

Creoles of the mountains

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“Creoles of the Mountains: Race, Regionalism, and Modernity in Progressive Era Appalachia”

On April 22, 1921, Mrs. William A. Servin and her daughter-in-law, both members of the Nyack Women’s Club went for a hike in Pearl River, New York; a hamlet located roughly twenty miles from Manhattan and just north of the New Jersey border. After traveling along a grown-over path the two women happened upon four children they later described as, “so wretchedly clad and so encrusted with dirt as to seem scarcely human.”¹ Disturbed by the children’s unkempt appearance and fearful for their overall well-being, Mrs. Servin summoned the county truant officer and local law enforcement to investigate.

Investigators returning to the scene discovered an entire family—father, mother, and four children—occupying an abandoned shack that might have housed “primitive people.”² Attempts to determine the origins of this “wild family,” as the press dubbed them, were hampered by the family’s inability to speak Standard English. Instead, according to multiple reports, the family communicated in “wild grunting noises.”³ The father, the only one capable of effectively communicating with authorities, revealed that the family’s surname was “Thompson,” although he was unable to provide a first name for himself, his wife, or any one of his children.⁴

The Thompsons were believed to have traveled inland from the Ramapo Mountains—part of the northern region of the Appalachian Mountain Range—and home to a multiracial group known as the “Jackson Whites.”⁵ Believed to be a distinct race, the Jackson Whites were

¹ Hill Dwellers Live Like Nomads,” *Duluth News Tribune*, May 29, 1921, 4

² Ibid.

³ “Town Puzzled by Wild Family,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1921, 16; William James Dobbin, “Wild Men Within Commuting Distance,” *New York Tribune*, June 12, 1921, D1; “Village Shrinks From Contact with ‘Poor, Unwashed Whites,’” *New York Tribune*, May 1, 1921 p. 2

⁴ “Family Living Like Barbarians,” *Tulsa World*, May, 22, 1921, 4.

⁵ “Finds Wild Family From the Ramapos,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1921, 7. It should be noted that the term “Jackson White” is now held in disrepute by a majority of this community as the term is seen as pejorative in nature and a denial of their longstanding claim to Indian identity. Known today as the Ramapough Mountain Indians, the shift in nomenclature is evidence of a decades long battle to determine the boundaries of black and Native identity.

“not black, nor white, nor yet red, but an admixture of all three.”⁶ Besides their tripartite racial heritage, the other most remarked upon feature of the group was their close proximity to one of the largest urban metropolises. For white elites residing near the Ramapo Mountains, the Jackson Whites exemplified the consequences of insufficient civilizing forces. Although there were the occasional reports of moonshining or a drunken feud “their most serious offenses [were] against the laws of hygiene.”⁷

Despite the Thompson’s way of life closely resembling that of the Jackson Whites, Pearl River authorities “claimed for the Thompsons the identity of a “pure-white people, in this respect different from the clan inhabiting the Ramapos.”⁸ By claiming whiteness for the Thompsons Pearl River authorities also claimed access to the rehabilitative services unavailable to their mixed-race neighbors. Yet despite efforts to rhetorically distance the “pure white” Thompsons from the racially mixed Jackson Whites, news outlets would continue to make the connection by labeling them the “Ramapo family,” thus cementing in the minds of the reading public the connection between the atavistic Thompsons and their racially mixed and equally backward neighbors.

In the years following their “discovery,” The Thompsons received the “civilizing efforts” of local institutions—both private and public—including the Nyack Women’s Club, the Red Cross, and New Jersey’s Vineland Training School for Feeble-minded Boys and Girls. As the tale of the Thompson family suggests, Progressive Era reform was a profoundly racial endeavor. At

For the purposes of this paper, the author will use the terms “Jackson White” as well as “Ramapo people” as the historical texts used them. However, this usage should not be read as a commentary on the racial identity of the group in question but merely in keeping with the usage of the time. For more on the nomenclature of identity struggles of the Ramapough Mountain Indians see, David Steven Cohen, *The Ramapo Mountain People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

⁶ “Hill Dwellers Live Like Nomads,” 4.

⁷ Elizabeth M. Heath, “Children Yet Adults,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1921, 93.

⁸ “Hill Dwellers Live Like Nomads,” 4.

first glance the mobilization of uplift efforts on behalf of the Thompsons affirms depictions of northern progressives as keenly invested in the protection of whiteness.⁹ However the Thompsons were not the only beneficiaries of reform-minded intervention. The family's discovery also helped to bring attention to the plight of their cultural doppelgängers, the Jackson Whites. As a result, the community was also singled out for rehabilitation through various public health initiatives. Though more than just middle class benevolence motivated these efforts. In both cases, race played an extremely important role in how the communities were framed as deserving beneficiaries of intervention. Specifically, anxieties over white racial degeneracy and racial mixing, though cast as separate concerns, became inextricably linked in minds of reformers working in both white and triracial mountain communities. Thus, it was each group's proximity to the other—the pure white Thompsons and the mixed-race Jackson Whites—that made these communities potential threats to both the maintenance of racial boundaries and the overall health of the nation thus necessitating intervention.

Between 1890 and 1930 reformers from both north and south worried about the consequences of racial mixture for both the public and national health. It is against this backdrop that communities like the Jackson Whites, and the scores of other “in-between peoples” came to the attention of reformers and warranted scrutiny. The Jackson Whites are one of approximately 300 communities of white, Indian, and black ancestry residing predominantly in the Appalachian region eastern United States. Social scientists in the 1960s coined the term “triracial isolate” to signify the perceived geographic and genetic isolation of these communities. However, during

⁹ For examples of scholarship illuminating this thread of progressive reform see: Jeanne D Petit, *The Men and Women We Want: Gender and Race and the Progressive Era Literary Test Debate* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2010); David W. Southern, *The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900-1917* (2005); and Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2009).

the early 20th century these groups were variously described as “creoles,” “mestizos,” “in-between people” and “racial outliers.”¹⁰ As these names suggest, one of the central characteristics of these tripartite communities is that they existed outside of the racial parameters of American society.¹¹ A fear of racial degeneracy on the part of white elites brought attention to mixed-race communities like the Jackson Whites. Not only were these communities seen as racially degraded due to their “mixedness,” their racial mixture was seen as precipitating a whole host of other ills, including poor health, licentiousness, and sexual promiscuity.

Yet mixing and racial degeneracy was only part of the concern. Triracial communities also stood out because their way of life and appearance seemed to harken back to a pre-civilized society. The numerous descriptions of the Jackson Whites as “barbarians,” as “uncivilized” and as “primitive” points to the ways in which race, region, and modernity linked in framing triracial communities as social problems. Yet it is important to note that primitiveness was not only a feature of triracial communities. As the Thompson case makes clear, the atavism of white mountaineers also set them apart as peculiar. Since the late 19th century, reformers justified intervention in the Appalachian Mountain region as an attempt to save the nation's “contemporary ancestors.”¹²

¹⁰ Calvin Beale coined the term “tri-racial isolates” although these communities are known by a number of derisive names like “racial dropouts,” “racial miscreants,” and sometimes “racial islands.” Calvin Beale, “American Triracial Isolates: Their Status and Pertinence to Genetic Research,” *Eugenics Quarterly* 4 (1957): 187.

¹¹ The racial ambiguity of communities like the Jackson Whites is also borne out in their name, which carried as much lore as the population itself. While there are two origin narratives for the Jackson Whites, the one most commonly reported upon is that the group received the name from a ... Today the term Jackson White is held in disrepute and regarded as a name bestowed upon the community by outsiders. Instead the community is known as the Ramapough Mountain Indians, a name which is seen to reflect their accurate background and ethnic heritage as Native peoples. A Visit to the Jackson Whites of the Ramapo,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 1909, p.SM6. See also David S. Cohen, “The Original of the ‘Jackson Whites’: History and Legend among the Ramapo Mountain People,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 85 (1972): 260-266.

