Historical Geographies of Childhood through Early 20th C. Archives

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Abstract

'Illegitimate' births, 'feebleminded' children, and 'drunk' parents are just some of the comments included in the Matron's handwritten records of the *Home for Destitute Children* in Burlington, VT. Add to this the incomplete records, sensitive issues of privacy, falsified public documents, and locational inaccuracies, and my project digitizing and analyzing orphanage logbooks from the early twentieth century presents a variety of challenges. In a substantive way, the project raises issues of trauma, family poverty and abuse, the Eugenics Movement, and allusions to an idyllic rural childhood that stand in stark relief to children's lived experiences. Empirically, the project provides some insight on a rarely-considered form of (involuntary) child migration and family separation but is limited by a lack of children's own perspectives, with only brief hints at individual agency or 'voice' within the 'official' records. In an effort to combine my previous work on 'qualitative GIS' and children's geographies with a peek back 100 years, I'm exploring the tools and approaches of geo-humanities, such as StoryMaps and timelines, in hopes that they will allow me to engage with these archives respectfully but with a critical perspective.

Introduction

This paper takes on both an empirical query and a more philosophical question. First, I use the findings of one project from my *Mapping American Childhoods* research to explore ways that poor and parentless children from all over Vermont were subject to involuntary migration into and out of Burlington's *Home for Destitute Children*, as well as the cultural construction of their self-replicating positionality as anything *but* the "ideal" child of the early 20th C. With a particularly active eugenics movement unfolding in Burlington in the 1920s and 30s, children in the *Home* were variously judged to be 'feebleminded', 'of bad stock', or otherwise unworthy of personal redemption, despite what we now see as significant structural disadvantages of poverty, poor nutrition, abuse, and emotional trauma. Mapping over 1500 children's arrivals and departures to/from the *Home* between 1900-1940, with contextual data from the Matrons' comments and individual census, we are able to trace the movement of *children* as well as the cultural shifts that signal changing views of *childhood*. Secondly, at a more 'meta' level, I consider how archival data on children's lives of this era can be usefully engaged to produce *critical historical geographies of childhood*. Specifically, I consider some 'digital dilemmas' that have arisen in my own work and raise some questions about lies, privacy, and ethical quandaries.

