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Susan Currell, "Dirty History and America's White Trash:  
American Eugenics and the Problem of Purity"

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## Opening Keynote

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# Dirty History and America's White Trash: American Eugenics and the Problem of Purity

## Introduction

Susan Currell's paper discussed the idea of purity on several levels of discourse: firstly, as a historical trope by which both "welfare" and eugenics were promoted as progress—seen in the metaphorical ideas of welfare as "social house cleaning" or the pure and thereby efficient/modern body during the 1930s. Secondly, how "pure" records such as well-intentioned documentary photographs aiming to uplift the rural poor were "infected" with the "fictions" of eugenic discourse around gene impurity. Finally, how researching the history of eugenics raises further trouble by hanging out the "dirty laundry" of the process of history making itself, in raising the problematic of historical knowledge and pure truths/transparent meanings, arguing that the methodological issues raised by researching eugenics

highlight mostly an “impure”, tainted, or incomplete historical record that needs acknowledgment. The following is a shorter version of her opening keynote paper.

## Dirty History and America’s White Trash

Photographs taken at a eugenics exhibition at the 1929 Kansas State Fair, when eugenic beliefs were at their height of popularity, illustrate that the discourse of purity was very much a part of the lingering progressive ideal (of which eugenics formed just one aspect) which linked health reform, education and inspections with broader improvements in society.<sup>1</sup> Such exhibits were common and have been quite widely commented on in academic literature on American eugenics, mostly as a form of positive eugenics popular in the 1920s which focused on “fitter families” and better breeding of humans. This is often contrasted with the negative eugenics that would lead to Nazi race hygiene. The fairs were used to disseminate scientific information to the uneducated and even to draw them in for eugenic testing so people could become effectively self-surveilling. Pre-Holocaust, these were often fairly benign efforts to make eugenics voluntary for the greater well-being of society—like teaching people to wash their hands with soap or clean their teeth. Exhibits focussed on purity and often used horticultural or husbandry metaphors to explain eugenics to uneducated or non-scientific masses. The central utopian purpose here was that you could improve human society within three generations by breeding purely and marrying eugenically. Racial segregation is an implied preference: the purity of the gene is linked to a coded discourse of colour that can lead to uplift for all races—purity might be gained by breeding pure black or pure white (illustrated at the fair through the example of guinea pigs).

Yet, at the same time, these shows highlighted how much popular eugenic thinking stemmed from a curious hybrid (to use a horticultural term) of ideas about race mixing (Gobineau), Darwinian social theory (Herbert Spencer) and newly discovered Mendelian genetics around the turn of the century. Eugenics as a science or discourse itself was never “pure” and the different factions of eugenics were often in conflict, riven with numerous internal differences and

disagreements from a political spectrum which spanned left and right. Suffice it to say that such vague pseudo-scientific thinking exhibited by the fairs, blending environmental with hereditarian beliefs, simplified the process by which purity could be achieved, and was already discredited by geneticists and much of the scientific community by the 1930s.

But, despite this, eugenics remained an incredibly popular and powerful discourse in mass culture, one that was multivalent and easily appropriated for whatever cause or narrative was necessary to further ideals of social betterment. This is, I would argue, the only way we can explain a key controversial and provocative paradox of the New Deal/1930s era: in the same decade that America created a welfare state and federally funded aid to support the poor, measures that were intended to lift up the “forgotten man” at the bottom of the economic heap, there was also widespread state-sanctioned coerced eugenic sterilization on an unprecedented scale.

I want to stress here that I am not saying that the New Deal government was “eugenicist”. There is no evidence to show that there was ever an official interest in eugenic policies (which were controversial even at the height of their popularity), but the point I am making is that an elision of welfare reform and eugenics (a cross-fertilization of impure scientific thinking and welfare politics) happened in the 1930s that led to the growth and consolidation of eugenics at the same time as there was a growth in national welfare provision. New Deal spending in fact provided an influx of funds for projects at state level that were of key interest to eugenic societies: housing, health and education in particular.

My argument, then, is that eugenics insinuated itself into the welfare reform in the `30s because of its widespread acceptance as a modern and scientific discourse by the late `20s. Moreover, the creation of new communities through New Deal housing projects gave sociologists an unprecedented opportunity to map and examine families (not just problem groups as eugenicists had been doing), and provided invaluable measurement data of great interest to the eugenics movement. Ways of measuring eligibility for selection not only used methods approved of (and often developed) by eugenicists, but gave social workers raised on eugenics training particular power in the selection process and surveillance of new and old communities.

