riis's understandings of heredity also share the common ground of a for-the-time progressive stance toward the US's recent waves of multiethnic immigration—but a stance, as I will argue in this chapter, which was underlaid by the relegation of the disabled to the category of static or unimpressible subject. The parallel between human and more-than-human life in Burbank's child-as-plant analogy helps to bring home a point to which both Riis and Burbank were strongly committed: human bodies, minds, and nervous systems were intimately shaped by the elements and life forms around them, as much as they in turn shaped these elements. Burbank and Riis both envision child-rearing as a process that does not (only) take place in the individualized family unit, but also in institutions and through the natural and built environment. The specific biopolitical agenda to which both men subscribed saw children as beings who should be shaped for the benefit of their nation, beings whose multicultural and multiethnic origins could bring particular biological advantages. Uniquely excluded from this multicultural nationalism were children with disabilities, whose physical or mental limitations placed them outside of the purview of "training" or adaptability, but whose omission as a category—or even, arguably, a race—was part of what allowed for the apparently progressive vision of a multiethnic nation. Unimpressible, or genetically "fixed," subjects with disabilities in Riis's and Burbank's texts take on the function that scholars have typically accorded to racialized subjects. Reading *The Children of the Poor* in relation to *The Training of the Human Plant* carves out a place for a biopolitical regime that embraced ethnic diversity—however questionably—as a means toward an engineered improvement of the American future, through the exclusions, implicit or explicit, of the category of disability.

## Biopolitics, Childhood, and Race

As Kyla Schuller has shown, many mid- to late-nineteenth-century American reform movements were fundamentally motivated by biopolitical ideals and a popular understanding of species evolution that saw minds and bodies as capable of being altered or "impressed" by their environments within a single lifetime in ways that could be passed on to future generations. This understanding, which diverged from a stricter Mendelian focus on genetics as inherent, unalterable traits, inspired an emphasis in sentimentalist reform movements on environment as shaping societal change, rather than the eugenic focus that took hold in the early twentieth century on controlling reproduction. This environmental approach to population change, while implicit in much of Riis's work, is also fundamental to it, and drives his understanding of the tenement districts of the Lower East

Side where he worked and where an influx of new immigrants created a growing and changing population pool in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Placing Riis in the context of the more explicitly eugenicist Burbank brings into focus the category of disability with its function as a holding pen for the unimpressible subject that enables a vision of a multiethnic nation of malleable citizens. Riis's work, in general terms, offers an excellent example of Kyla Schuller's portrait of sentimental reform movements (134–171): he both relies explicitly in his writing and lectures on the techniques of sentimental literature, and emphasizes the significance of built and natural environment in shaping human bodies, an understanding that lends urgency to the project of building and urban reform. At the same time, the idea of physical fixity within populations prefigures scientific eugenics. Riis's representation of subjects with disabilities as static, fixed, and incapable of the improvements of impressibility lays the groundwork for more explicitly eugenicist thinkers such as Burbank, whose writing emphasizes both the significance of environment and the use of targeted breeding to create generational change. Both men demonstrate how slippery the line between euthenic and eugenic thinking in fact was. Their work suggests that even in the case of thinkers such as Riis, for whom the idea of impressibility offered a strong motivation for the reshaping of the urban environment, the fixity or stasis of some subjects was the exception that proved the rule of adaptability.

Scholars in the last few decades have emphasized that scientific racism is an important factor in understanding which subjects are most susceptible—or represented as most susceptible—to biopolitical adaptation to environment. Schuller defines impressibility as "the often-racialized quality of being easily moved" (7); the understanding of who was capable of biological adaptations to environment was influenced by race, with whites generally considered as the most impressible. Asians, Native Americans, and African Americans were often understood as examples of more "primitive," less "civilized" races, incapable of cultural adaptation. This stasis overlaps with what Hortense Spillers calls the Black body's existence as "flesh," an element out of time, useful only for what it can be set to produce for others (67), and what Sianne Ngai calls "animatedness," the framing of racialized figures as lacking in individual agency, moving only through the will of others (89–125). Mel Chen, Xine Yao, and others likewise work within an understanding of biopolitics that depends centrally on a racialized hierarchy of animation. The racialized body was a mechanical body, one incapable of self-constitution, and ideally suited for labor exploitation. In line with this view, the founder of the Children's Aid Society, a charitable organization that Riis supported both in his texts and

through fundraising, believed that children of Western European ancestry were most easily transformed by their environments, and consequently the Children's Aid Society focused its attention on Irish, German, and to a lesser extent, Italian immigrants. Their reform work largely excluded African American children and immigrants of other nationalities as not sufficiently malleable to reward reform (Schuller 142).