¹² William Goddell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” (Atlantic Monthly Company, 1899).

Though fashioned similarly, the histories of triracial and white mountaineers have never been considered together. Thus, this article breaks new ground by exploring how racial degeneration, whether through white cultural backwardness or race mixing, helped to construct triracial and white mountaineers as well as the Appalachian region as culturally distinct from the rest of America. Although regionally distinct, Appalachia and its degenerative inhabitants, both white and triracial were also imminently threatening due to their close proximity to urban industrializing America. In a period that brought vast modernization efforts and industrial innovation the ability of Appalachian mountaineers to hold seemingly outmoded ways of life, served as a constant reminder of American's potential for social degeneration.

This article contributes to three disparate but intersecting historiographies. In the broadest sense, this essay places the question posed by racial mixing at the forefront of Progressive Era discourse. Through benchmark works from the likes of Jonathan Spiro, Thomas Leonard, and Paul Lawrie, we know that progressives both north and south concerned themselves with the race question, especially as it pertained to black Americans and European immigrants.¹³ Yet these works have focused on the efforts of progressive reforms to maintain racial boundaries in strictly black and white terms. Lawrie for instance, argues that the absence of "mulatto" as a racial category in the 1920 census signaled the success of Progressive Era attempts to enforce strict racial boundaries and marked the rise of a biracialism in American society.¹⁴ As a result, mixed-race persons became impossibilities in a legal and social sense.¹⁵ However, I contend that

¹³ Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2009); Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and Economics in Progressive Era America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Paul Lawrie, *The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Lawrie, *Forging A Laboring Race*, 157.

¹⁵ This characterization is not to suggest that racial boundaries became somehow impermeable but only that a majority of scholarship has treated it as such. For examples of this work see: Alex Lubin, *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1989); Natalie Molina, *Fit to be*

attempts to diagnose the social, biological, and psychological problems of triracial populations like the Jackson Whites provided an intellectual space in which they were recognized and contended with even after being dismissed as legal impossibilities. In fact, those studies helped to constitute the category of "triracial," as well as the systems of meaning that informed how outsiders viewed these populations.

Because the racial mixture of the Jackson Whites helped to construct Appalachia as a region that was unique and separate from the rest of the nation, this article also builds upon the work of scholars such as Susan-Mary Grant, Natalie Ring, and Daniel Bender who have pushed for a rethinking of the relationship between North and South through a focus on regionalism and its link to anxieties about modernity. These scholars have pushed back against the notion of a solid American national identity by focusing on the ways in which southern distinctiveness in particular, helped to frame the South as a cultural outlier vis-à-vis the rest of the United States. Just as reformers used the racial distinctiveness of the South to set it off as a region apart, so too did the peculiar conditions of white and triracial mountaineers serve to set Appalachia as a region distinct from the rest of America. Furthermore, they argue that discussions of atavism and degeneracy, which were often framed as unique to the South, allowed Northern Americans to feel better about their progress of modernity while also serving as a reminder of the potential for social degeneration.

Through focusing on northern Appalachia and the plight of white and triracial mountaineers residing in the region, this essay troubles the seemingly neat distinction between North and South that these works propagate. In focusing on racial mixing, the article makes clear

Citizens: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); J. Douglass Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Orlan Svingen, "Jim Crow, Indian Style," *American Indian Quarterly* 11 (1987): 275-286.

that this racial distinctiveness not only unified Northern and Southern Appalachia, regions that have generally not been discussed together, but helped to set the whole of the Appalachia region off from the rest of the United States. Secondly, this essay joins a score of more recent scholarship that has challenged the framing of Appalachia as an exclusively Anglo-Saxon region.¹⁶ By placing triracial mountaineers alongside white mountaineers this article illustrates that commentators used the presumed “mixedness,” backwardness, and degeneration of both populations to frame them as regionally distinct phenomena that threatened urban industrializing America. Racial mixing in particular is an aspect of the atavistic discourse that does not get much attention. Because atavism functioned as a way to exteriorize those characteristics that might otherwise conceal themselves in the undetectable realms of the body's interior spaces, the fear that racial mixing might lead to a future generation displaying the characteristics of their pure-blood progenitor was an ever present fear underpinning the discourse on racial mixing. The discussion on racial mixing covered in this article reveal that racial mixing was not only potentially dangerous for its immediate consequences, this threat was also ongoing because at any time the proof of an interracial liaison could show itself through reversion to an older racial type.

And finally, this article contributes to discussions on the eugenics movement and its role in constructing the meaning of whiteness in America. There have been numerous works on the eugenics movement and its attention to immigrant issues and the race question. In recent years scholars have also taken up the question of what the eugenics movement meant for racial

¹⁶ For two notable examples see John Inscoc, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2008); and Karida Brown, *Gone Home: Race and Roots Through Appalachia* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

minorities.¹⁷ Despite this attention there has not been a widespread attention given to the question of white racial purity from a standpoint that centers mixed-race populations. By focusing on one of just two eugenics studies to explicitly investigate the question of racial mixing, this article does important revisionist work in uncovering a more marginalized aspect of eugenic discourse. While eugenicists were greatly concerned with the biological health of white native-born Americans, by the 1910s, this health was increasingly predicated on the need to keep the white population racially pure. Thus, my article makes clear that in addition to the so-called pure races, triracial populations like the Jackson Whites also powerfully shaped how eugenicists thought about and conceived of white racial degeneracy. The family studies discussed below rooted white racial degeneracy to a mixed-blood ancestor and in doing so exposed the conceptual blindspots in the eugenicists' understanding of whiteness and racial purity.

In what follows, I argue that local and national reformers came to Appalachia in an attempt to work through their concerns over the future of the nation. In a period that brought mass industrialization, urban migration, and immigration, the coming together of diverse people and the numerous potential crosses of racial and ethnic groups provided new ways of thinking about the nation and its citizens. As such, racial mixing emerged in the minds of progressive reformers as a cause for serious concern. Although there is an abundance of scholarship that deals with how this anxiety played out in the south, namely through anti-miscegenation laws, there has been less attention given to the efforts of northern reformers to engage this particular race question. Northern progressive reformers often framed racial mixing as a threat to public health and national hygiene. The degraded status of groups like the Jackson Whites served as evidence of

¹⁷ For examples see, Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

the deleterious effects of racial mixture. Only through programs aimed at improving sexual hygiene and overall health could these communities be improved. Though improvement was not the only aim. Much like their southern counterparts, many of these initiatives were designed to both surveil and police these "racial outliers" so as to neutralize the threat they posed to the wider society.

This article is divided into three sections, which together examine the role of region, race, and modernity in fashioning of Appalachia. The first section examines the early discourse on the Jackson Whites and other mixed-blood communities. This section argues that though a legal possibility, both popular writers and intellectuals concerned themselves with working through the meaning of racial mixture from a social and biological standpoint. The second section examines the discourses that fashioned the mountaineer as possessing a tainted whiteness through an exploration of the popular discourses surrounding the "hillbilly" and the "triracial". These discussions were rooted in early twentieth century concerns over national health, race purity, and the nature of social change and isolation, by illustrating how the discourses on white and tri-racially mixed Appalachians aligned between 1900 and 1920, I show how both helped to fashion the racial identity of the other. The final section examines the eugenic family studies taking place during this same period. In locating the roots of rural white degeneracy in mixed-blood ancestors, these eugenic studies illustrate the truly porous and often arbitrary nature of U.S. racial boundaries.

