The Orphan Train Movement: Examining 19th Century Childhood Experiences

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Chapter One: Migration, Overpopulation, & Poverty

New York City in the 1800s

In the mid-1800s the United States departed from a distinctly agrarian past, celebrated for its simplistic and masculine character, into an overwhelmingly urban and industrial environment. “The United States was itself becoming a nation of cities,” altering previous political philosophies, social ideals, and the national ethos, prompting the creation of the Orphan Train Movement. Focused solely on impoverished and orphaned youths, these orphan trains assisted in approximately 200,000 placements between 1853 and 1929, making it the largest child resettlement initiative in American history. Founded by Reverend Charles Loring Brace, the orphan train program aimed to challenge the “greatest evil[s] of our city

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life” – migration, overpopulation, and poverty.⁴

When the United States began surveying railroad lines westwards in the mid-1800s, various advertisements and marketing materials were distributed throughout the world, especially Europe, praising American as the “land of milk and honey” teeming with the “free land,” which many impoverished families so urgently needed.⁵ As a result the United States inherited the largest population of immigrants than any other country in history. (See

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Figure 1.6 Between 1841 and 1860, America welcomed 4,311,465 newcomers.7 Immigration rates surged due to the growing employment opportunities provided by the industrialization and mechanization of the nation. Ultimately, over 33 million immigrants arrived in the United States between 1815 and 1915, three-quarters of which traveled through the Port of New York, leaving an indelible mark on the nation as a whole.8

Populations were growing at an unforeseen rate with “the number of people living in places of over 5,000 inhabitants jump[ing] from 597,000 in 1820 to over 5,600,000 in 1860.”9 Almost twenty cities had populations over 25,000 people in 1860, many of which reaching a populace of over 100,000 by 1870.10 Perhaps the most striking and immediate social revisions occurred in New York City, which absorbed more than one million people from around the globe by 1860.11

Although these immigrants provided necessary factory labor, their presence also created numerous social, financial, and political crises within the urban areas they most frequently inhabited. Consequently, issues of urban overpopulation began to arise. New York City especially became a “host of urban ills, including poverty, disease, alcoholism, job competition, and lack of resources,” which “led to instability and desperation.”12 Work and housing opportunities were scarce, inevitably forcing shacks, tenements, and even street corners to transform into makeshift homes. With time impoverished families, or “street
Arabs,” became synonymous with disease, crime, and impure sensibilities, problems that required immediate attention.

These demographical, and therefore cultural, shifts posed a legitimate threat to the traditional social dynamic of the United States. (See Figures 2 & 3) By the 1850s there were thousands of homeless and orphaned children in New York City alone as “sometimes families were left with little choice but to abandon their children to the city streets.” Reverend Charles Loring Brace, a prominent Connecticut theologian, was so appalled by the desperate existence of these children that he founded the Children’s Aid Society in 1853 in an effort to provide necessary reform. His actions eventually culminated in the Orphan Train Movement, a legal relocation program, which transplanted alleged “children of unhappy fortune,” sending them to new homes in rural,

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13 Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*, 175.
14 Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*, 121.
15 Wendinger, 11.
agriculturally-driven areas deeply rooted in Christian practices to generate a more ideal, or quintessentially “American,” population.
Chapter Two:  
Reverend Charles Loring Brace & the Orphan Train Movement

The rescue of these children began under the advisement of one of the most acclaimed and influential “child savers” of the 19th century, Reverend Charles Loring Brace. The minister took responsibility for these “ragged young girls who had nowhere to lay their heads; children driven from drunkards' homes; orphans who slept where they could find a box or a stairway; boys cast out by step-mothers or step-fathers.” Reverend Brace assumed this authoritative role in hopes of purifying their young, impressionable souls and, by association, positively reshaping the future of the United States.

The resulting Orphan Train Movement aimed to validate these children and culminated in

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an emigration program founded upon agricultural and domestic practices indicative of Reverend Brace’s own upbringing and perception of appropriate national values. Deeply rooted in Christianity, Reverend Brace’s upbringing unsurprisingly parallels the model juvenescence endorsed by the Orphan Train emigration program.

Born in 1826, in Litchfield, Connecticut, he spent the majority of his youth a short distance from Hartford. The descendant of a prominent, wealthy, and educated family, Brace lived in a setting completely different than the urban sprawls that would later become the basis of his life’s pursuits (Figure 4). While Reverend Brace led almost an idyllic life, those he’d later try to save lived in “damp underground basements which every high tide flooded, crowded with men, women and children…packed to the smallest attic with a wretched population.”