Discussions of biopolitics often leave disability out of this schema, but disability studies scholars have shown that ableist discrimination and scientific racism emerged out of the same "increasingly narrow continuum of human variation developed in the wake of the European Enlightenment," with some scholars similarly arguing that forms of disability can function socially as race ("The Eugenic Atlantic" 851; Davis 81, 91–92). Inherent in this parallel between racism and ableism is the idea of the discriminated groups as developmentally fixed or unimpressible; as Mitchell and Snyder write in the context of urban modernity: "What characterized the feebleminded individual, in the rhetoric of eugenics, was his or her inability to keep up with and adapt to a rapidly changing environment" (*Cultural Locations* 84). The rhetoric around disability and racialization works in both cases to characterize these subjects as slow-moving or static in the context of modernizing environments that increasingly demand rapid adaptability and change.

Riis's significance to Burbank lies in Riis's rejection of the scientific racism on which much contemporary biopolitical work depended and his relative proximity to what Lennard Davis calls a "Utopia of the norm" in relation to the able-bodied (28). Riis's work highlights the role that the ideas of nature and the rural had in both urban planning and biopolitical projects. Rather than positing that racialized groups can be neither harmed nor helped by their environments, as did for instance the Children's Aid Society, Riis frames environment as an equal threat or beneficiary to all, with the exception of subjects with disabilities. While aid organizations focused on disability were a cornerstone of the nineteenth-century charity work that Riis discusses in *Children of the Poor*, they figure only in the last section of this book's appendix under the heading of "Asylums for Defective Children" (299) and on a single page in the chapter "The Outcast and the Homeless." In this chapter, Riis emphasizes an idea that comes up throughout his book: that disability places subjects outside of schemas of productivity and growth. Here, Riis notes that the "crippled boys' brush shop" is the "*bête noire*" of the Children's Aid Society, as the boys are "of all the city's outcasts the most unfortunate and the hardest to manage" (270). This intractability positions the boys outside the normal productive and reproductive currents of modern capitalism; in Riis's telling, they produce brushes for which there is no market, and through charity, the "brush

shop pays them wages that enables them to make their way" (270). In this state, maintenance is the highest ideal and the luckiest boys "manage to pick up and enjoy the good things they find in their path as they hobble through life" (270). While Riis bemoans the fact that "[t]here seems to be no room for a poor crippled lad in New York," the text gestures toward neither a real solution to this problem nor a framework in which they are other than "outcasts" from the movements of the larger society. This omission speaks to the bracketing of disability as a meaningful site for social reform in Riis's work, which emphasizes instead increasing educational and recreational opportunities for able-bodied children of all ethnicities.

In this sense, Riis's and later Burbank's work was in conversation with a nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse in which "disabled bodies are constituted as unduly discordant within a rapidly solidifying fiction of an idealized American body politic" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Cultural Locations* 23). In the example of the boys' brush shop, this site is unprofitable and "able to employ only a small fraction of the number it might benefit" because, as Riis notes, it is in direct competition with the wares of another group of "outcasts": adult prisoners (270). The misalignment between "outcast" producers and normative consumers emphasizes surplus: like the brushes themselves, there are "too many" of the boys. In a sentence that describes the boys but could equally describe the objects of their labor, Riis declares, "No one wants them" (270).

## Shaping the Human Child

In Riis's work, as in nineteenth-century reform work more generally, children played a particularly important role in the schema of impression. The child, with its "plastic, passive soul" in the words of minister Horace Bushnell, was considered particularly susceptible to environmental impressibility and was therefore the focus of much urban reform (qtd. in Schuller 19). Not surprisingly, then, Riis's understanding of heredity and environment emerges most clearly in *Children of the Poor*, which profiles the transformations of particular children and constantly reiterates the idea that "the child is a creature of environment, of opportunity, as children are everywhere"—with the exception, as we have just seen, of the disabled child (4).