PROBLEM AND PROMISE: PROGRESSIVE ERA SCIENTISM AND THE CREATION OF THE MIXED-BLOOD

The major technological and demographic shifts of the Progressive Era witnessed an increased scientific interest in the effects of racial mixing.¹⁸ As the diversity of the American population increased so too did anxieties over the biological and social future of the nation. Many social commentators worried that the body politic had been polluted with inferior stock. Both the courts and state legislatures swiftly acted to protect white racial purity by passing anti-miscegenation statutes that prohibited sex and marriage across the color line while also helping to define racial identity through the language of blood quantum.¹⁹ As the century progressed, state legislatures increasingly expanded the definition of what it meant to be non-white. Between 1900 and 1935 at least a dozen states passed anti-miscegenation statutes that added new races to those already prohibited from intermarriage with whites.²⁰ Georgia's 1927 anti-miscegenation, one of the most expansive pieces of legislation passed, included Negroes, American Indians, West Indians, Asiatic Indians, Malays, Japanese, and Chinese as races prohibited from interracial marriage with whites.²¹

This sections places non-white groups at the center of my analysis of popular and scientific studies of race in this era and illustrates that biological and social scientific interest in race ensured that race mixture remained an animate discourse despite efforts to collapse racial meaning into monoracial terms. Biological and social scientific discourse on race mixture is one space in which to locate what historian Gary Nash has termed "the hidden history of mestizo

¹⁸ Lawrie, *Forging a Laboring Race*, 100

¹⁹ Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 65.

²⁰ Montana (1909), Nebraska (1913), Oklahoma (1917), Arkansas (1911), Tennessee (1917), Virginia (1924), Alabama (1927) See Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 118.

²¹ "An Act to Define Who Are Persons of Color and Who Are White Persons, to Prohibit and Prevent Intermarriage of Such Persons, and to Provide a System of Registration and Marriage Licensing as a Means for Accomplishing the Principal Purpose," no. 317 sec. 14, 1927 Ga. Laws 272.

America.” While anti-miscegenation laws and rules of hypo-descent were believed to make multiracial identity a legal and social impossibility, the scientific arguments and studies explored in this section highlight the reality of multiracial subjects despite these obstacles.²² Finally, this section seeks to explain how separate enclaves of triracial persons came to represent by the end of the 1920s, a distinct racial phenomenon of the Appalachian region. It is my contention that scholars working to understand the lived experiences and biological conditions of the Jackson Whites helped to inform what it meant to be mixed race in twentieth century America.²³ Lastly, I argue that investigators’ willingness to focus on individuals and communities that defied easy classification preserved a space where multiracial identity remained a possibility despite legal and social proscriptions saying otherwise.

Scientific concern with the consequences of race mixing originated in nineteenth century debates over the origin of the separate races. Monogenicists claimed human origin derived from a single source with racial groups undergoing differential development that lead to some races being more advanced than others. Polygenecists on the other hand argued that human races were as separate as biological species each with its own developmental capacities. Many notable American anthropologists subscribed to the theory of polygeny and their work represents the beginning of an American intellectual tradition independent of European influence. In fact, polygeny was so associated with American anthropology that it was often called the “American school.” Although it proved difficult for scientists to agree on the origin of the races they did agree that the offspring of interracial unions held the key.²⁴

²² Gary Nash, “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” *The Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 941 and 947.

²³ In this chapter I rely on Jill Olumide’s definition of “mixed-race” which she defines as the patterns and commonality of experience among those who obstruct whatever purpose race is being put to at a particular time.” Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Race* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). For a discussion of the mulatto in terms of white/black ancestry see Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), xii.

²⁴ George Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 231.

Early interest in race mixing then was an opportunity to understand the qualities of the single races—red, black, and white—as well as their relations to one another. Commentary on race mixture generally addressed three types of mixture—between individuals of the same race, between different but nearly related races, (i.e. Nordic and Mediterranean races), or between distantly related races (i.e. Negro and white).²⁵ For most race purists it was the last type of mixture that drew the most criticism. Regarding the biological consequences of black-white mixture, many scientists saw the “mulatto” as the human equivalent of crossing a donkey and horse.²⁶ Nevertheless, “mulattoes” were considered biologically and intellectually superior to the “pure-blood Negro,” but less so than the “pure-blood Caucasian.”²⁷ Additionally, “mulattoes” were not only infertile but physically weaker in terms of both stature and disease resistance.²⁸

Individuals with mixed ancestry presented a host of problems for twentieth century scientists and social reformers. From the biological standpoint, the failure of mixed-race unions to produce an easy classifiable type worried those who relied on physical characteristics to make group distinctions. The assumption that mixed-race people could and did slip out of racial categories at will antagonized those committed to the maintenance of strict racial separation. And finally, mixed-race people were believed to be mentally unstable. Sociologist Edward Byron Reuter's theory regarding the “psychic condition of the mulatto” is an illustrative example of how multi-racial individuals were imagined. According to Reuter, the “mulattoes” who failed to fulfill their “personal wish complex,” that is to become white, were doomed to become

²⁵ R. Ruggles Gates, *Heredity in Man* (New York: Constable & Co., 1929), 329.

²⁶ John G. Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918*, 9

²⁷ Wilson D. Wallis, “Variability in Race Hybrids,” *American Anthropologist* 40 (Oct-Dec. 1938): 682.

²⁸ Aikman believed that the process of racial mixing produced biologically inferior stock but he was also convinced that those participating in interracial unions were generally unhealthy.

“discontented, unhappy, unadjusted persons... mulattoes in the psychological and sociological senses.”²⁹

In the early studies of the Jackson Whites one of the most remarked aspects of the group was their physical variability. In 1913 investigation into the group's living conditions the writer documented a, ‘black skinned, full-bodied negress with her small white baby,’ and in another instance within the same family a “little young Indian plays with his clumsy wooly-headed brother...”³⁰ Despite a preoccupation with Jackson Whites' physical variance, writers arrived at an array of conclusions in regards to what this racial variation might mean for their ultimate racial classification. In some instances the Jackson Whites were classed as “white,” in others as “negro-Indians.”³¹ Yet, these descriptions had to contend with the fact that, “There, in one face is to be found the impress of three continents, in one voice the intonation of three races, in one form a trinity of blights and blemishes.” Even in stances where the racial classification of the Jackson Whites seemed settled, writers found it difficult to ignore the fact their physical variation made classification difficult.

The physical variation that resulted from racial mixing greatly influenced the widely held belief that racial mixing was negative, especially when such mixing resulted in biological disharmonies. With scientists admitting they still knew little about the mechanisms of heredity, many studies published during the early twentieth century pointed to a number of physical disharmonies that resulted from interracial unions. Physician K.B Aikman argued that racial mixing was dangerous because inherited characteristics could become jumbled and contribute to

²⁹ Edward B. Reuter, “The American Mulatto,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (November, 1928): 42.

³⁰ “Strange Folk: Live Among Mountain Fastness of New York,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 13, 1913, p.4.

³¹ “The ‘Jackson Whites’: Curious Folk of the Ramapo Hills a Hybrid Race,” *New York Tribune*, Jan 5, 1896; Village Shrinks From Contact with ‘Poor, Unwashed Whites’” *New York Tribune*, May 1, 1921 p.2.

the "chaotic constitution" of the offspring. Aikman pointed to skeletal maladaptations such as skulls too large to permit birth, or teeth too large for their jaws in order to substantiate his claim that miscegenation was a biologically dangerous endeavor.³² The allure of the Jackson Whites resulted from the notion that so called "racial" characteristics—skin color, hair texture, nose width, lip size, and speech—recombined within the population in unpredictable and potentially troubling ways.

Conversely, a small cohort of investigators subscribed to the theory of "hybrid vigor" and opined that racial hybrids were biologically stronger because they were the combination of the best of both parent stocks.³³ For instance, biologist Edwin Conklin, writing in 1915 argued that while some hybrids were inferior others could be vastly superior to both parent stocks.³⁴ The perceived moral character of a racial group also impacted whether commentators advised intermarriage. In her 1927 article on race mixing, Marjorie MacDill, a journalist who typically wrote on issues related to zoology and ecology, posited that the "thrift" and "mental superiority" typical of the Chinese-Hawaiian qualified this group as a successful hybrid. In contrast, the Filipino-Hawaiian, a mixture of "Japanese, Chinese, Caucasian, and Negro blood" was "overly emotional and weakly inhibited," most likely due to the conflict of the various racial strains present.³⁵ The bulk of scientific opinion however stressed the biological dangers of race mixing over biological advantages.³⁶

³² K.B. Aikman, "Race Mixture," *The Eugenics Review* 25 (1933): 163.