Hartford was a much more wholesome town compared to New York City or the other cities associated with the “dangerous classes.” More importantly, the necessary social, economic, spiritual, and educational opportunities it provided created a suitable habitat for children. American writer and Hartford resident Mark Twain went as so far as to say,

20 Bender, 136.
“Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see it is the chief.”

Furthermore,

Each house sits in the midst of about an acre of green grass, or flowerbeds or ornamental shrubbery, guarded on all sides by the trimmed hedges of arbor-vitae, and by files of huge forest trees that cast a shadow like a thunder-cloud. Some of these stately dwellings are almost buried from sight in parks and forests of these noble trees. Everywhere the eye turns it is bless with a vision of refreshing green. You do not know what beauty is if you have not been here.

This almost ideal and quintessentially American setting provided Brace with a greater recognition of and corresponding appreciation for notions of purity, virtue, and nature. The urgency with which he encouraged an agrarian, nature-driven childhood and his praises of its effectiveness are therefore understandable as these traits were embedded and essential to his own upbringing and maturation.

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22 Twain, American Heritage.
Religion was always a very important aspect of Reverend Brace’s life beginning in childhood. The Brace family was deeply invested in their congregation, the North Church, and the surrounding Christian community. Brace was greatly affected by the frequent sermons of his family pastor and prominent 19th-century theologian Horace Bushnell. Bushnell’s strong influence inspired Brace to pursue a ministerial life, studying theology at both the Yale Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary.

Brace attended Yale Divinity School to study theology in 1842 in an effort to emulate Bushnell. Shortly after Brace enrolled, Bushnell preached a sermon on “Unconscious...
Influence,’ which Brace would later admit, “influenced my whole life.”

Bushnell’s address ultimately provided the inspiration for the creation of Orphan Train program years later.

The 1842 sermon proposed the idea that leading children “by teaching, by argument, by persuasion, by threatenings, by offers and promises” was infinitely less important than the “sympathetic powers, the sensibilities or affections that are not immediately rational.”

Therefore the character and later success of children were established by their ability to reproduce these “unconscious influences.”

Bushnell expanded upon these themes in his 1847 sermon “Christian Nurture.” Stating that no “purposed control whatever” can affect children as effectively as the “organic working of a family,” he maintained that poorly raised children should be relocated to more virtuous households.

Reverend Brace and his work at the Children’s Aid Society eventually carried out these suggestions on a much larger scale than perhaps Bushnell had anticipated. Bushnell’s ideas regarding the importance of the family in Christian nurture and in the transmission of culture, as well as his preference for naturalness in

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25 Bender, 136.
26 Bender, 138.
28 Bender, 137.
29 Bender, 137.
30 Bender, 137.
child-rearing, clearly provided the theoretical basis of Brace’s campaign to place poor and homeless children in families as opposed to institutions.\footnote{Bender, 139.}

However, Reverend Brace was not always predisposed to helping children. While at Yale, Brace wrote that “my heart is wrong and my tastes are all set against sympathizing with the low and vulgar.”\footnote{Brace, \textit{Dangerous Classes of New York}, 78.} He also dismissed impoverished communities, as “heaven was not made for the low, dirty undressed Christian.” In 1848 Brace left New Haven and continued to pursue a ministerial life as a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The soon-to-be reverend became interested in the varying social tensions of the developing metropolis, conditions he was previously unaware of. After personally witnessing the struggles lower classes faced, he softened his initial sentiments.\footnote{Brace, \textit{Dangerous Classes of New York}, 78.} Reverend Brace quickly became more sympathetic towards the misdiagnosed “undressed Christians” and opted to dedicate his existence to their reform and purification.\footnote{Brace, \textit{Dangerous Classes of New York}, 78.}
Chapter 4: Change Through Urban Inspiration

Jacob Riis's "Bandit's Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street" (1887)

Brace’s enlightening experiences in New York City, in addition to his yearlong tour of Europe’s philanthropic infrastructure in 1850, motivated the Reverend’s charitable endeavors. Brace’s lifelong efforts to deter the “growth of the dangerous classes” officially began in 1852 when he assumed a ministerial position for Blackwell’s Island and Reverend Lewis M. Pease’s Five Points Mission’s impoverished communities. Reverend Brace was most concerned by “that immense class – the children of New York” and exposing them to the “influence of the moral and fortunate classes.” Reverend Brace was adamant that urban communities were the most equipped to accept charity and become positively influenced by its efforts. Ultimately

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36 Bender, 139.
37 Bender, 139.
39 Bender, 143.
dictating that “what New York most of all needed was some grand, comprehensive effort to check the growth of the ‘dangerous classes’” and rescue its children from a life of vagrancy, crime, and violence.\textsuperscript{40}