*Children of the Poor*, like most of Riis's reform writings and lectures, focuses on the tenement districts of the Lower East Side in New York, but in this book, nature, and its role in shaping the malleable child, is a subcurrent that leads directly into the work and thought of the botanist Burbank. The preface begins with an expression of nature as benediction, in this case from Riis's Long Island home to the inner-city tenement districts: "To my little ones, who, as I lay down my pen, come rushing in from the autumn

fields, their hands filled with flowers 'for the poor children,' I inscribe this book" (v). The image of Riis's own children picking flowers as offerings recurs in some of his other books and illustrates the dynamics of his model of charity, which aims to transfer the inherent healthfulness of the countryside into the congested city. The idea of the countryside as a "civilizing influence" on urban children emerges clearly in the sections of *Children of the Poor* dedicated to the Fresh Air Fund, which sent (and still sends) urban children on vacation in rural areas (172). Here children are shaped by "[t]he subtler lesson of the flowers, the fields, the sky, and the sea"; "Down in the worst little ruffian's soul there is, after all, a tender spot not yet pre-empted by the slum. And Mother Nature touches it all at once" (173).

Riis's dedication to the rural extends into a defense of the Children's Aid Society's Emigration Plan—controversial even in Riis's time—which rehomed poor, predominantly immigrant children from urban areas to work as laborers in rural homes, with the stated aim of improving a vulnerable generation (and their future generations) through the wholesome influence of rural life (Schuller 134–171). Framing the project as an effort to find "safe country homes" for "poor city children," Riis contends that "a farmer's home is better for the city child that has none than a prison or the best-managed public institution," while admitting that "[n]ot even the larger number" of the children were truly homeless to begin with (248). Following this thought, then, all urban children might be said to benefit from a rural home, in contrast to institutions such as the urban orphanages where the child "is saved from becoming a tough to become an automaton" (277). In Riis's work, the urban environment figures as mechanistic and urban institutions as dehumanizing. Neither can afford inhabitants—and especially not impressible children—the support they need for organic growth and development. If the tragedy of the "crippled" child in Riis's work is their stasis, their inability to develop and grow, in the urban institution all share this fate.

The impressibility of the child, the wholesomeness of natural influences, and the threat of institutions in encouraging the automation or deindividuation of young subjects are issues that echo throughout Burbank's text. In considering the education and the upbringing of the child, Burbank emphasizes the child's impressibility and the role of environment in shaping early life: "All animal life is sensitive to environment, but of all living things, the child is the most sensitive. . . . A child absorbs environment" (14). Burbank's role as a botanist is a constant reference point for this understanding of childhood susceptibility, and he repeats and reformulates the analogy between sensitive child and plant as it appears in the treatise's title, noting for instance the guardian's duty to "[i]nstil better things into him, just as a plant-breeder puts better characteristics into a plant" (27).

This analogy sets his work apart from Riis's, which anchors its expertise in statistics, facts, and personal anecdotes, but it leads into claims that would be at home in any of Riis's paeans to the Children's Aid Society: that "the only place that is truly fit to bring up a boy or a plant [is] the country, the small town or the country, the nearer to nature the better" (16) and that no healthy country-raised child "should see the inside of a school-house until at least ten years old" (16). Burbank's suspicion of institutions arises, like Riis's own, from what he sees as their tendency toward standardization and deindividuation, their propensity to "[run] children through the same mill in a lot, with absolutely no real reference to their individuality" (19). Burbank fittingly imposes a natural counterpoint to this mechanical metaphor: "So it is imperative that we consider individuality in children in their training precisely as we do in cultivating plants" (20). Proper individuation, in people as in plants, is cultivated in a natural environment.

While environment is an important aspect of both Riis's and Burbank's texts, heredity plays a more significant, if still sometimes unclear, role in Burbank's writing. At different points, he seems to assert that heredity and environment are different but equally important entities; that heredity and environment are one and the same thing; and that heredity has enough independent importance that certain (vaguely defined) groups should be prevented from procreating. About midway through the text he summarizes his stance on what Riis calls the "question of heredity" with the apparently contradictory statement: "In child-rearing, environment is equally essential with heredity. Mind you, I do not say that heredity is of no consequence. It is the great factor, and often makes environment almost powerless" (52). Burbank soon counters any genetic fatalism, however, with the assertion that the "repeated application of the same modifying forces in succeeding generations will at last accomplish the desired object in the child as it does in the plant" (53); heredity can over the course of several generations shift definitively through a carefully adjusted environment. From his experience in plant breeding, Burbank has a specific venture for the amount of time necessary for this change to take place: "Ten generations of human life should be ample to fix any desired attribute" (63).