³³ For an explanation of hybrid vigor and its consequences see, H. J. Mueller, "On the Variability of Mixed Races," *The American Naturalist* 70 (Sept.-Oct., 1936): 409-442.

³⁴ Edwin Conklin, *Heredity and Environment in the Development of Men* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1915), 15.

³⁵ Marjorie MacDill, "Will the Blending of Races Produce Super-Men?" *Science News-Letter* 12 (Nov. 1927): 338.

³⁶ For examples of scholarship stressing the physical and psychological disadvantages of race crossing see: L.C. Dunn, "Some Results of Race Mixture in Hawaii," *Eugenics in Race and State* 2 (1921): 109; A. Dickinson, "Race Mixture: A Social or Biological Problem," *The Eugenics Review* 41(1949): 81-85; and John Alfred Mjoen, "Biological Consequences of Race Crossing," *The Journal of Heredity* (1926): 175-182.

Aside from the biological concerns raised by racial mixture, it was socially harmful because it was believed to involve the lower portions of both groups. The Jackson Whites also bear out this assumption as they were described as “the descendants of Indians, escaped slaves of revolutionary days and bad whites” fleeing the law.³⁷ The low social standing of mixed-race persons was then seen as both a cause and manifestation of racial mixing. For the Jackson Whites, their degraded progenitors were the reason the group shunned marriage morals, the men were lazy and shunned work, and the reason religion didn’t appeal to them.³⁸ Numerous sociological investigations by African American scholars mirrored the conclusions of their white counterparts in attributing to “mulattoes” such moral transgressions as promiscuity, licentiousness, and vagrancy. In his Chicago-based family study sociologist E. Franklin Frazier reported that prostitution seemed to be concentrated in those neighborhoods with large concentrations of “mulattoes.”³⁹

While the weight of the scientific community advocated against racial mixture, very few of the studies actually involved human populations. Investigators typically bred separate plant or animal species and then extrapolated those conclusions onto human populations. The use of plant and animal analogies also lent to the popular appeal of these studies as it offered the public readily accessible proxies for understanding racial mixing. This practice explains why it was common in this period to read of racial mixing resulting in biological disharmonies like sterility,

³⁷ “Strung Up A Negro: Lynch Law in the Mountains of New York State Effect,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 21, 1899, p.5; William James Dobbin, “Wild Men Within Commuting Distance,” *New York Tribune*, June 12, 1921 p. D1.

³⁸ Jersey’s Poor Whites: Inhabitants of the Ramapos,” *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 18, 1884, p.11; William James Dobbin, “Wild Men Within Commuting Distance” *New York Tribune*, June 12, 1921 p.D1; “A Visit to the Jackson Whites of in the Ramapo,” *The Washington Post*, Feb 28, 1909, pg.SM6.

³⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 103. Other sociological studies include: Carter G. Woodson “The Beginnings of Miscegenation between Whites and Blacks,” *Journal of Negro History* 3 (Oct. 1918): 339 and Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1941), 262.

blindness, and skeleto-muscular maladaptations as these were commonly the issues derived through interspecies crossings.

Between 1910 and 1930, investigators increasingly turned their gaze to human populations in order to gather more accurate data regarding race mixture. Although social scientists performed much of the previous research on human populations, biological research proliferated during the twentieth century. Researchers went to such distant locales as the Yucatan, South Africa, India, and Hawaii to conduct their fieldwork. Not only did these locales have racially diverse populations but they also afforded researchers examples of other models of race relations that could illuminate the racial patterns they observed in the U.S. But not every researcher was able or felt the need to go abroad to study racial mixture. Not when there were home-grown populations of racially mixed persons ripe for study. Thus, the Jackson Whites represented a major scientific breakthrough as they were a local and relatively accessible community through which scientists could study racial mixing. Scientists generally believed that new races of people only developed across several centuries. And even then, because of legal restrictions and the stigma placed around interracial unions and their products, it was difficult to find willing subjects. Yet, the Jackson Whites were “a new race of men in the making” that had developed in several decades as opposed to several centuries. As a tripartite community present since at least the Revolutionary period, the Jackson Whites were “patiently working out the experiments scientists did not dare make.”⁴⁰ Thus for all the problems that mixed-race persons represented they were scientifically valuable as a testing ground through which to work out important questions of heredity, natural selection, and social development of the races.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Taken together, popular writing as well as social and biological studies helped to transform the triracial from a physical type into an idea. Physically variable, social degenerate, yet scientifically important, these are the conclusions that early researchers developed about triracial Americans like the Jackson Whites. These studies not only helped to draw attention to disparate populations but they helped to provide the conceptual framework that would link other disparate groups so that by the 1940s when the first ethnographic study of Appalachia's triracial communities were performed, they did not break new ground so much as reinforce what these early works had laid out in terms of triracial identity.

REGION AND RACE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF APPALACHIAN OTHERNESS

At the same time that popular writers and researchers were becoming interested in triracial groups like the Jackson Whites, writers wishing to emphasize the distinctiveness of mountain life began to focus on white mountaineers, particularly the more nefarious aspects of mountaineer culture like moonshining, cousin-marriages, and their pervasive poverty. These pejorative stereotypes of white mountaineers find their clearest expression in the image of the "hillbilly," perhaps one of the most enduring icons of mountaineer life to emerge from the local color writing of the 19th century.⁴¹ Local color writing also served to transform Appalachia's residents into "the purest Anglo-Saxon stock in all the United States."⁴² As the previous section makes clear, triracial groups were also saddled with damaging stereotypes. Both popular and scholarly investigations emphasized the racial "inbetweenness" of the triracial isolates as well as their anti-social behaviors, including pauperism, inbreeding, and licentiousness. Not only did

⁴¹ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴² Semple, "The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains," 592.

white and triracial mountaineers share similar social traits, these conditions were attributed to the social and geographic isolation endemic to both populations.

Derogatory in nature, the terms “hillbilly” and “Jackson Whites,” represent dual stereotypes of inhabitants of Appalachia that are rarely, if ever, discussed together.

Appalachians, be they white, black, or other, have shared the same backgrounds, patterns of speech, cultural practices, and yet are often culturally categorized as different.⁴³ This section examines early 20th century writings on white and triracial mountaineers and argues that social scientific discourse especially, but also popular writing, helped to underscore the regional distinctiveness of Appalachia. In including Appalachians of color, particularly those triracial communities of white, Indian, and black extraction, alongside discussion of white mountaineer otherness, this section makes clear that the racial boundaries of early twentieth century America were more porous than scholars have previously appreciated. Furthermore, the discourse on white and triracial mountaineers illustrate how race, biology and geography served to define a region and its inhabitants.

Historian Henry Shapiro has argued that depictions of Appalachian mountaineers reveal more about those participating in the creation of those depictions than it does about those being characterized.⁴⁴ In no way is this truer than in discussions of Appalachian whiteness. The characterization of Appalachia as an Anglo-Saxon stronghold did more than just garner support to combat the region’s socio-economic issues; it helped to reconcile Appalachia to the rest of America. At the same time that industrialization and modernization taking place in America’s

⁴³In “Name Calling,” John Hartigan observed that southern migrants from Appalachia—both black and whites—shared commonalities of speech and lifestyles, but nevertheless he designated them into two groups—blacks and hillbillies. John Hartigan, “Name Calling: Objectifying ‘Poor Whites’ and ‘White Trash’ in Detroit,” in Matt Wray ed. *White Trash*

⁴⁴ Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia On Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 30.

urban centers made mountain life conspicuous and backward, the whiteness of inhabitants guaranteed that this disconnect was reconcilable. In much the same way that the Nyack residents used whiteness to justify aid on behalf of the Thompson, social reformers used the whiteness of the mountaineer to justify a broad range of social and political agendas.

