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Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness

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White trash. The phrase conjures up images of dirty rural folk who are poor, ignorant, violent, and incestuous. But where did this stigmatizing phrase come from? And why do these stereotypes persist? Matt Wray answers these and other questions by delving into the long history behind this term of abuse and others like it. Ranging from the early 1700s to the early 1900s, *Not Quite White* documents the origins and transformations of the multiple meanings projected onto poor rural whites in the United States. Wray draws on a wide variety of primary sources—literary texts, folklore, diaries and journals, medical and scientific articles, social scientific analyses—to construct a dense archive of changing collective representations of poor whites. Of crucial importance are the ideas about poor whites that circulated through early-twentieth-century public health campaigns, such as hookworm eradication and eugenic reforms. In these crusades, impoverished whites, particularly but not exclusively in the American South, were targeted for interventions by sanitarians who viewed them as “filthy, lazy crackers” in need of racial uplift and by eugenicists who viewed them as a “feebleminded menace” to the white race, threats that needed to be confined and involuntarily sterilized.

Part historical inquiry and part sociological investigation, *Not Quite White* demonstrates the power of social categories and boundaries to shape social relationships and institutions, to invent groups where none exist, and to influence policies and legislation that end up harming the very people they aim to help. It illuminates not only the cultural significance and consequences of poor white stereotypes but also how dominant whites exploited and expanded these stereotypes to bolster and defend their own fragile claims to whiteness.

Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness Details

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From Reader Review Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness for online ebook

Jonny Gerig Meyer says

An impressive multidisciplinary look at the history of the term "white trash" and other boundary terms. A must-read for those interested in Boundary Theory, or Critical Whiteness Studies.

Melanie says

Eugenics vs. the hookworm in the context of white supremacy within and outside the American South. Important in lots of ways, not excluding the fact that the pathologized poor white is, quite literally, family. (Having just finished *Pinay Power,* clearly I felt like I needed to keep poking this beast from a different angle.)

Harvey Smith says

Very interesting scholarly research about the meaning of "poor white trash". Once you get beyond the "thesis" writing style of the author, it's a fascinating read. By "thesis" writing style, it's written in a style known to academia thesis writing.

There are reasons for the term "poor white trash", and the book spells it out. It's not about laziness, or slovenliness. It's about being in a situation where you have very limited opportunity for upward change, if any opportunity. Poor holds you down. Not being well parented holds you down. Surprisingly, disease, in the form of a hookworm epidemic in the south holds you down.

This book is well worth a read.

Marlin says

super quick read, very well organized, and fascinating subject. The study separates the history of the term white trash into four chapters starting in the late 17th century and ending in the 1930's. I would've liked to have seen Wray's input on what is considered "white trash" today (really a whole chapter on honey boo boo alone would've been phenomenal) but his research leading up to the present is top notch.

Elizabeth Bradley says

Finding this diappointing so far. Lots and lots of inter-disciplinary lingo, methinks the author doth protest too much...

Dr. Robin Markowitz says

It's a very necessary book, especially now. I encourage everyone who cares a about the future direction in the States to dig deeply into the past and discover how groups become both racialized and thus marginalized.

I am currently reading it again.

David Ward says

Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness by Matt Wray (Duke University Press 2006)(305.5) is a treatise about the societal place of landless white peasants in the South before and after the Civil War. Most of the behaviors attributed to "poor white trash" were, according to the author, attributable to hookworm, which is associated with eating dirt and spending much time close to the soil. Who knew? My rating: 7/10, finished 9/9/11.

Lisa says

I read Annalee Newitz and Wray's book "White Trash: Race and Class in America" as part of an independent study on representations of working-class whites and their experiences in higher education during the Winter Term of my junior year of college, and I used this book in a class I taught on John Waters, during which I also discussed the roles of shock value and the cult film - but which could also be seen as a class on representations of the grotesque and the body as they relate to gender, sexuality, gender identity, and class. Wray doesn't speak much of sexuality vis-a-vis LGBTQ issues in this book, but he does discuss the ways in which the idea of 'white trash' is morally and sexually specific, and the role of eugenics studies in defining white trash. What was most interesting in this book was the 'racial uplift' schema applied by Northern capitalists to the poor Southern White - and the campaign to eradicate hookworm - a disease supposedly contracted via contact with the soil through bare feet or the practice of dirt-eating, and of course, the hookworm itself supposedly was transported via the slave trade, suggesting the 'contamination' of the poor white with an African disease, but that if this disease could be eradicated, the poor white could be 'restored' to whiteness, and thus, an acceptable American white working-class identity. It is important to note that this 'whitening' did not provide entree into the privileged classes, but merely qualified the poor white to be 'productive' at manual labor, as the hookworm supposedly produced the disease of laziness, though it did not reduce his proximity to dirt, which, as Wray astutely points out, was an obsession of the middle-class, as was the idea of moral purity, which was intimately tied to a distance from dirt. I found this book fascinating because it offers no simple answers and reveals the complexity of 'boundary work' done on the level of academia to define and redefine social difference and status on a variety of levels.

Precious McKenzie says

Scholarly analysis of whiteness and the poor and working classes. Interesting and unusual approach to race studies.

Ronna says

More abandoned than finished... was too much like a detailed sociology/anthropology text, so it was a pretty dry read. Very informative, very well-researched, but dry.

Cheryl Klein says

As anyone who's guiltily (or shamelessly) watched Honey Boo Boo knows, our nation's obsession with "white trash" culture is in full swing--"they" are people to be entertained by and feel better than, and for some reason it's accepted in a way a minstrel show would not be. Matt Wray's well written blend of history, sociology and cultural criticism takes us back to colonial times and up through the early twentieth century to show us how we got there.

Anyone who doubts the worthiness of "white studies" should consider this: In the antebellum south, seventy-five percent of white people owned no slaves. Their stories are absent from Django Unchained and its pop culture predecessors, but, as Wray points out, were crucial in shaping the race and class dynamics of the South and beyond. I was particularly intrigued by the chapters on the eugenics movement--which was more about stigmatizing and sterilizing poor U.S. whites than about Nazis killing Jews--and felt thoroughly disturbed by the intrusion of prejudice on people's actual bodies. Maybe because, as a cancer patient, I feel very fucked-with by outside forces lately, even if I've signed consent forms.

The book, which is slim and one of the quickest academic reads you'll find, does an excellent job of showing how the white trash "stigmatype" came to be made and remade. But I frequently found myself thinking, "Okay, now we know how the negative story got perpetuated--but what was the real story? If poor whites weren't lazy, shiftless sluts, what were their actual lives like?" Stuff for another book, I suppose. But this one does what it does in a highly compelling manner.

Blackbook says

Took me forever to finish.