Far from Home, Far from *Ideal*

This project rests on the principle that childhood, and, age itself, is a socio-cultural construct. Similar to other constructs such as race, there are immanent biological markers in the category of
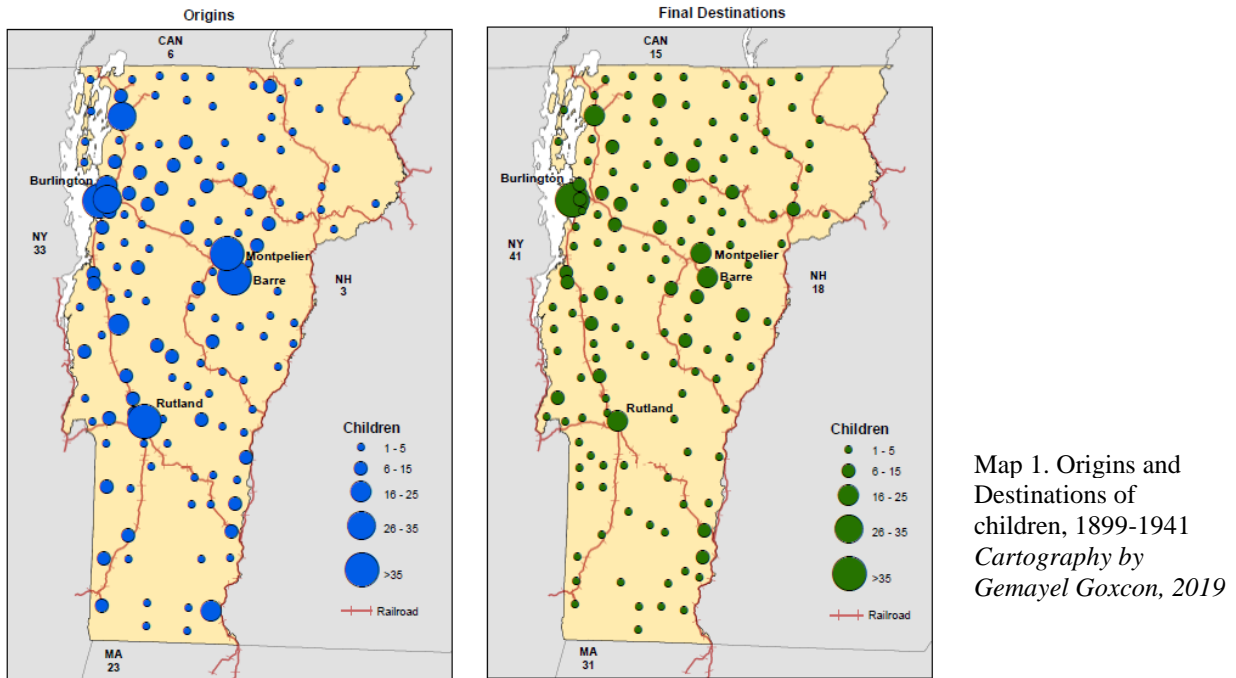
'children' but these are interpreted and utilized in the construction of 'childhood' in varying ways over time and across space (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Taking this further, I propose that we need to look critically at what constituted the 'ideal' child and the 'ideal' child*hood* (including the characteristics of *place* – home, neighborhood, region – that are embedded in those ideals). These may be understood through discursive means, such as examination of historical advertisements, government reports, and parental advice columns, but we may also reveal which children were (least) valued and which childhoods were seen as (not) ideal by tracing what happened to real children who did *not* qualify as ideal, due to their poverty, race, environment, or parentage. Examining the institutions that were charged with caring for these not-ideal children shows us which elements of the ideal childhood were *transferable* to institutional settings (e.g. regular bedtimes, fresh air, religious instruction), which qualities were seen as *ingrained*, and therefore, gain clues about how the power of the ideal served to discipline families who were unable or unwilling to achieve it.

Fig. 1 *Home for Destitute Children*, Burlington VT

The *Home for Destitute Children* (Fig. 1) was started in 1866 by a group of middle-class and wealthy women in the city of Burlington, Vermont, initially to serve orphans of the Civil War, but later to serve a wider population of children from all over Vermont. Thanks to meticulous record-keeping by the various Matrons over the years, and the preservation of their handwritten logbooks by subsequent organizations and now the Silver Special Collections Department at the University of Vermont, the paths children took in and out of the *Home* are revealed (Map 1 – note the slight trend of urban-to-rural movement, which is in keeping with both the labor needs of Vermont farms and the cultural assumption of the redeeming qualities of wholesome rural childhoods).

Origin and Final Destination 1899-1941

Map 1. Origins and Destinations of children, 1899-1941
Cartography by Gemayel Goxcon, 2019

The logbooks indicate that some children were paying boarders for short periods of time while their families were in crisis or transition, but many were given up by their parents to be adopted by others, or until they aged out as young teens. My research team transcribed and cataloged the logbook information for over 1700 unique children for the years 1899-1941. Other information in the collection includes Board Meeting Minutes for select years, a 'work duties' book instructing caregivers on daily tasks, letters, and financial records. We have used the manuscript census to trace family circumstances of the early 20th C. to understand broader contexts of why children were brought to the *Home* and what happened to them after they were placed with new families.
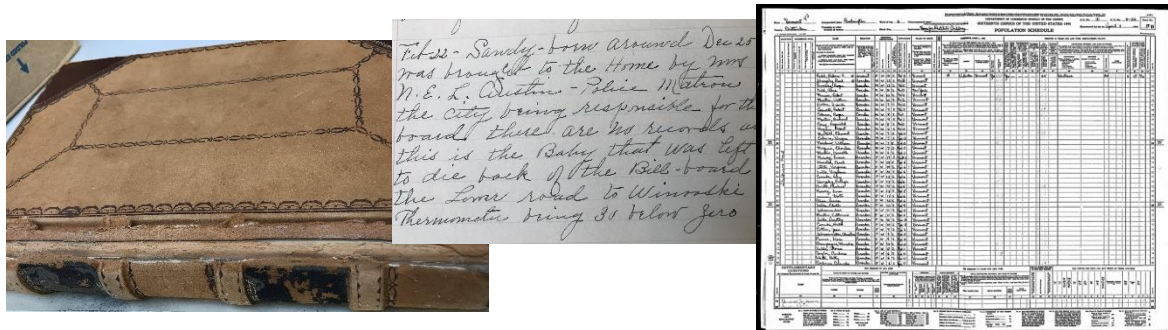