The purported racial purity of the mountaineer not only helped to endear his unusual folkways to northern whites; it served in the re-writing of the region's racial history. While the rest of America appeared to be under siege by unchecked immigration and black urban migration Appalachia, it seemed, had effectively kept these elements at bay. For example, Charles Dudley Warner argued that the absence of foreign and Negro elements made the mountaineer "more distinctly American in his characteristics."⁴⁵ Despite Appalachia being cast as an exclusively Anglo-Saxon stronghold, the region was actually home to a small yet visible population of non-white mountaineers. In addition to a sizable black population, Appalachia is home to several major Native American tribes including the Cherokee and Creek Indians, as well as members of the Powhatan Confederacy.⁴⁶ Thus, even as Appalachia was being fashioned as a predominantly white region, Native Americans, African Americans, and eastern Europeans constituted at least 30 percent of the regions' population.⁴⁷

Edward Cabbell has argued that the erasure of mountaineers of color was a deliberate attempt to mythologize Appalachia as a land of poor whites beset with "white problems" and not the racial problems that plagued the rest of America. Yet, for a certain set of reformers, particularly those coming out of social purity and eugenic campaigns, not only were

⁴⁵ Charles Dudley Warner, *Studies in the South and West with Comments on Canada* (New York: Harper, 1889), 20.

⁴⁶ Other notable tribes in the eastern U.S. include the Tuscarora, Shawnee, Catawba, Narragansett, Choctaw, and Seminole.

⁴⁷ "Race, Ethnicity, and Identity," in *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell ed. (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 981.

mountaineers facing the same racial problems as the rest of the nation, they were succumbing to them. Darlene Wilson and Patricia Beaver have attributed loser social mores of mountain whites to their social and geographic isolation, which shielded residents from the same legal and social regulations against interracial coupling operating in other areas of the country. Even for those more weeded to the notion of Appalachia as exclusively white, there is much to suggest that their depictions of the region's problems were racial in nature. The focus on the physical characteristics of white mountaineers—their physical deformities and illness, which were also laden with connotations of backwardness and atavism reflected anxieties about white racial degeneration. These tropes mirrored the racializing discourse targeted at communities like the Jackson Whites who were singled out for their racial mixture, as well as their poor biology, geographic isolation, and general backwardness. Thus central to the construction of both communities during this period was their spatial, psychological, and “biological” proximity to one another.

Investigations of Appalachia commonly remarked upon the impoverished living conditions of both its white and non-white residents. Sketches of the region often focused on dilapidated “huts” or log cabins where one to three windowless rooms were the norm.⁴⁸ One writer of Appalachia life commented that he had “never before seen so dismal and desolate a haunt of human life.”⁴⁹ The living conditions of mixed-blood mountaineers evoked parallel descriptions with one writer opining that their “surroundings of dirt amidst their huts built of logs are of the rudest possible sort”⁵⁰ The poverty of the mountaineers took on added significance in

⁴⁸ George E. Vincent, “A Retarded Frontier” *American Journal of Sociology* 4(1898): 4; John C. Campbell, *The Southern Mountaineer and his Homeland*, 120.

⁴⁹ William Aspenwall Bradley, “Hobnobbing with Hillbillies,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* (May, 1915): 132.

⁵⁰ Ada Carver, “Redbones” *Harper’s Magazine* (Feb. 1925), 257; “The Jackson Whites: Strange People Living Between New York and New Jersey” *The Sunday Herald* (Jan. 26, 1896), p.21

the twentieth century as the eugenical philosophy of “fitness” gave members of the white elite the conceptual framework through which to link class position with genetic worth. Surveys of the living conditions found amongst both populations attributed their social problems to their degraded mental condition.⁵¹

Researchers also cited the practice of consanguineous parings, particularly those involving cousins, as a defining feature of both societies. Arthur Estabrook documented first cousin marriages among the mountaineers of Kentucky although it was “not as common as second or third cousin marriage.”⁵² Sociologist George Vincent noted the incidence of “intermarriage of three or four generations.”⁵³ In a sketch of the living conditions of the Jackson Whites, one writer suggested that the feelings of racial superiority had prevented the Ramapo people from marrying anyone besides their own kind.⁵⁴ It was not just racial pride that facilitated intermarriage amongst triracial isolates, biologist Arthur Estabrook pointed to prolonged social isolation as the major cause of intermarriage amongst a triracially mixed community in Virginia.⁵⁵ The passage of time did little to alter this image. So that by 1957 demographer Calvin Beale found that the practice of intermarriage during centuries of geographic isolation helped to produce “a distinctly new racial element in society.”⁵⁶

Discussions of mountaineer morality naturally extended to questions of their sexual morals. Not only did mountaineers exhibit a “low standard of morality in their domestic

⁵¹ Arthur Estabrook, “Blood Seeking Environment,” *Eugenical News* (1926): 106-114; Roland Harper, “The Most Prolific People,” *Eugenical News* (1938): 29-31

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ “The Jackson Whites: Strange People Living Between New York and New Jersey,” *The Sunday Herald* (Jan. 26, 1896), 21.

⁵⁵ Arthur Estabrook “Triple Crosses in the South: Indian, White, Negro,” *Eugenical News* 9(1924): 58-59

⁵⁶ Beale, “American Triracial Isolates: Their Status and Pertinence to Genetic Research,” *Eugenics Quarterly* 4 (December 1957): 187.

relations,” they were in the words of one author, “a most fecund race.”⁵⁷ It was not uncommon for researchers to find families with an average of seven to ten children. Similarly, large families were considered the rule among triracial isolates.⁵⁸ In addition, to large families, writers found that both communities were surprisingly tolerant of illegitimacy. According to John C. Campbell, children born out of wedlock to white mountaineers were not at all ostracized.⁵⁹ Similar conditions were found among the Jackson Whites. Their illegitimacy was in large part due to “the licentious conduct [and] concubinage with both black and white men.”⁶⁰ These depictions contributed to the social construction of white and triracial mountaineers as persons possessing the worst moral qualities in the nation. As eugenics gained inroads in the 1910s and 1920s as a palatable social movement aimed at biological improvement, the loose sexual morals of both societies made them the chief targets of compulsory sterilization programs and institutionalization.

In addition to similar depictions of their pathologies, both communities garnered the interest of researchers wishing to understand the consequences of social isolation. George Vincent was among the first to implore, “students of sociology [to] leave their books and at first hand in the Cumberland deal with the phenomena of a social order arrested at a relatively early state of evolution.”⁶¹ William Frost reached similar conclusions about the mountaineer, opining that the “Appalachia American may be useful as furnishing a fixed point which enables us to measure the progress of the moving world”⁶² Both E. Franklin Frazier and Horace Mann Bond

⁵⁷ Through Cumberland on Horseback, 69.

⁵⁸ Horace Mann Bond, “Two Racial Islands in Alabama” *American Journal of Sociology* 36(1931): 552-567; “The Jackson Whites: Strange People Living Between New York and New Jersey” *The Sunday Herald* (Jan. 26, 1896), p.21

⁵⁹ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (Lexington, KY, 1921), 132.

⁶⁰ The Jackson Whites: Strange People Living Between New York and New Jersey”21.

⁶¹ George E. Vincent, “A Retarded Frontier,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 4(July 1898), 20.

⁶² Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors,” 31.

reached similar conclusions on triracial communities and encouraged social scientific investigation before modernization had destroyed the distinct social customs of this intermediate type.⁶³ Interest in the social change and social problems of both groups sparked multiple surveys of the Appalachian region by both private and public entities.