As he once wrote to his younger sister Emma: “You can have no idea, Emma, what an immense vat of misery and crime and filth much of this great city is!” Horrified by the immoral influence of city life and the conditions he witnessed, he wrote “Think of the thousands of children growing up almost sure to be prostitutes and rogues!”\textsuperscript{41} (See Figure 6\textsuperscript{42}) Reverend Brace and the Children’s Aid Society, conveyed sentimentalist and naturalist themes within their work. These efforts allowed Reverend Brace to compare multiple socioeconomic classes and realities, revealing an increasingly oppressive relationship between the inherent laws of society and nature during the Gilded Age. Brace acknowledged that Americans, most important of which were the children, could not simply rely

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\textsuperscript{40} Bender, 139.
\textsuperscript{41} Bender, 139.
on solitary thought to create manhood; actions must be made and worthy rules must be followed to ensure individual and national success. In response, Reverend Brace strived to “[drain] the city of its neglected and ignorant children who were on the threshold of criminal careers” and ultimately contribute to a redefined notion of welfare through the intensely Christian “kindness of strangers.”

This fascination with poverty-stricken children grew immensely, inspiring in the establishment of the Children’s Aid Society in 1853. A progressive organization for its time, the Children’s Aid Society aimed to forestall “a life of misery, shame, and crime” destined for the approximately 30,000 homeless children dispersed throughout New York City. By 1920, the Children’s Aid Society had placed hundreds of thousands of “city Arabs,” or underprivileged children, through what appeared to be an emigration strategy rooted in philanthropic sentiments. The “great duty” Reverend Brace wrote in the 1856 Annual Report of the Children’s Aid Society, “is to get these children…utterly out of their surroundings and to send them away to kind Christian homes in the country” via the orphan trains. Additionally,

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relocating the youthful “bad blood” of society conveniently fulfilled the increasingly urgent need for labor in almost every expanding agricultural sector throughout the nation.

Yet, Reverend Brace found that many citizens “avert[ed] their eyes from the social problems festering in [cities],” ignoring and/or inadequately dealing with impoverished children.\textsuperscript{46,47} Furthermore Brace noted, “the poor were isolated from the other half of society” and and intended to help absorb the “multitude of the unfortunate into the community,” fostering a “‘link of sympathy’ between classes.”\textsuperscript{48} More equipped classes and communities must simultaneously acknowledge that the “great lower class of our city” will eventually “influence elections...shape the policy of the city” and “if unreclaimed, poison society all around them.”\textsuperscript{49} It then became imperative to mediate the overall threat posed by an “unfortunate” generation through whatever reform necessary.\textsuperscript{50} Success, as defined by Brace, was the ability to establish an appropriate identity through the transplantation of “this motley throng of infantile misery and childish guilt” created by impure urban environments.\textsuperscript{51}

In an era when children were expected to work, Reverend Brace argued against traditional child service asylums because "the skills they taught had little practical use."\textsuperscript{52} Instead, “the best of all asylums for the children is the farmer's home...and... kind Christian
homes in the country,” completely removed from the hedonistic streets of New York City.⁵³ According to Reverend Brace, contemporary service agencies and asylums were unable to “prune dangerous impulses” since they relied on “mechanical virtue,” rather than notions of “parental responsibility.”⁵⁴ Instead, Reverend Brace and the Children’s Aid Society strived to provide a social opportunity dichotomous of urban asylums, “which denied the natural workings of family and society.”⁵⁵ This culminated in the Orphan Train Movement.

As see by Figure 7 & 8, from Reverend Brace’s 1872 book The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years’ Work Among Them, agricultural settings were thought to create happier, more pious children, whose appreciation for nature and hard work would allow them to

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⁵³ The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
⁵⁵ Bender, 143.
⁵⁶ Brace, Dangerous Classes of New York, 243, 222.
become successful adults. Unlike the aforementioned asylums, farming communities would provide the children with a wholesome society, allowing them to pursue a natural existence. Reverend Brace was confident that the most important and influential aspect in molding a child’s character was the environment they lived in, as it would no doubt dictate the rest of their lives. Therefore, once separated from the impurity of urban life, the transplanted child would learn how American society and families were intended to work, maturing into a useful citizen and participant of both.

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57 Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*, 243; 222.
Reverend Brace’s obsession with the United States’ urban landscapes grew in tandem with the increasing effects of immigration, poverty, and industrialization. Reverend Brace was fascinated by these crime-ridden and sometimes unrestrained communities, where vagrant children as young as five years old were arrested, sent to various asylums, “houses of refuge,” or other paltry institutions, or entirely dismissed. The various instances of delinquency, disease, and other poverty-driven agencies were the “saddest, most hopeless sight[s]” Brace had perhaps ever witnessed, which required immediate attention.  

