



Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness

Matt Wray

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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.

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