

# Baby's Picture is Always Treasured: Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album.

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## "Baby's Picture is Always Treasured": Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**“Baby’s Picture is Always Treasured”:  
Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family  
Photograph Album**

*Shawn Michelle Smith (bio)*

“A baby’s photograph, to all save doting parents and relations, is a stupid thing.”<sup>1</sup>

— R.H.E., *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, April 1867



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**Figure 1.**

H.C. White Company stereograph card, 1902. Reproduced from the collections of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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**Figure 2.**

Cyclone Camera Advertisement, *The Ladies’ Home Journal* (July 1898).

To twentieth-century readers accustomed to the now-ubiquitous “baby’s photograph,” R.H.E.’s observation about the stupidity of these images seems either shocking or wonderfully perverse. Despite the fact that such photographs typically depict fleshy, wrinkled creatures, with eyes not quite focused, and expressions rather startled, baby pictures remain highly valued commodities in contemporary culture. Today the family photograph albums that protect these images are nearly sacred records. Indeed it is almost impossible to imagine dismissing the importance of those documents which twentieth-century Americans consistently herald as the most important things to save from the imagined disasters of proverbial floods and fires.

Considered in its own historical moment, R.H.E.’s proclamation continues to surprise. Where is the nineteenth-century rhetoric of maternal love and pride? Wasn’t R.H.E. addressing, in *Godey’s*, a reading audience of white middle-class women raised on the rhetoric of True Womanhood?<sup>2</sup> The sentimental response to baby’s photograph that one might expect to find here surfaces only thirty years later in an 1898 advertisement for the Cyclone Camera in the *Ladies Home Journal*. This advertisement, which encourages white middle-class women to buy newly manufactured hand held pocket cameras, proclaims: “Baby’s Picture is Always Treasured.”<sup>3</sup>

This utter reversal in the estimation of baby’s picture does not settle the question of how or why the transformation itself occurred. Surely baby’s photograph did not change dramatically over the course of 30 years. Perhaps focus was improved with shorter exposure times, but was there really anything more to see in a sharp rendering of baby’s corpulence? What, then, *did* transform white middle-class evaluations of baby’s picture over the course of the late nineteenth century? What transformed a “stupid thing” into a marketing “treasure”?

In attempting to resolve this dilemma, I have been led only to further

questions and even more striking evaluations of baby's picture. In the period that separates R.H.E.'s disdain for these photographs from later exuberance over such images, "baby's photograph" came to emblemize a racial fantasy as eugenicists claimed it [End Page 197] for scientific evidence. The family album was a particularly important evidentiary document for Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, who defined "race" as an essential, biological characteristic rooted in heritable moral and intellectual capacities.<sup>4</sup> In eugenics the family became central to the discursive production of race and of racial hierarchies, as the family album became one of the social institutions through which heredity was charted. Within this eugenicist context, photographs of children became powerful familial records through which racial hierarchies could be reproduced and maintained.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the "science" of eugenics transformed the signifying context for baby's "private" picture. What I propose to consider here is whether or not eugenicist appropriations of baby's picture in turn informed the shifting evaluation of these representations in popular white middle-class venues. How can we make sense of the uncanny formal consonance and temporal congruence of popular and eugenicist family albums? To what degree do these parallel representational practices share ideological contingencies? Does the "stupid" picture of baby become a popular "treasure" as it becomes a sign of the reproduction of middle-class whiteness?

In asking these questions, this essay interrogates the genealogies that informed the seemingly innocuous practice of photographing baby in the late nineteenth century, and suggests that this sentimentalized middle-class ritual was also a racially inflected act. Such a perspective compels us to query the history of white normalcy and eugenicist desire, and to participate in efforts made by Deborah...



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