Corruption among urban youth threatened the future of the nation and the livelihood of once celebrated values. Reverend Brace believed that almost any concern regarding the

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59 Brace, Dangerous Classes of New York, 78.
“street Arabs” and the social impurities they prompted by could only be dissuaded by transplanting these children, even by force, to the nation’s more wholesome rural areas. Nature then established, or perhaps reestablished, itself as “the best forming-institution for young minds,” becoming the preferred reformatory backdrop of the Orphan Train Movement.60

Furthermore, these rural placements acted then as repudiation of urban society, providing visions of a traditional material and spiritual foundations, revealing both the internal and external struggles that Brace assumed plagued America’s impoverished children. Brace and his colleagues based their practices on the traditional agrarian ideologies, reminiscent of the beliefs conveyed in Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia almost a century prior.61 This increasing tension between the material and the spiritual identity throughout the nation and its effects on the domestic tableau and consumerist ethos were most apparent in the nation’s ever growing urban landscapes where, as Jefferson predicted, “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.”62 It therefore became imperative to embrace the domesticity and piety founded in agrarian culture to delineate the superior from the inferior at a young age. In all, Reverend Brace envisioned the placements, which spanned across more than 45 states including areas in Canada and Mexico, as vehicles of critical and substantial change for both the child and the nation. Furthermore, the program expected to instill a self-reliant behavior among its riders.

Each trip intended to actualize the notion that the United States was “the land of

61 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
62 Bender, 4.
opportunity” and “second chance[s],” reaffirming the idea of the ‘American Dream.’”

Reverend Brace understood the ‘American Dream’ as almost an extension of the United States’ Declaration of Independence. The practices of Children’s Aid Society especially recognized the ideas that “all men are created equal” and are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights,” such as “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The ‘American Dream,’ provided a belief that prosperity, success, and overall instances of upward social mobility are readily achieved through hard work, regardless of an individual’s circumstances.

The “American Dream” inspired Reverend Brace to proceed with this social experiment and strive to establish authentically American identities among his Orphan Train riders. He maintained that the utopian impulses associated with the belief would resonate most with the younger generations who should be the most susceptible to its ideological benefits, especially when guided by the wholesome, Christian, and therefore American placement homes. Reverend Brace was eager to expose his malleable “children of unhappy fortune” to these ideological practices, providing them with the opportunity to become hard working and successful as defined by society’s standards. This necessary realization and corresponding contextualization of the “American Dream” dictated what it meant to be a successful Orphan Train rider and eventual adult.

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Chapter 6: 
Purifying the ‘Bad Blood’

From its inception in 1853, the Children’s Aid Society was inundated with service requests. Groups of impoverished children gathered at Brace’s slum-based offices in search of much-needed aid. Reverend Brace described the children, who frequently noted that they “don’t live nowhere!,” as a “motley throng of misery and childish guilt.” By providing opportunities for self-help, Brace aimed to ‘purify’ a generation destined for “courses of crime-all,” demoralization, and an overwhelming sense of defeat.

Marketed as an initiative to “help the children help themselves,” the Children’s Aid

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Society pandered to the Christian sensibilities of its’ investors. An integral aspect of being a worthy Christian existed in the degree to which an individual was “American” and promoted the appropriate values associated with legitimate citizenship. Essentially, Christians must take action by self-definition. A dual relationship “as Christian men…cannot look upon this multitude of unhappy, deserted, and degraded boys and girls without feeling [a] responsibility to God for them.” Furthermore, Reverend Brace argued that, despite preconceived notions, history and heritage are ephemeral, escapable institutions. A Darwinist, Brace, who would eventually read The Origin of Species thirteen times, dismissed the idea that individuals blood chemistry, referred to then as ‘gemmules,’ would dictate their character and future.

A hypothesis successfully tested by the Orphan Train program, these permeable associations with the riders’ inherited class better elaborates upon the malleability of identity and to what degree individuals are ‘made,’ by external influences, rather than biology. Reverend Brace ultimately acknowledges, in a distinctly anti-eugenic manner, “The action of the great law of ‘Natural Selection,’ in regard to the human race, is always towards temperance and virtue,”

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69 Bender, 139.
70 O’Connor, 80; Brace, Dangerous Classes of New York, 43-44.
especially “among the poor.” Reverend Brace was adamant that social rehabilitation among the nation’s impoverished children was a plausible endeavor, which could not be impeded by any alleged biological differences or invalid claims of “Bad Blood.” Regardless, these children of “bad blood” were frequently understood as a burgeoning danger to the livelihood of the American spirit yet, apprehensions aside, traditional social control was still an attainable feat. Although New York City fostered a “crowd of poor” it was in fact “made up of individuals debased by their own fault, or made by circumstances, who can be influenced,” if exposed to the necessary conditions. An innovative program, Brace combined new science with tradition to ensure the Orphan Train movement’s effectiveness and overall impact within society. As a result factions of impoverished children were then encouraged, if not forced, to completely separate themselves from their families and relocated to more agrarian ‘American’ venues.