In the early twentieth century the “hillbilly” and the “triracial isolate,” offered those concerned with racial purity the chance to situate their anxiety in a particular geographic location. On the one hand, locating these communities in a specific area made the threat they posed to white racial purity alarmingly real, on the other, because of the perceived distance of most Americans from these territories, the danger posed by white and triracial mountaineers seemed less immediate. Furthermore, the fact that important segments of the decision making public viewed poor white and triracially mixed people of the mountains in a similar manner carried profound implications for both populations, ultimately informing how these communities came to understand their own racial identity. For one, triracial communities laid claim to the hillbilly appellation as a badge of honor and testament to their pioneer stock. Outsiders also fashioned triracial communities as part of the same pioneer/hillbilly heritage as white Appalachians. E. Franklin Frazier contributed what he documented as the well-developed religious and cultural institutions of the various racial islands of the U.S. to the Anglo-Saxon stock of their pioneer ancestors.⁶⁴ Likewise, white mountaineers used their relationships with their multi-racial neighbors to lay claim to a more diverse past. Darlene Wilson and Patricia Beaver have argued that the multi-racial heritage of their close neighbors, in particular the

⁶³ Bond, “Two Racial Islands in Alabama,” 552-567; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (New York: Dryden Press, 1948), 164-189.

⁶⁴ Frazier, *The Negro Family in the U.S.*, 187.

emphasis on their Native American ancestry, allowed white mountaineers access to a multiracial identity that allowed them to distance themselves from the stigma attached to blackness.⁶⁵

In serving to construct both the hillbilly and the triracial as degenerate, popular and social scientific writers in this period helped to link these problematic populations together. As an umbrella term, degeneration helped to signal disparate populations as a singularly harmful threat to an otherwise healthy nation.⁶⁶ The discourse surrounding the hillbilly and triracial groups like the Jackson Whites also formed a similar racializing function. Through their backwardness and degeneration, both groups were cast as outside the bounds of normative whiteness. While whiteness is often conceptualized as monolithic attention to the ways in which white and triracial mountaineers cast as the ‘other’ reveals that whiteness is contextually negotiated. It is worthwhile to note that acknowledging the variations of whiteness doesn’t deny the privilege that comes from “just being white.” After all, one of the reasons that social reformers and later bureaucrats were willing agents in the fight against mountain poverty was because “in the context of United States’ racial formations, white people are not supposed to be poor.”⁶⁷ Yet, white Appalachians weren’t wholly helped. They were marginalized, castigated, and sometimes singled out for eugenic intervention. Therefore, attention to the ‘othering’ of white and triracial mountaineers is a way to recognize that the privileges of whiteness are based on a multitudes of circumstances that are not always open to all peoples identified as white.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Darlene Wilson and Patricia D. Beaver, “Transgressions in Race and Place,” 50.

⁶⁶ Dain Borges, “‘Puffy, Ugly, Slothful, and Inert,’ Degeneration in Brazilian Social Thought, 1880-1940,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 25 (May, 1993): 275.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Scott, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 12.

⁶⁸ Carla D. Shirley, “You might be a redneck if...Boundary Work Among Rural Southern Whites,” *Social Forces* (2010): 35–62.

RETHINKING WHITE RACIAL DEGENERACY: THE EUGENIC FAMILY STUDIES REVISTED

As mentioned above, rural white populations stood out because their social customs differed so strikingly from those of middle-class America. Endemic poverty, the lack of strong industrial centers and educational opportunities greatly worried social reformers, not only those committed to eugenics. Whereas the uplift literature of previous century located the mountaineer's distinctiveness in his social isolation and thus implicated environment, twentieth century eugenicists advanced biological arguments to explain the mountaineer's degraded condition. As a result, inbreeding, criminality, violence, pauperism, and sexual immorality were not only inherent but heritable conditions lumped under the umbrella term "feeble-mindedness".

The work of eugenicists represents a major contribution to the construction of both poor whites and mixed-race people. Throughout the first three decades of the twentieth-century researchers, largely funded through the Eugenics Record Office, produced sixteen different family-based studies in order to scientifically prove that rural whites were "mental defectives." As one scholar puts it: "the central image these studies created was the degenerate hillbilly family, dwelling in filthy shacks, and spawning endless generations of paupers, criminals and imbeciles."⁶⁹ Despite the fact that most studies centered on rural whites, at least two, the unpublished *Jackson Whites: A Study in Racial Degeneracy* (1911), authored by Elizabeth Kite and Arthur Estabrook and Ivan McDougle's *Mongrel Virginians* (1924), dealt explicitly with rural communities of triracial ancestry. Still, a majority of these family studies implicated a "mixed-blood" ancestor as the source of the family's feeble-mindedness. Even when a mixed-

⁶⁹ Wray and Newitz, *White Trash*, 2

blood progenitor could not be located, researchers pointed to contemporary interracial coupling as another indication of defective germ plasm.

In effect, the eugenic family studies helped to draw a causal link between miscegenation and mental degeneracy. As a medical term meant to signify a broad range of mental defectiveness, "feeble-mindedness" served as a conceptual umbrella that allowed eugenicists to implicate both rural whites and "mixed-bloods" as threats to white racial purity.⁷⁰ The "feeble-minded" were considered a greater eugenical threat than "idiots" (those of a mental age of two years or younger) and "imbeciles" (those with a mental age of about seven years) for the same reasons that "mixed-bloods" were seen as more threatening to white racial purity than black Americans. While idiots and imbeciles were generally identifiable to the layperson, "high-grade morons" (those of a mental age between eight and twelve years) shared with the "mixed-blood" the ability to "pass" into unsuspecting white communities.⁷¹

As a biosocial movement "eugenics," which derived from the Greek term *eugenes*, meaning "of good birth," represents the utilization of hereditary theories to ensure the production of the "better" segments of society through selective mating.⁷² In the American context, eugenics not only encouraged the better populations to reproduce (positive eugenics), proponents advocated intervention in the way of sterilization and segregation to prevent those deemed less fit from propagating their kind (negative eugenics).⁷³ Together, these efforts would ensure that

⁷⁰ Southern and Eastern Europeans were also considered a serious threat to white racial purity, however their immigration was largely curtailed after 1924 in large part due to Henry Goddard's intelligence testing at Ellis Island. His 1915 testimony before the U.S. Public Health Service indicating that large segments of Eastern and Southern European immigrants were feeble-minded, greatly influenced legislators to take action to curb immigration from these regions. For more on eugenics and immigration see, Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 17-37.

⁷¹ Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America's Worst Family: Eugenics, Islam, and the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 107.

⁷² "Better" was a common term used in eugenic parlance and was rhetorically linked to a raced, classed, and gendered ideal.

⁷³ Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3-7.

eugenicists reached their chief aims, the prevention of white racial degeneracy. Declining birthrates among the eugenically “fit” as well as increased immigration by and high birth rates among those deemed eugenically “unfit,” convinced a large segment of the decision-making public that racial degeneracy was well underway.⁷⁴

The Eugenics Record Office served as the basecamp for the American eugenics movement. In 1904 biologist Charles Davenport lobbied the Carnegie Foundation for a grant to establish a research center on Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island. Two years later Davenport lobbied the American Breeders’ Association to fund a research center to investigate human heredity and “to emphasize the value of superior blood and the menace of society of inferior blood.”⁷⁵ The result of these efforts was the Eugenics Record Office, which was founded in 1910 and funded by an endowment provided by Mary Harriman, widow to the railroad magnate R.E. Harriman.⁷⁶ The original function of the ERO was to serve as an archive of genealogical records on American genius. The initial pages of *The Eugenics Review*, the flagship journal of the movement, featured genealogical sketches that attempted to trace the hereditary origins of genius in prominent Americans such as: Alexander Graham Bell, Madison Grant, and Theodore Roosevelt.⁷⁷

Under the direction of Harry Laughlin, the ERO soon shifted its attention to documenting the lower strata of the population through intelligence testing and the publication of family

⁷⁴ Between 1907 and 1932 thirty states passed legislation permitting the involuntary sterilization of mental degenerates. See, Anna Stubbelfield, “‘Beyond the Pale’: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization,” *Hypatia* 22 (2007): 164-165

⁷⁵ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 162.