This idea of a gradual shift is significant enough to Burbank's text that "Ten Generations" is a subsection of one of his chapters—but that this chapter is titled "Marriage of the Physically Unfit" and begins with the statement, "It would, if possible, be best absolutely to prohibit in every State in the Union the marriage of the physically, mentally and morally unfit" (58) suggests the paradoxes of Burbank's short treatise. The chapter's eugenic focus is a sharp shift from early sections centered primarily on platitudes about providing children with good food and fresh air, and it seems at least superficially at odds with the idea that "Heredity is simply

the sum of all the effects of all the environments of all past generations on the responsive, ever-moving life forces" (68). In spite of Burbank's reiteration in the course of the treatise of the primacy of environment, it seems that there are logical, or at least practical, limits to this understanding. As Burbank concludes in one early section on respecting the different propensities of individuals (where he also asserts that many girls are "unfitted by nature and bent . . . for the study of arithmetic" [19–20]):

> Can one by any possible cultivation and selection and crossing compel figs to grow on thistles or apples on a banana-tree? I have made many varied and strange plant combinations in the hope of betterment and still am at work upon others, but one cannot hope to do the impossible. (20)

Environmental influence has its limits, and so too does targeted breeding.

This pragmatic idea—that there is a limit to the possible in the development of the species—may seem to be at odds with Burbank's public persona as an engineer of biological miracles, but is perfectly in line with his practical position as a commercial plant breeder, as is the intermingling of eugenic and euthenic ideas. Burbank was inspired to become a botanist by his reading of Darwin's *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (1868). He certainly knew that radical species change was possible over long time periods but focuses in *The Training of the Human Plant* on the span of ten generations as the period necessary for the more modest change of fixing specific attributes, a goal that aligns with the ambitions of reform work (Smith 27). "The impossible," then, may not be truly impossible so much as merely impractical, but for Burbank as both a plant breeder and a student of human development that came down to much the same thing. A desire to effect feasible change can also go far in explaining his apparently confused perspective on heredity and environment. While Burbank as a Darwinian may have believed that all heredity eventually comes down to environmental factors that have encouraged the development of certain traits, Burbank as a commercial breeder was dependent on a much faster development of new varieties for his livelihood. On his experimental farm in Santa Rosa he certainly worked to encourage new and desirable traits to develop through an optimal environment, but he also stepped in and forcibly steered these experiments through the selective breeding and cross-breeding of the plants he deemed most likely to produce these desired traits. In the end, Burbank's answer to Riis's "question of heredity" is that it is what we make it to be, but that this making is a practice that for greatest efficiency should include a focus on both environment and breeding. Burbank's program of cross-breeding comes

about, much like Riis's consideration of the surplus of New York's "crippled lads," through the exigences of modern capitalism.

Burbank does not define precisely what he means by the "physically, mentally and morally unfit" (58), nor does he lay out his plan for human procreation in any detail beyond the relatively uncontroversial idea that first cousins should not marry and that families should avoid inbreeding. He does stress, in a subsection titled "The Abnormal," that "the weakling should [not] be destroyed" and that "it is the influence of cultivation, of selection, of environment, that makes the change from the abnormal to the normal" (51). He also notes that his suggestions for the prohibition of procreation do not necessarily include the "physically weak," and he argues that children with these attributes should not be "put out of the way" as "many of the leaders of thought in every department . . . have been physically weak" (53–54). So while the weak can be cultivated "as we cultivate plants," to become "the very best that they are capable of becoming" (55), others, the "abnormal," and the "mentally defective" (55), for instance, while they also should not "be destroyed," are best kept out of the gene pool.

Burbank's pragmatic approach to species development in plants is problematic when applied in even the most general sense to human development, but his vague prescriptions do not amount to anything like an executable eugenics program, nor did they go beyond what many in Burbank's time would consider platitudes. They had a particular cultural power only insofar as they were filtered through Burbank's expertise as a plant scientist. The vague and apparently contradictory bent of his arguments goes some way in explaining the widely varying interpretations of his work. The apparent contradiction of this stance has led to radically divergent readings of Burbank in his own time and beyond, much as readings of Riis's reform agenda have varied broadly and shifted through time (Yochelsen and Czitron xvi). Burbank's prescriptions do shed light on a contemporary such as Riis by demonstrating how popular scientific thinkers of this era could define heredity and environment in ways that seemed alternatingly (or simultaneously) eugenic and pre-eugenic, presenting the human body as both imminently sensitive and impressible and as stubbornly fixed or carrying abnormalities that would make procreation "a crime against the state and every individual in the state" (Burbank 59).