To eugenicists, “white trash” Americans were the human equivalent of the ever-expanding garbage dump—the more progress/wealth/consumption that modernity created, the more trash emerged. The more you looked to help the forgotten people, the more problems you saw. So while federal housing projects prided themselves on the creation of new, modern, healthy communities, as they did so, the “wasteland” of rejects appeared to be increasing and the urgency or need to deal with the emerging trash grew. Federal policies of the New Deal thereby became indirect facilitators of both “positive” and “negative” eugenics, a “hangover” from the twenties where local/regional issues blended eugenics with the operation of federal welfare policies, something you can see in events like the 1929 Kansas Fair.

In the case of the poor whites targeted as rubbish or waste products the term “white trash” emerged as the dominant way of describing those unfit for modernity. Eugenics functioned as a modernizing discourse in that it designated certain people as “ruins” or remnants from past civilizations and certain communities as “wastelands”, in order to justify a widespread rebuilding of society. Matt Wray analyses the term “white trash” in his book *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*, saying:

Split the phrase in two and read the meanings against each other: white and trash. Slowly, the term reveals itself as an expression of fundamental tensions and deep structural antinomies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt. In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, white trash names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other. It brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order. (Wray, 2007, p.2)

White then, as an ethnoracial marker, is conjoined with trash as a signifier of abject class status and “white trash” becomes a puzzle with two pieces—one about race, the other about class—demanding the question, “which modifies the other?”.

Dina Smith has further noted that there is a multivalency in the way the term is used to create an alternative whiteness—a dirty whiteness if you like—where ‘The poor white exists . . . as whiteness's other self, a masochistic complement to Southern white class and racial privilege’ (2004, p.370). Pure whiteness, then, is a fantasy that must always contain within it its opposite—

not blackness but “other whiteness” or impurity—in order to uphold theories of racial supremacy. Of course, the term also hints at a deep anxiety: that pureness cannot be known “visually”, that one marker (whiteness) contains within it, even conceals, its own inevitable taint and degeneracy.

Rendering groups of people as obsolescent—as trash or detritus—especially when they are “white” thereby functions rhetorically as a justification of modern systems of organization and community which aim to return to a historically “purer” moment (a moment before becoming tainted) in the future.

This presence of eugenics, unseen and unspoken about by historians, was revealed to me by a filmmaker Richard Robinson, who had set out to investigate a set of images created by Arthur Rothstein in 1935. On assignment for Roy Stryker, head of the “Historical Section”, a photographic unit that would produce over 80,000 photographs by 1942, Rothstein made a series of photographs in the Shenandoah mountain region in October 1935, just as residents within the park boundaries were being evicted to make way for the creation of the Shenandoah National Park, something I first wrote about in my book on leisure.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other National Parks that were to be preserved and protected from modernity as pristine wildernesses, Shenandoah, just a stone's throw from Washington DC, was occupied by “white trash” residents who stood in the way of progress (and thereby purity) by cluttering up the park with their detritus and evidence of habitation, and so needed to be cleared and cleaned. In effect the park had to be reconstructed as an unspoilt, pure, natural environment, returned to a pristine state by removing the human detritus whose casual labour and pre-capitalist systems of production and trade made them unsuitable candidates for both New Deal revived capitalism *and* for rural housing projects. These people were the very definition of misfit.

Studied by eugenicists over the 1920s, Rothstein (among others) took the well-worn path of earlier reformers and went to the mountains to photograph a way of life and a community that was understood to be vanishing under New Deal progress. A search of Library of Congress prints and photographs using the terms “Rothstein” and “Shenandoah” brings up most of the photographs from this shoot (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/>).

I come now to the problem of dirty history. How can we use or understand these photos as historical evidence, and in what way does this

dialectic indicate the impurity of all forms of evidence? Can we make a historical argument using these images that does not repeat the past?