⁷⁶ Garland Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940: An Essay in Institutional History.” *OSIRIS* 2nd series, 2:225-264.

⁷⁷ Eugenicists believed that if a trait could be found in more than one generation then that trait was heritable. Later studies on “cacogenic” meaning unfit families also discussed the heritability of promiscuity, a trait they observed in successive generations of poor rural families. See Nichole Hahn Rafter, Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 6-9

studies. Family studies represented just one aspect of a multi-pronged approach to documenting mental defectiveness. In addition to the family studies, Davenport, along with psychologist Henry Goddard administered intelligence tests to southern and eastern European immigrants entering at Ellis Island. They also pioneered intelligence testing amongst army recruits during World War I.⁷⁸ According to Laughlin the job of eugenics was to seek out “the submerged tenth, the socially inadequate persons who must be prevented from reproducing...the insane, the feeble-minded, the paupers, the epileptic, the criminals, and so on.”⁷⁹

Over the course of three decades the ERO released a total of sixteen family studies that used observation, genealogical mapping, and phenotypic variations to measure social degeneracy. The authors of the family studies came from a variety of backgrounds. At least one was a minister, two were sociologists, and the others were researchers employed by the ERO with training in various fields including biology, psychology, and linguistics. The studies also cover a variety of locales. For reasons most likely having to do with convenience, early studies centered on communities in close proximity to the ERO’s Long Island headquarters. However, many of these communities still had ties to the Appalachia region. The Tribe of Ishmael, a community of purported multiracial origins, were residing in Indiana when they came to the eugenicists’ attention but were believed to be the descendants of pioneer families living in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee. As the 1920s progressed and the ERO gained more funding researchers were able to expand their studies out into rural communities in central and southern Appalachia.⁸⁰ In addition to a variety of geographic locales, the family studies also presented

⁷⁸ Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 33-35.

⁷⁹ Harry Laughlin “Eugenics in America” address delivered at Burlington House London printed in *Eugenics Review* 17 (April 1925), 28.

⁸⁰ For examples of this later work see Arthur Estabrook, “The Southern Highlands,” *Eugenical News* (August 1925): 5-8; Arthur Estabrook, “Blood Seeking Environment, Presidential Address, Eugenics Research Association, 1926,”

varied opinions on the usefulness of social intervention. While some believed that social programs might improve the conditions of their subjects other researchers were steadfast in their commitment to sterilization in order to prevent the propagation of the unfit.⁸¹ Authors of the Minnesota based *Dwellers in the Vale of Siddem* likened poor relief for mental defectives to, “trying to stamp out malaria or yellow fever in the neighborhood of a mosquito breeding swamp.”⁸² Researchers did however agree on the idea that social problems were rooted in biology and that the effective control of the mentally defective would be the only successful way to ameliorate these issues.⁸³

Family studies typically began when a member of a group came to the attention of researchers either because they were institutionalized or they exhibited an exceptional degree of negative traits. From there researchers used public records, interviews with neighbors, and recollections by other family members to trace particular traits through time in order to prove that the traits that characterized the group were in fact hereditary. The family studies followed those of the natural sciences in terms of being interested in the biological basis of human difference, however they embraced the new sociological principles in terms of a desire to translate their findings into social programs, most notably institutional segregation and the coerced sterilization of the feeble-minded.⁸⁴ The authors of the Sam Sixty study were explicitly clear on this point stating: “Society has the right and the duty to save such ever increasing

Eugenical News (August 1926): 106-114; Nathaniel D.M. Hirsch, “An Experimental Study of the East Kentucky Mountaineers,” *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 3 (March 1928): 183-244.

⁸¹ Henry H. Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 102. Internet Archive
http://archive.org/stream/kallikakfamilyst00godduoft/kallikakfamilyst00godduoft_djvu.txt. (accessed January 23, 2015)

⁸² A.C. Rogers in Maud Merrill, “Dwellers in the Vale of Siddem” (1919), published in *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919*, ed. Nichole Hahn Rafter, (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1988), 345.

⁸³ Karl Pearson, “Mendelism and the Problem of Mental Defect” *Questions of the Day and Fray* 9 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 8

⁸⁴ Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 2.

expense from increasing numbers of dependents...by keeping the feeble-minded in custody while they are of child rearing and child be-getting ages.”⁸⁵

Eugenic studies capitalized on the marginality of interracial unions by positing miscegenation as a cause of feeble-mindedness. Authored in 1911 by Elizabeth Kite, a field worker with New Jersey’s Vineland Training School, *The Jackson Whites: A Study in Racial Degeneracy* is the first eugenics study to explicit consider a mixed-race population and as such made the strongest argument for a biological link between miscegenation and mental defectiveness. In addition to her study on the “Jackson Whites,” on which Kite is listed as the sole author, she also performed the fieldwork for Henry Goddard’s study of the Kallikak family (1911) and published a separate genealogical history of one branch of the Kallikak clan in 1912. The following year she published a study of another rural poor community in upstate New York by the name of the Pineys.⁸⁶

Born in 1864, Elizabeth Kite attended elite secondary schools in the U.S. before leaving to pursue higher education abroad. While in Europe, Kite took up history as well as French language studies. After her return to the U.S. Kite trained under Henry Goddard, the director of research at the Vineland School, and served as a fieldworker there from 1909 until 1918. During this period she also put her French skills to use by translating several key works on mental testing by Binet and Simon for use in Vineland’s intelligence testing program. Kite was among the first wave of women professionals in the sciences. Like her counterparts, Kite gained access to a predominantly male field by performing jobs that were considered women’s work. As field workers, Kite and the other 250 female alumni of the ERO’s summer training school were valued

⁸⁵ Kostir, *The Family of Sam Sixty Publication no. 8 Ohio Board of Administration* (Press of Ohio State Reformatory, 1916), 208.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Kite, “Two Brothers,” *The Survey* (May 2, 1912): 1861-64; Elizabeth Kite, “The Pineys,” *The Survey* (October 4, 1913): 7-13, 38-40.

by their male superiors for their keen sense of observation, which in their eyes, endowed them with the skills needed to perform the careful documentation of genealogical histories and social observation.⁸⁷

The “Jackson Whites” first came to the attention of researchers at Vineland when they went in search for the relatives of one of their young female patients. Beginning in 1909, the study was the result of two years of research amongst the Ramapo community and drew on extensive interviews with neighbors of the Ramapo clan to determine their racial and moral quality. Like the other family studies that would come before and after, the Jackson White study made extensive use of genealogies to trace the inheritance of defective traits. Yet, unlike these other studies, the authors made no attempt to conceal the location or identity of their 2600 subjects. Coming so closely on the heels of the Kallikak study it is no surprise that Kite believed the studies were related, despite the fact that the Jackson Whites were of mixed heritage. Not only did the studies “belong logically to the same series,” Kite argued that while both groups are in totally different environments, they were all “closely related by blood and are fundamentally of the same life.”⁸⁸

A triracially mixed community of Negro, Indian, and European ancestry, Kite documented the Jackson White ancestry as follows:

These loose living descendants of slaves were gradually crowded back into the mountain districts where they lived from hand to mouth and where their numbers were from time to time recruited by whites whose tendencies were similar to their own...