Fig. 2 – One of the logbooks, a sample of the Matron's comments, and the MS census

A few revealing examples demonstrate the role of the *Home* as an arbiter of who constituted a 'desirable child' as well as what made parents qualify as fit or unfit. Albert, age 8 months, was "Brought to *Home* by Overseer of the Poor, Mr. Ira A. Belknap, on three months trial as boarder. At the expiration of that time if a desirable child, he will be surrendered to the *Home* [for adoption]". How does an 8 month old demonstrate 'desirable' characteristics? Having already been blessed with the benefits of being male and white, it's likely that young Albert only had to prove he was not 'feebleminded' to make it to the winner's circle of desirability and thus

adoption. But what of prospective adoptive parents? The Matron seemingly had no qualms about judging potential families solely on their looks: Gladys, age 2 months, was placed with Mr. and Mrs. S. despite lack of recommendations because "they seemed like nice people, had nice looking faces"; alas, only a short time later Mr. S. "got drunk and was in jail overnight" and the *Home* demanded Gladys be returned.

Reviewing four decades of Matrons' comments, several themes become clear. The ideal child is from sober, hard-working, Christian, Anglo-Saxon parents and is good-natured, plump and sturdy, obedient, and a fast learner. This ideal child has entered the *Home* through a series of unfortunate events such as the death of one parent forcing the other to work to support their children, the seduction of an otherwise 'good girl' by an older man, or illness of the mother while the father was 'fighting in France' during WWI. Interestingly, illegitimacy seemed to be less of a disqualifier than parental bad behavior (drinking, crime, abuse, etc.) or mental illness; this may be related to the *zeitgeist* of the eugenics movement in which the circumstances of one's birth (unwed parents) were not as damning as having come from 'bad stock' (Gallagher, 1999). The ideal adoptive home also comes into focus from the Matron's comments, though there are some indications of differences for younger or older children: for babies and toddlers the ideal home was one in which a child would be loved and treated as the couple's own, but for older children (from about age 10), the ideal setting was one in which they would work for the family and learn skills of domestic and farm life so as to have a future as a servant or laborer. Children were recalled from prospective parents when the latter exhibited drunkenness (as with Mr. S., above), were 'unable to care for' the child for unspecified reasons, and when the child was treated 'not quite right', which in some cases was pretty clearly a euphemism for sexual abuse. It is telling that the majority of children over the age of about 5 who were surrendered for adoption ended up being 'placed out' multiple times. Prospective families could take a child on a three-month trial before deciding to adopt permanently, though some stretched this period out significantly longer. This meant that a fair number of already-traumatized children embarked on a revolving door of placements, not surprisingly getting returned repeatedly for being 'naughty', 'incorrigible', for stealing or lying, or for 'playing with matches' – these were the children most often sent to the reform school in Vergennes, VT as soon as they were old enough.

The final indicator of what constituted the ideal home is shown, in relief, by comments about homes from which children were taken by the *Overseer of the Poor*. In this era of minimal social support, each town had an Overseer who was empowered to place adults on the local poor farm and put their children in institutions in cases of extreme poverty. One vivid example recorded by the *Home's* Matron in 1915 involved five siblings ranging from age 10 months to 11 years: "The town authority took them from their parents, who seemed perfectly willing to get rid of them. [The Overseer] Mr. Davis said we could not imagine the conditions and surroundings under which these children had lived; more like animals than human beings. Not enough to eat at all times. The children were to be taken on three month's trial. If desirable, they were to be surrendered and the usual fee paid. If not surrendered, their board was to be paid [by the town] at $1.50 a week. They had never been inside a Church. They did not know what 'Christmas' meant". Perhaps not surprisingly, the older children experienced multiple placements and were returned with complaints about their behavior; the youngest spent his early life at the *Home*, eventually moving to the Brandon (VT) *School for Feebleminded*.