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72 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains*.
73 Bender, 140.
Chapter 7:
The Children’s Aid Society & the Inception of the Orphan Trains

The Orphan Train Movement began in 1854 with the trial placement of 164 boys and 43 girls throughout the farmlands of New York and surrounding states. This initial effort intended to reaffirm the expected effect of CAS’s emigration program. A catalyst for hundreds of Orphan Trains, this preliminary philanthropic endeavor was highly regarded by Reverend Brace in the Children’s Aid Society’s Annual Report the following year. He maintained that:

Of these 200 boys and girls, a great proportion are so many vagrants or criminals saved; so much expense lessened to courts and prisons; so much poisonous influence removed from the city; and so many boys and girls, worthy of something better from society than a felon's fate, placed where they can enter on manhood or womanhood somewhat as God intended that they should.\(^75\)

Brace, his agents, and the Children’s Aid Society found sufficient success and moral affirmation to ‘place out’ the “unfortunate” street children more intensely.\(^76\) Shortly thereafter, the official Orphan Train Movement began with the emigration of forty-six urban children on the evening of September 28, 1854.\(^77\)


\(^76\) Bender, 139.

\(^77\) O’Connor, 106.
Quickly establishing itself as an effective endeavor, the Orphan Train Movement emigrated 207 children in its first year alone only to be quadrupled the following year with an astounding 863 placements. After removing the children from their lodging houses, orphanages, private homes, street dwellings, or other residences, the Orphan Trains program would transplant them to, what Brace perceived were, the “many spare places at the table of life” in the “wholesome” West. Successful reformation of the Orphan Riders was more probable if they assimilated into the more domestic tableau. (Figures 9 & 10)

Townspeople throughout the nation were alerted to their arrival by “circulars through the city weeklies and rural papers, of the intention of supplying children.” Advertisements, such as Figure 9, brought “a speedy response in the form of hundreds of applications from farmers and mechanics.” These advertisements would frequently detail the characteristics of the soon-to-be auctioned Orphan Train riders alleging, for example, “All children under the care of this Association are of SPECIAL PROMISE in intelligence and health.” Additionally, the children’s physical attributes, such as hair, eyes, heights, etc., were highly focused aspects within the CAS marketing materials. Significantly, handicapped children were strictly excluded from these advertisements and public viewings.

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78 O’Connor, 101.
79 Wendinger, 11.
80 O’Connor, 106.
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83 Warren, 37.
For many, the emigration process was exceedingly unsettling and overwhelming. 1924 Orphan Train Rider Lee Nailling, whose original name was Alton Lou Clement, recalled the event during an interview for the 2006 PBS documentary *The Orphan Trains*, stating, “I do remember the children milling around outside the train and waiting to be assigned our seats. The big problem was that you never knew what the future held for you. You had no idea what the future ever held for you and that was a great concern and a great worry.”

84 Nailling waited at the train platform with his two younger brothers and watched as his recently widowed father was “crying when we were taken from him.”

85 Nailling saw his biological father, whose name remains unknown, as a victim of alcoholism, poverty, and single-parenthood, operating under “circumstances that he couldn’t help.”

86 Once the children were aboard the train, CAS agents

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Figure 10: Children’s Aid Society’s 1871 Annual Report regarding number and frequency of

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84 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.*
85 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.*
86 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.*
confiscated any of the familial possessions the children might have had. Nailling had packed a letter from his father and was devastated was CAS agents removed it without his consent. Nailling was eventually separated from his brothers, which, “broke my heart again,” leaving the young seven year old devastated and alone.87

The young riders were occasionally sung to and given small Bibles by CAS agents in an attempt to comfort the often confused and scared children. The defining moment of the Orphan Train experience was not the trip itself but rather the children’s arrival and corresponding distribution. From the trains the children were immediately grouped upon stages, town halls, or a variety of other viewing platforms where prospective parents could analyze their appearances.88

Orphan Train rider Hazelle Latimer, who was sent to Texas from New York City at age eleven in 1918, described the exhibitions as “an ordeal that no child should go through.”89 A traumatizing moment for Latimer, she elaborating upon her experience stating,

They pulled us and pushed us and shoved us. And this old man-- I had never seen anything like anybody chewing tobacco. I knew nothing about it. This old man came up and his mouth was all stained brown and I thought, well, he’d been eating chocolate candy or something. Then he said,
'Open your mouth.' I looked at him and he-- 'I want to see about your teeth.' I opened my mouth and he stuck his finger in my mouth and just-- and rubbed over my teeth. And his old dirty hands just-- I wanted to bite, but I didn't.90

Almost every aspect of the children, from their teeth, stature, and even eye color, was evaluated while on display. Despite only being four years old at the time, Lorraine Williams vividly remembers arriving in Kirksville, Missouri. “on a Sunday,” in 1926, and the “strange feeling” she experienced because “you'd never been looked at in that way before” with “people looking all around you.”91 A dehumanizing process, the children would often be physically handled by spectators to gauge their usefulness. Despite Reverend Brace’s initial perceptions, traditional farming communities did not instinctively impart positive reform or regeneration. Instead of uplifting, they often animalized the children.