In order to explain the invisible history of gene purity, eugenicists constructed a narrative of the unseen, the unportrayable (that is, the perception of purity or impurity beyond the eye). In other words, a narrative that had to be a plausible fiction of the real, one that became stored in the after-image of the photograph that could show no “positive” presence. Photographs alone, however, provide weak evidence. Social-documentary photographs accompanying eugenic texts often showed residences as isolated, dirty, or in a state of collapse, not to demonstrate that occupants needed help or housing but as a way of confirming the feeble-mindedness that justified eugenicists demand for segregation and sterilization. Taken out of context, however, it would be impossible to discern eugenic intent in these, even where we know it certainly exists. For example, there is little to distinguish between the photographs included in *Mongrel Virginians*, such as the interior and exterior shots of family homes (‘An Average Win Home’ and ‘Interior of a Better Grade Home’) and structurally similar images by Rothstein (‘Dicee Corbin's cabin, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia’ or ‘Fennel Corbin’s cabin, Blue Ridge Mountain, VA’). The same could be said for the many other images of rural poverty that were taken by Stryker’s “sociologists with cameras”.

Rereading images in the light of wider contextual evidence exposes the way in which the subjects were interpolated by the fictions eugenicists and reformers created about their lives. Such fictions justified the dominant modernizing ideology of the New Deal which aimed to integrate “areas occluded from modernity” into the modern nation. Rothstein’s photographs were constructed and construed within a framework of commonly held assumptions about the diagnosis and treatment of “feeble-mindedness”, alongside a discourse on the purity, health and progress of the nation, an elision that had become so embedded that it was not visible even to those, like Rothstein, staring at it.

At a time of threat to welfare programs in the US it would not be surprising if academics are unwilling to examine the legacy of New Deal welfare policies in relationship to a suggested taint of either positive or negative eugenics, yet an unwillingness to unpack the paradoxes or dialectics

further and expose welfare's dirty laundry means that the relationship between eugenics and nation-building has been whitewashed.

It also needs to be acknowledged that historical methodologies themselves can occlude, in that they often don't admit "impure" methods such as the interpretation of discourse. History, of course, is not "pure", but we need to face the inadequacy of the historical method that reconstructs the past using only fragments obtained from documents created by those whose voices are already privileged over their subjects (academics, politicians and artists for example). How do we refute those dominant narratives without privileging our own?

Similarly, attempting to research the history of eugenics in the US has highlighted to me the difficulty of providing untainted "evidence". Items that can be published or shown, such as medical records, legal reports, educational or social worker reports, might invade the privacy of the most powerless and re-inscribe that powerlessness, even while using such evidence to plead for their case. Not only that, but we are faced with the difficulty of drawing historical conclusions whilst tacitly accusing those in the past (social workers, public welfare workers, artists and educators) of what we only now define as human rights abuses in the present. How do we acknowledge and discuss the lack of testimony from the disenfranchised and disinherited, voices eliminated from the historical record, or ventriloquized and distorted by it, and find a way of talking about their experience that does not talk *for* them?

One way that we might proceed is to question and probe the gaps, to explore the binaries and unity of opposites such as "white" and "trash" to expose the imperfections and impurities of historical evidence. This will never lead us to a pure story of course. Like the invisible and problematic gene, we need to unpack and question both the presence and absence of *all* the evidence. Both eugenics and photography provide us with a paradigm for the unity of opposites fundamental to examining the dialectics of purity. The photo portrays an absence, makes present that which it tries to hide and hides what it is truly showing. Likewise, eugenics cannot be either positive or negative but is always both, like the photo, and like "white trash": a positive with a negative, a contradiction, paradox and symbol which makes visible what it tries to hide.



## Conclusion

Only by crossing disciplines and accepted intellectual borders (as this conference so clearly aims to do) and using literary deconstruction, archival historical research, social science analysis, geospatial mapping or visual theory—and by admitting to ourselves that this mongrelization is still inadequate, albeit necessary—will we even come close to unpacking the illusions, confusions and delusions of the discourses of purity.

## Afterword

The issue of coerced sterilization in Virginia is still active, with groups lobbying for justice and recognition. See: “Justice for Sterilization Victims” at <http://www.forcedsterilization.org/west-virginias-unconstitutional-law-sterilization-of-mental-defectives/>. Other projects are actively working to bring to light the history of eugenics, to make information available and to create dialogue between scholars, historians, eugenics survivors and people with disabilities. See: the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada Project, <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/>

For a collection of eugenic portraits see “The Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement” at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/graphics:1661>. Charts used at a Kansas Free Fair 1929 show types of marriage. The American Eugenics Society organized a series of "fitter families contests" in which participants (divided into small, medium and large family

classes) were ranked based on the mental, physical and moral health of family members. Image held in the American Philosophical Society, American Eugenics Society (AES) archive.

<sup>2</sup>See Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) pp.181-2.

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