In Burbank's case, his legacy has been that of the agriculturist most associated with California's rise as the fruit basket to the nation, with both the positive and the more critical associations that follow this boom. But in Burbank's own lifetime, his work was more closely associated with scientific debates, especially around evolution—he was for several years a lecturer in evolution at Stanford—and his authority was often harnessed to contradictory ends. In the 1925 Scopes Trial, which resulted in the prohibition of the

teaching of evolution in public schools in Tennessee until 1967, both the defense and the prosecution called the seventy-six-year-old Burbank in as an expert witness, and both sides interpreted his perspectives on heredity change in radically different ways (Smith 263–265). Burbank's identity as a eugenicist has a similarly confused legacy. He was an honorary member of the Committee of Eugenics in the American Breeders' Association from the time of its founding in 1903 and weighed in on eugenics in both *The Training of the Human Plant* and articles in the association's journal. Burbank's most recent biographer Jane Smith nonetheless writes, "Burbank did not want to limit or guide fertility. He recoiled from the idea" (189–191). Burbank may have been on "the liberal fringe of the eugenics movement" (Smith 191), but he was in its midst nonetheless, and his proscriptions against the procreation of "the abnormal" certainly constituted a means of guiding fertility (Burbank 55).

Burbank's liberal stance toward multiethnic immigration, a perspective on which he overlaps with Riis, may be part of what has misled his modern readers. Smith for instance argues that Burbank, instead of focusing on guiding or limiting fertility, "defended the wonderful possibilities of human hybrids and urged his audience to embrace the vast experiment in 'crossing' that the United States provided" (191). In this next section, I argue that these ideas, rather than being opposed to eugenics, work together with it, and that the understanding of the US as a "vast experiment in 'crossing' " is the definition of a eugenic perspective on the nation-state. This perspective, which we might call multiculturalist eugenics, follows a logic outside of standard political divisions, but resonates with Riis, who in his discussion of US childhood emphasizes ethnic diversity as a means to the creation of a stronger national population. In both of these cases, the disabled subject is the foil whose stasis allows us to see the developmental potential of the population at large.

**Multiculturalist Eugenics**

Burbank wrote an early version of *The Training of the Human Plant* primarily as a collective address to an audience of fellow Americans, which he delivered as a speech at a banquet in his honor at the California Board of Trade in 1905 (Smith 190). He maintains the first-person plural address of the speech in the published treatise, where within the first few pages, after arguing for the logic of an analogy between plant and human development, Burbank immediately anchors this analogy in a national framework:

> let me lay emphasis on the opportunity now presented in the United States for observing and, if we are wise, aiding in what I think it fair to say is the grandest opportunity ever presented of developing the finest

> race the world has ever known out of the vast mingling of races brought here by immigration.
>
> (5)

In this first chapter, titled "The Mingling of the Races," Burbank goes on to chart the different ethnicities of immigrants to the US in the early years of the twentieth century and argues that after a few generations of this ethnically diverse "mingling,"

> we notice constant changes and breaks and modifications going on about us in this vast combination of races, and so may we hope for a far stronger and better race if right principles are followed, a magnificent race, far superior to any preceding it.
>
> (9)

As in the eugenic chapters later in the treatise, Burbank is vague in defining these "right principles," though his discussion of his work in plant breeding as "a rigid selection of the best and as rigid an exclusion of the poorest," and his warning against a "mere crossing of species, unaccompanied by selection" as capable of producing "vast harm" (4), are suggestive of a system in which certain individuals or groups would be excluded from reproduction altogether, and the "mingling" of others would be monitored or even determined by eugenicists. In any case, what he celebrates in the US as a nation of immigrants is its mirroring of his own experiments with plant breeding: the unexpected new potentialities and combinations that can emerge through racial "mingling." That these ideas preface a parenting treatise implies that the intermixture and eventual reproduction of children of different ethnic backgrounds falls under the purview of what Burbank considers as child-rearing.

The next chapter does little to clarify the limits of what Burbank would call "selection" in the American environment, but it does make clear that conscious choice is an aspect of what he imagines in the national population's "mingling." In the US, Burbank argues, "we meet the same results that are always seen in a much-crossed race of plants: all the worst as well as all the best qualities of each are brought out in their fullest intensities" (11). The solution to these extremes for humans, as for plants, is what Burbank calls a "selective environment" and defines ambiguously as "the care, the nurture, the influence of surroundings, selection, the separation of the best from the poorest" (13), a combination of a regulated environment and selective breeding. Burbank laments the nation's lack of attention to the development of a superior national race: "The work of man's head and hands has not yet been summoned to prescribe for the development of

a race. So far a preconceived and mapped-out crossing of bloods finds no place in the making of peoples and nations" (12–13). The emphasis here falls on "not yet" and "so far." Burbank's celebration of the US as a nation of immigrants is a celebration of its potential for a new multicultural eugenics, and through this, the development of "the race of the future" (12).