Once a placement was made, a contract was signed, such as the one shown in Figure 11, between the Children's Aid Society and the newly assigned parents. An almost emotionless document, these contracts solidified the commodification of the child.92 Despite legal contracts, the children’s well being was in no way guaranteed. The Children’s Aid Society rarely checked on the safety or happiness of the children after placement. The insufficient resources and overall inadequacy of the organization’s follow-up procedures were often attributed to the growing rider-to-agent ratio. The Children’s Aid Society’s annual reports include almost nothing about the quality of treatment within the placement homes.

CAS agents had intended to visit placements at least once a year, but the demand exceeded expectations. Eventually, this lack of necessary evaluations prompted Reverend Brace to commission an independent investigation of the program in 1883. Brace found that, although certain committees were ineffective, the majority of children were leading happier,
more productive lives. Yet, the emotional livelihood of orphan train riders was not taken into account by Reverend Brace’s primary goal of creating children who could effectively "embrace...all the accoutrements of respectability." Reverend Brace and the CAS program were more concerned with the future character and overall usefulness of orphan train riders, rather than the potentially dehumanizing reformation processes.

In addition, the program was also frequently mistaken as an opportunity for free labor, as riders were often treated more like indentured servants than children. The relocated children were predominately used to satisfy various domestic and agrarian labor needs, and did not experience the nurturing and affectionate adoptive families advertised. North Carolina orphanage superintendent J.H. Mills criticized these placements: “Men needing labor, their slaves being set free, take these boys and treat them as slaves.”

Devoid of any emotional or familial connection, these types of placements were contingent upon the child’s ability to perform manual labor. One foster father commented, “We farmers can hardly imagine how it is that these boys can be so awkward on a farm,” and shortly thereafter, sent his foster son elsewhere. The farmer validated this rejection by claiming the child was useless and simply “did not suit me.” Some foster parents resorted to physical violence if the children did not meet their standards. One rider shared, “They whipped me until I was all black and blue,” or were simply given away reaffirming the perception that they were products, not people.

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93 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
95 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
97 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
98 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
Chapter 8:
Experiences & Reactions

Reverend Brace found, “The readiness on the part of farmers to receive these children was at once evident.”

However, the urban families losing a child rarely shared this enthusiasm. Not all Orphan Train Riders were in fact orphans but rather hailed from struggling households, ill-equipped to raise a child. The process of removing the potential riders from their urban dwellings varied from case to case. While many parents willfully surrendered their children in desperation, others struggled to detach from their love ones regardless of the severity of their living situations.

Reverend Brace even witnessed one

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99 Kidder, 32.
101 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
mother who, despite her volatile financial standing, went so far as to proclaim that, “she would rather die” than separate from her son.\textsuperscript{102} Despite the emotional suffering that young riders were likely to experience, this trauma was noticeably absent from CAS records and reports. Brace remained confident in the efficacy of his growing operation.\textsuperscript{103}

Numerous riders had negative experiences, far from the innocent, carefree, all-American childhood CAS originally anticipated for its transplants. It was not uncommon for children to drift among farms or even run away in an effort to return to New York City. The children were living in a completely foreign setting, with “total strangers,” so there were no guarantees that placements would go as planned.\textsuperscript{104} Although some Orphan Train riders were appropriately matched with loving, invested families, many of these hasty placements were unsuccessful, resulting in anything but the intended reform or purification.

Many American families were also suspicious of the urban children, apprehensive of their character and the potential contributions they could make. One Southern official said, “What was good for New York was very bad for the West,” fearful that the transplants would in some way corrupt their new surroundings.\textsuperscript{105} However, this was a mutual apprehension.