But how account for the Indian blood that shows itself so conspicuously among this race today? Undoubtedly a large

⁸⁷ Rafter, *White Trash*, 21.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Kite, *The Jackson Whites: A Study in Racial Degeneracy*, (Manuscript, Vineland, NJ, 1911) n.p. Elizabeth Sarah Kite Papers, 1864-1959 Box 1 A Rutgers University and Special Collections Archives

part of it comes from Indians who were formerly held as slaves...⁸⁹

The consequences of this deleterious racial mixture expressed itself in a number of ways, mainly in the “temperamental laziness” and “liquor heart” of the Jackson Whites.⁹⁰ Not all of the inherited racial characteristics were negative. Kite documented amongst many of her subjects a combination of the “Indian reserve” and the “Negro independence.” These she considered responsible for the Jackson Whites’ love of nature and physical freedom. Unfortunately, these qualities did not overcome the sexual immorality of the clan. Kite noted that “sex laxity [was] universal” among them.⁹¹

The danger of the Jackson Whites stemmed not only from their degraded racial status, but also from their close proximity to New Jersey’s wealthy elite who not only refused to shun these social outcasts but also provided for their welfare. In her notes on the manuscript of the Vineland Study, Kite notes with alarm the fact that many Jackson Whites were no longer secluded in the isolation of the Ramapos but had migrated en masse to Hillburn, New Jersey, a small village located at the bottom of the Ramapo Mountains. In addition to the Jackson Whites, Hillburn was also the summer home to many of New Jersey and New York’s elite families who had taken a “paternalistic stance against this defective race.”⁹²

Ultimately, the central danger of the Jackson Whites lay not in their mental deficiency but in their physical form. The argument as Kite put it, the “picturesque” and “attractive” qualities of the Jackson Whites could fool a casual observer as to the true nature of their racial

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kite, *The Jackson Whites*, n.p.

and moral character.⁹³ As a precursor to *Mongrel Virginians* the Jackson Whites study laid the groundwork that linked physical appearance, sexuality, and place in the construction of the “mixed blood.” When in 1932 scientists concluded that the “White-Indian-Negro” blood combination had bred “moron people,” the racial construction of eastern remnants as breeders of mental deficiency had largely been finalized.⁹⁴

Although Elizabeth Kite’s *Jackson Whites: A Study in Racial Degeneracy* (1911) and Arthur Estabrook and Ivan McDougale’s *Mongrel Virginians: The WIN Tribe* (1926) are often claimed as the only studies to explicitly deal with racial mixture, of the remaining fourteen studies, at least six make mention of “half-breed” relatives or the propensity of their subjects to engage in sex across the color line. Even when racial mixing was not marshaled as the direct cause of degeneracy researchers it was offered as proof.⁹⁵ Researchers made this point by tracing the defective germ plasm of their subjects back to an interracial liaison. In his description of a Kansas clan by the name of “Smoky Pilgrims,” sociologist Frank Blackmar attributed the “moral defectiveness” as well as the “dusky and possibly the sickly yellow color” to “the Negro blood in the veins of part of the family.”⁹⁶ Likewise, author Oscar McCulloch traced the “family history [of] murders, a large number of illegitimacies and prostitutes to the wandering blood from the half-breed mother ...[and] the poison and passion that probably came with her.”⁹⁷ He also noted their group’s tendency to “gypsy,” wandering across the mid-west by wagon when not

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ “Blood Combination Has Bred Moron People,” *National Labor Tribune* (Thursday, Nov. 24, 1932), p.5

⁹⁵ Both the Jukes and the Kallikak families, the subjects of the two most popular eugenic studies, were believed to have engaged in interracial sex.

⁹⁶ Frank Blackmar, “Smoky Pilgrims,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1877): 491.

⁹⁷ Oscar McCulloch, “The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation” *Proceedings Conference of Charities and Correction*, 1888: 157.

occupying tree-houses or abandoned homes.⁹⁸ In his 1912 study of the Nam Family—an ominous appellation meant to denote the backwardness of the family—Estabrook argued that the “highly inbred community in New York State” sprang from a union involving a “roving” Dutch pioneer and an “Indian Princess.”⁹⁹ Another cacogenic family in rural Ohio, the Happy Hickories, was the progeny of “an Indian squaw.”¹⁰⁰ And finally, one of the families in Vale of Siddem was descended from “Nigger Ned.” The daughter, “a mulatto,” had several children and each of them shows their “Negro heritage. The oldest boy is an imbecile with very vicious tendencies. He will steal whenever the opportunity offers...”¹⁰¹

More than just elide concerns of racial purity and rural mental degradation, the eugenic family studies helped to blur the boundaries of whiteness. By rooting white racial degeneracy in a mixed-blood ancestry, the eugenic studies served to position rural whites as racially impure in both a social and genetic sense. Even if rural white Appalachians were not reclassified as white, they were clearly conceptualized as approaching the specter of non-whiteness. If this is true, then the conception of the rural poor to white racial purity takes on new significance. By drawing genetic proximity between indigenous and black populations, the rural white mountaineer was transformed from off-white, the term used to describe their social degradation, to non-white, the language used to describe their genetic degradation.

Conclusion

In the years following their “discovery,” The Thompsons received the “civilizing efforts” of both private and public aid institutions including the Nyack Women’s Club, the Red Cross,

⁹⁸ Nicole Hahn Rafter released a collection of the most notably and most hard to locate family studies in 1988. I will be using her book as the citation for most of these studies in this section. Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenics Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Holliston: Northeastern, 1988), 54.

⁹⁹ “Nam” was actually “Man” spelled backwards. Arthur Estabrook and Charles Davenport, *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenity* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY, Eugenics Record Office, 1912), 2.

¹⁰⁰ Mina Sessions, “The Feeble-Minded in a Rural County in Ohio” 1918 in Rafter ed. *White Trash*, 276.

¹⁰¹ Rogers and Merrill, *Dwellers in the Vale of Siddem*, 368.

and New Jersey's Vineland Training School for Feeble-minded Boys and Girls. Although most of the family members were diagnosed as feeble-minded, the one bright spot was "Ella," the oldest Thompson daughter, who, despite her troubled beginnings was considered "bright and promising" and in 1923 was attending a "normal" school in the area. Although¹⁰² both the Thompsons and the Jackson Whites were presumed to exist on the margins of society, the racial purity of the family earned them reintegration into the mainstream.

The treatments of race mixing covered in this article have relied on a conceptualization of race mixing as the route to or manifestation of psychological, social, cultural, and political degeneracy. In this vein, they had as much to do with the particular behaviors and conditions thought to befall these persons than with the ambiguity of their racial status. Although people biologically black could not aspire to whiteness, as the eugenic family studies in the last section reveal, whites could easily descend into "mulatness"—creating what historian John Mencke calls "a new and curious kind of mulatto—a mulatto who was in fact genetically white but morally black."¹⁰³ By naming the conditions that befell these communities, each description and enumeration of a social disorder provides a condensed articulation of the identity story of the "mixed blood." Eventually, these characterizations served as the litmus for identity of eastern communities for both future investigators to ascribe that identity but also formed a set of characteristics by which eastern Indians could deny that identity by claiming not to fit them. Historian James Klotter has argued that efforts to distance mountain whites from blackness allowed them to access the benefits of white privilege by providing a population against which mountaineers could position themselves. What is also interesting to note is that for triracial

¹⁰² "Family Living Like Barbarians Found in New York Hills" Margery Rex Evening Journal APS, Eugenics Record Office Trait Files, MSC77, Ser.1 Box. 36.

¹⁰³ Mencke, *Mulatatoes and Race Mixture*, 105.

communities like the Jackson Whites of New Jersey and the Narragansett of Delaware, their proximity to whiteness, however tainted, availed them to remedial efforts of social welfare agencies. In the decade following the discovery of the Thompson family, the Jackson Whites received both a teacher and hygiene instructor, both of whom were employed by the ERO. Thus, both populations could capitalize on their proximity to degraded whiteness and it is this proximity that allowed them to make claims to citizenship and national belonging that are significant even if they are limited in nature. Finally, these populations trouble the scholarly supremacy assigned to the “one-drop rule” in regards to racial classification. That a number of rural whites participate in sex across the color line and still maintained the classification as white illustrates that racial boundaries were porous and like other mediated spaces, reflect the political, social, and economic interests of their gatekeepers.