Reading Riis's discussion of US multiculturalism in reverse, through Burbank's later focus on eugenics and childhood, suggests what the botanist may have seen in the urban reformers work. Riis's text lacks Burbank's extended metaphor of plant breeding and does not veer explicitly into eugenics. But Riis and Burbank both share a progressive perspective on multiethnic immigration that was far from the norm in the period in which they were writing, and Riis's transnationalism can benefit from a re-evaluation through Burbank's multicultural eugenics. Riis's descriptions of districts and populations depend heavily on character stereotypes such as the "Mediterranean exuberance" of the Italian and the "thrift" of the Eastern European Jew (*How the Other Half Lives* 7, 12). In Burbank's work these cultural generalizations lead to distinctly eugenic exclamations such as "Look at the material on which to draw! Here is the North, powerful, virile, aggressive, blended with the luxurious, ease-loving, more impetuous South" (9–10). Riis does not venture into eugenic territory explicitly, but it is clear that he, like Burbank, thinks schematically about ethnicity, and such schematic thought lends itself naturally to the development and curtailment of certain ethnic traits.

In this light, both writers understand ethnic minorities as part of the biopolitical schema. Unlike in racialized scales of animation, in which the ethnic minority falls into the category of the automaton, in Riis's schema all subjects (except disabled subjects) are capable of change, and environmental factors are the key factors. In his chapter in *Children of the Poor* on the Fresh Air Fund, he notes approvingly, "Against colored children there is no prejudice" (*Children of the Poor* 157). This stance implies the ability of the racialized body to be affected by a change in environment. Similarly, he considers Italians as particularly "tractable" (*Children of the Poor* 156), in contradistinction to the general idea of the Northern European immigrant as the most impressible.

Although Riis did not advocate for an unchecked immigration policy, he also did not support immigration restrictions based on ethnicity, and his language suggests that the mass influx of immigrants into New York solved some problems even as it caused others. As he writes near the beginning of *Children of the Poor*,

> while immigration peoples our slums, it also keeps them from stagnation. The working of the strong instinct to better themselves, that

> brought the crowds here, forces layer after layer of this population up to make room for the new crowds coming in at the bottom, and thus a circulation is kept up that does more than any sanitary law to render the slums harmless.
>
> (2)

The subtext in this passage is that immigrant groups are characterized by movement, both geographical and social, and that they by their nature oppose the "stagnation" that otherwise could threaten the "slums." The immigrants' social mobility creates space for a new influx of immigrants that will in time, themselves, rise out of the neighborhood. In Riis's text, stasis and stagnation are associated with the disabled subject, not the racialized one. While Riis called for evaluating potential immigrants on an individual basis and restricting entry to healthy, financially solvent, politically moderate candidates with no criminal background, he did not support the radical curtailment or complete halt to immigration that restrictionists called for, nor blanket restrictions on ethnic groups (O'Donnell 20). And Riis's embrace of "circulation" here resonates with Burbank's "mingling of the races" in its understanding of movement and new blood as an inherent social boon.

Both Riis and Burbank present the past and the future as inextricably tied, with different degrees of emphasis on how far one could move from the source. Riis's understanding of all able-bodied children as "tractable" laid the foundation for Burbank's more explicit formulation of the US as a nation capable of undergoing radical biological change, through a combination of environment and breeding. And for both men, the able-bodied child, young enough to be molded by its environment, old enough to demonstrate some innate tendencies and characteristics, was an emblem of the potentialities and limitations of the biopolitical project at the turn of the century. The threat for Burbank was that without what he euphemistically calls "the work of elimination, the work of refining," the US faced the same fate as a "much-crossed race of plants: all the worst as well as all the best qualities of each are brought out in their fullest intensities" (11). The metaphor of botanical manipulation necessitates selection and elimination, and so the vague category of the disabled or feebleminded child becomes the holding pen that allows Burbank to embrace a vision of a fluid, transformational, and multiracial US. Riis, in his documentation of the "crippled lads" of New York, presents this category as a fixed entity outside of the habitual flows and developments of urban life, in the context of work that otherwise embraces the potentialities of long-term biopolitical development of New York's immigrant populations. In this context, Burbank's professed "profound admiration" of Riis is both more understandable and more disturbing.

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