"Nobody can understand the loneliness that an orphan feels,” said Orphan Train Rider Toni Weiler.\textsuperscript{106} She continued stating, “You don't know who you are,” a feeling which was only exacerbated by the frequent

\textsuperscript{102} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
\textsuperscript{103} O’Conner, 112.
\textsuperscript{104} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
\textsuperscript{105} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
\textsuperscript{106} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
discrimination against city orphans Weiler and numerous other transplants experienced.\textsuperscript{107} Despite the program’s objectives, transplants continued to struggle even after being removed from the impurity of city life.\textsuperscript{108} After being assigned to a new family, Orphan Train Rider Claretta Miller, who was sent west at the age of nine, “it seemed like it just kind of hit me when I got [there] that I had left everything behind…It just caught up with me all at once…I felt all alone.”\textsuperscript{109}

Despite their young age, riders were “old enough to realize that there could be a lot of mistakes made.”\textsuperscript{110} These rural homes were not as compassionate as was originally thought. For many these new homes provided anything but the idyllic childhood Reverend Brace envisioned. Many of the Orphan Train Riders experienced flagrant prejudice, in addition to frequent incidents of physical abuse, causing emotional distress. The new communities would often discriminate against the children of alleged “bad blood,” isolating them from various practices, such as birthday parties, sporting events,

\textbf{Lee Nailling on his new family’s farm}

\textsuperscript{107} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
\textsuperscript{109} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
\textsuperscript{110} The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
and other group activities.\footnote{The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.}

While being interviewed for the PBS documentary \textit{The Orphan Trains} Toni Weiler shared,

Children didn't want me. They didn't want to play with me. And I remember, possibly in the fourth grade, when this-- I was walking with this girl and this mother came to the screen door and she said, ‘ Haven't I told you I don't want you to walk with her? I don't want you to talk to her. Get away from her.’ And that's the way it was. And it was very hurtful because sometimes I'd go home and look in the mirror. What was the matter with me? I didn't know. Somehow, those people, the ones I went to school with, knew that I was a bastard.\footnote{The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.}

Children such as Toni were repeatedly marginalized for their lesser status, affecting almost every aspect of their young lives. Vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, these children also had to rationalize their new, often solitary, existence. This difficult situation was only made worse by the enduring struggle to make friends and simply feel a sense of belonging or importance within their new homes.

The persistent ostracism Toni Weiler and other orphan train riders faced had lasting effects on the already lonely, distressed, and homesick children.

Yet conversely, there are numerous accounts of successful placements, where families would, as intended, treat the children as their own. Orphan Train riders could more easily flourish in these increasingly accepting and welcoming environments. In quintessential environments, Orphan Train riders
were allowed, or even encouraged to act as children and pursue a more innocent and carefree existence. No longer viewed as a commodity or burden, these placements fostered prosperous and, more importantly, happy children. In suit with the initiatives of the program these ideal placements provided the relocated children access to more appropriate character-building opportunities, which would otherwise be unavailable to them.

Understandably, orphan train riders could more readily become successful adults under these types of circumstances. The best example of which is seen through the story of Andrew Burke and John Brady. Burke and Brady who rode the same Orphan Train and were sent to the same Indiana town in 1859. Adopted by a judge, Brady’s new foster father found him to be “the homeliest, toughest, most unpromising boy in the whole lot” but “had a curious desire to see what could be made of such a specimen of humanity.”113 Despite their original “street Arabs” titles, both boys became successful adults, John Brady grew up to be governor of Alaska and Andrew Burk the governor of North Dakota, validating Reverend Brace’s original transplantation hypothesis.114

It was not uncommon for children to prefer their rural placement to their initial urban existences. Even after being permanently separated from both brothers and all of his worldly possessions Orphan Train rider Lee Nailling never thought about leaving his new family or even returning to New York City at all, noting, “I don’t imagine I’d go back even if I had the chance.”115 Nailling realized that this placement gave him the opportunity to be nurtured and cared for in a capacity that his biological father was unable to provide. Similarly, rider Elliott Hoffman Bobo felt a sense of loyalty to his foster parents, whom he lovingly referred to as mom.

113 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.*
115 *The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.*
and dad, as their love and support “saved my life.”

Although they each reveal a variety of different political, social, and economic visions for the nation, each rider and corresponding placement family advocated for the establishment of an authentic, and most importantly, pure identity through their participation in Reverend Brace’s charitable initiatives. These seemingly different Orphan Train riders reflect the diversity of experiences during while simultaneously reaffirming a national struggle to define what it means to be an “American,” especially by a child of instable means.

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116 The American Experience - The Orphan Trains.
Chapter 9:
Evaluating Society and Tradition

Orphan Train Rider En Route to Various Locations

The desired success for the Orphan Train Program depended upon the implementation of plausible strategies and legitimate understandings of the various dynamics, whether social, political, or economic, associated with urban life. The impending ideological fluctuations resulted in conflicting definitions of success and manhood, vital to the American psyche, through an increasing divide within notions of urban versus rural lifestyles and individual versus community perspectives. This social polarity ultimately speaks most effectively towards the universal struggle of livelihood and the overarching desires of 19th century populations.