Based on analyses such as these, I find that a critique of the 'ideal' child/hood brings questions of social justice to the forefront. Most of the children coming through the doors of the *Home*

were not 'ideal' in body, social standing, or family environment, which helps to reveal the disciplinary power of that cultural trope. Within a political economy that held individuals responsible for their own poverty, and in a social milieu concerned with weeding out 'bad stock' from the Vermont population, these children were branded with stigma, punished for acting on their own trauma, and their life opportunities were unfairly limited through systemic oppression and labor exploitation. While the charitable efforts of the middle-class Board of the *Home* undoubtedly improved the material conditions of many children's lives, and provided schooling to some that otherwise would have had no education, there was also a performative value for those women of serving on the Board that reinforced their own relative class standing and undoubtedly enhanced their families' reputation and wealth accumulation in the region.

Digital Dilemmas of Historical Geographies of Childhood

Several times in the course of this research I have discovered instances of secret births, adoptions, and retroactive editing of birth records to fit a new family's version of the truth. Vermont birth records after 1908 are searchable online and include date and place of birth as well as parents' names, birth order, and other details, but thanks to information recorded in the *Home* logbooks and cross-checked in the census, I know more than what some of these suggest. I have also found inconsistencies between what parents claimed to the matron and what was catalogued by the census enumerator; the most memorable case was one in which a woman brought four children to the *Home* claiming to be a widow with four more children at home and having recently lost her farm to a fire. Yet in the census, which was taken very shortly after this, she had a different surname, lived in Saratoga NY with a man to whom she'd been married 14 years, and four other children. Did she make up a story for the Matron? Did the Matron exaggerate her case out of pity? Did the census get it wrong? Due to multiple layers of flawed record-gathering it is impossible to know if any of the stories was true. This kind of triangulation is only possible due to the digitization of the manuscript census and vital records. In most cases the facts line up or correct each other, such as when a name is misspelled, but sometimes the various sources compound a mystery and the only thing that is clear is that the truth was being hidden.

To add a digital dimension to my archival anxieties, I frequently have the odd sensation of being a genealogical voyeur. US census archives are available through *Ancestry.com* so it's easy to bump into public records and people's family trees. Admittedly, I can only see them if the owners have made them public, but many users are not necessarily aware of that, or they keep their trees public to connect with other family historians who might be related. Do I take a peek when I find a family tree? I confess that I have, particularly when I'm stymied by a tangle of public records and nothing seems to make sense with the *Home* log entries. Should I do this? I don't know! I acknowledge it feels a bit strange to realize that an adoption or out-of-wedlock birth is missing from someone's family tree that I know about but they don't (I have never contacted anyone to set the record straight). Another temptation is that the genealogical sites often have historical photos of the children I've spent hours and even days researching – the chance to see a set of siblings whose twists and turns I've been following through scraps of partial records over the course of a decade in the early 1900s is tantalizing. Does it harm them that I see their faces? Can I show them to public audiences? I don't know the answers but my intentions are to honor and remember those children, not to exploit them. The rise in DNA testing has shifted my position as researcher-voyeur once again – as people are finding unknown

relatives, particularly babies born to unwed mothers who may have entered a children's home, the information in my database takes on new meanings for family historians. As Francesca Moore says (2010, 268), "Even when sensitive material is unrestricted and available in the public domain, it still poses ethical dilemmas for the researcher." She goes on to posit "the likelihood of the academic and the family historian crossing paths over the same source material in the archive is ever increasing." Nine years after Moore's paper we are there – we have crossed paths, though in my case only I am aware of it and it is not a comfortable situation.

Fig. 4 Group of siblings who spent time at the Home; photo from *Ancestry*, faces masked with 'inked' photo editing feature

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