Collecting upon traditional American ideals, Reverend Brace’s solution to the moral woes of urban areas collaborated with beliefs found in “Self Reliance” and other texts by author

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and Transcendentalist leader Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” critiqued America’s dependence on capitalism and traditionalism. He argued that these institutions acted as oppressive forces socially, spiritually, and intellectually, which could lead to the destruction of an original self or whole man. The stratification of society, an impending division of self, and a culmination of what Emerson described as a nation fraught with “little minds,” led many, such as Reverend Brace, to question the current social, political, and economic state of the nation.¹¹⁸

Reverend Brace is able to elaborate upon his intentions, the existing welfare state, and the enduring urbanization by employing Emerson’s ideas of solitude and isolation among nature through a distinct emphasis on the importance of an individual ambition in connection to self and society. Both Reverend Brace and the Children’s Aid Society argument are a harsh critique on the technological, scientific, and philosophical transformation of America into what Emerson described as a “diseased society.”¹¹⁹ Reverend Brace and Emerson are similarly able to describe a shift from romantic, all-American visions of farmland to the realities of an urban, industrialized consumer culture, which corrupts our ideas of self, at direct expense of the child.

¹¹⁹ Emerson, “Self Reliance.”
Heavily influenced by the increasingly industrial environment, current philanthropic sentiments did very little to stimulate American youth or offer even the slightest glimmer of hope in what Reverend Brace argued was a shockingly impoverished and abandoned faction.\footnote{Bender, 67.} \footnote{[Photo] "Jacob A. Riis's New York," \textit{The New York Times}, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/02/27/nyregion/20080227_RIIS_SLIDESHOW_index.html?_r=0.} Reverend Brace later explored these circumstances in his 1859 pamphlet \textit{The Best Method of Disposing of our Pauper and Vagrant Children}, which reiterated these growing social issues in cities through the following declaration:

\begin{quote}
How to minister even the young mind, diseased; how, still farther, to prevent the attack of the malady...how to manage numbers of persons, under a system, and yet have the system work in accordance with the providential laws of society; how to use moral machinery, and yet regard the peculiarities of the individual; how to make our legislation, our reformatory expedients, and our charity, not exceptional and temporary, but in harmony with the great principles of political economy and the great impulses of human nature-these.\footnote{Charles Loring Brace, “The Best Method of Disposing of our Pauper and Vagrant Children” (1859), 3. http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/3290622?op=n&n=1&treeaction=expand.}
\end{quote}

When contextualized, this discussion regarding appropriate and legitimate philanthropic interventions and the corresponding growth of the Orphan Trains initiative aptly reflects the times. Reverend Brace examines vagrancy, criminality, and their corresponding effects on society, calling upon humanity to intervene productively.

With this struggle between the individual and community, private versus public, it becomes difficult to delineate whether or not 19\textsuperscript{th} century urban constructs were, as Reverend Brace maintains, a “conspiracy against manhood” where “the power which resides in him” is increasingly lost in the ever-expanding machinist tableau of industrialization.\footnote{Emerson, “Self Reliance.”} Conversely, the "brightest of all visions" was "a humble, self-controlled life, all devoted, given up, to working for
human happiness," which relied on the benefits of agrarian hardship and simplicity.\textsuperscript{124} This shared concern over the influence of industrialization, mechanization, and an ultimate deterioration of agrarian culture became a decisive factor in the Children’s Aid Society and Reverend Brace’s Orphan Train program and its unusual welfare procedures in general.

\textsuperscript{124} O’Connor, xviii.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

A train load of children en route to their new homes in the West

An often ignored event, the process of diluting “bad blood” is consistently overshadowed by the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and other likeminded sensations yet was nonetheless an important and influential aspect of U.S. history. The inception of the Children’s Aid Society and the rise of Orphan Trains reflect American society while effectively speculating on the future of the nation through the lens of children’s identities and experiences. While exposing the dualistic nature of individuals in regards to their struggle for identity through what was essentially a program intended to purify burdensome children, the Orphan Trains provide a valid depiction and analysis of 19th century America and its plight to

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Kidder, 30.
find success, truth, and maturity during precarious times via the construct of a child and American childhood.

This unique social experiment remains the largest child resettlement program in American history, as well as an exceedingly valuable and enlightening component of a perpetually evolving image of nineteenth-century social politics. Despite obvious inadequacies, the Orphan Train movement and the success of other Children's Aid initiatives eventually inspired the onset of a variety of child welfare reforms, which more closely examined child labor laws, adoption services, public education, and other societal constructs, which later established itself as a prototype of modern foster care. Orphan Trains are still a relevant topic as the effects of Reverend Brace’s moral endeavors continue to impact society, even after almost a century since the last train was sent West. In investigating Reverend Brace, the Children’s Aid Society, and the overall happiness of 19th and 20th century orphan train riders, we gain a better understanding as to how to most effectively serve today’s youth and childhood in general.
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