

Sammy Bourji

Dr. Guenther

Hist1378H Semester project

Isabel Wilkerson's narrative nonfiction *The Warmth of Other Suns* does not directly label or discuss eugenics or its effects on black Americans leading up to and during the Great Migration. Nevertheless, signs of the impact of eugenics are scattered throughout the stories of the people Wilkerson interviewed. In observing these impacts, we can see how eugenics supported and strengthened the tragedies of the caste system in 20th century America. Concerning Dr. Robert Foster, it is interesting and saddening to see how the pseudoscience of eugenics clashes and interferes with the valid, proven intellect of an expert in the scientific medical field early in his career simply because he is black. Outside of the context of Wilkerson's book, state-wide anti-miscegenation laws throughout the nation effectively segregated romantic relationships within a state's boundaries, and forced sterilization disproportionately affected black American women. Jim Crow laws and the hierarchy it solidified allowed eugenics to transition into a racially charged movement, as eugenics provided a false but convenient justification for America to treat its black citizens as less than equal.

Wilkerson uses the word "caste" often in her book. The stories she shares intricately detail the many nuances that occur with interactions among people from different castes. Eugenics, an ideology focused on "fitness" and superiority of specific groups of humans, relates to and may stem from these interactions. One brief example occurs in Ida Mae's story, with a planter and his sharecropper. The sharecropper, Jack Fowler, wants to go up north to Illinois. His planter responds with, "Jack, you're gonna go up there and freeze your brains," and "who is

going to handle my horses when you leave?”¹. Although the planter’s response could have several interpretations, there are two to focus on. Firstly, Wilkerson tells us that planters want to scare their sharecroppers into staying down south. Secondly, there is a perspective involving eugenics. The planter is worried about who will handle his horses because he thinks handling horses is beneath his caste’s station. He will need to find a new sharecropper because eugenics relegated the lowliest tasks to those who are deemed “least fit;” those residing in the lowest caste.

The terms “unfit” and “feeble-minded” are used frequently in the context of eugenics. One way in which these terms were assigned to people were through the Binet-Simon scale, somewhat related to IQ tests today². The scale was supposed to be an indicator for the abilities of children at the specific point in life that the test was taken, but the scale became incorrectly extrapolated to estimate intelligence. The abilities tested were things “typically assigned in school.”³ Consequently, when we consider the educational barriers that were put in place to prevent black Americans from going to school and earning an education equal to white Americans, it makes sense that black children were destined to fail the Binet-Simon test, thus gaining the label “unfit.” It is worth noting that European immigrants would also fail these tests and be considered feeble-minded, but because they had the same skin color as the white Americans constructing the tests, European immigrants were still on a higher rung of the eugenics ladder than black Americans.

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (London, NY: Penguin Random House, 2020), 168.

² *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 151.

³ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 151.

The Binet-Simon scale and IQ tests were used for their eugenic purposes mostly in the early 1900s. During the Great Migration in the time periods Wilkerson writes about, the tests were not used as frequently to determine feeble-mindedness, but the impact the tests created remained. One of the most blatant impacts occurs early on in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, during George Starling's time in Eustis, Florida. It is simple yet tragic. "No colleges near Eustis, nor any state universities in Florida, for that matter, admitted colored students."⁴ (71) Here was a bright young man, who graduated high school as the valedictorian, and could not attend a convenient, closely located college because he was black. Of course, this is not all due to eugenics, as Jim Crow laws and general racism and segregation had a foothold in America, but eugenics did play an important role.

Malcolm X shared a story of his time in high school (then known as Malcolm Little). His English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski encouraged all of his white students to follow their career dreams, but when Malcolm tells his teacher that he wants to be a lawyer, Mr. Ostrowski replies that Malcolm needs to be realistic; that black people need to have realistic aspirations.⁵ We see that certain jobs (lawyers, doctors, positions of high intellect and respect) were simply not intended for black people during eugenics and the time periods that followed eugenics. Malcolm X and Mr. Ostrowski's interaction occurred in Michigan, far north in the United States, but the effects of eugenics and Jim Crow spread throughout the entire nation.

Mr. Ostrowski, sadly, was correct in the context of his time. In the Jim Crow south, Dr. Robert Foster faced these realizations firsthand. The St. Francis hospital in Monroe, Louisiana

⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (London, NY: Penguin Random House, 2020), 71.

⁵ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 170.

would not allow Dr. Foster to work there because he was black. When Dr. Foster tells this truth to a white storekeeper that has known Dr. Foster for a long time, the storekeeper's reaction provides a window to see the effects of eugenics. "For a split second, the storekeeper seemed to see Pershing as no different than any other bright young physician. But Pershing's words brought him back to reality: the rest of the white world did not see Pershing the way the storekeeper did."⁶ The "white world" and its views through the lens of eugenics does not see Dr. Foster as a young bright physician, because in eugenics, it is impossible for Dr. Foster to be both bright and black. On a positive note, Dr. Foster's career's story takes place in the later half of the 20th century, with eugenics slowly dying out. As a result, we get to see Dr. Foster become an incredibly successful physician in the 1960s and 1970s in the more moderate California. This provides some evidence that the effects of eugenics on black Americans were tied with the Jim Crow era.

One of the most significant features of the eugenics movement was preventing the spread of the unfit and feebleminded. The two important mechanisms to ensure this were anti-miscegenation laws and forced sterilization. Anti-miscegenation laws ban people of different ethnicities and races from marrying each other and having children. Sterilization leaves people incapable of reproducing. Isabel Wilkerson does not mention either of these factors in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, but the intent of anti-miscegenation laws was already well engrained in the Jim Crow South by means of lynching. When black Americans could be lynched for the most inconsequential actions like "bumping up against a white woman,"⁷ the message is sent clearly:

⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (London, NY: Penguin Random House, 2020), 173.

⁷ Campbell Robertson, "History of Lynchings in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 10, 2015),

do not interact with white women. Wilkerson does describe many lynchings that impact the focal characters of her book, from the torture of the Carter brothers to Emmet Till. All of these unnecessary tragedies resulted from black children, who did not know any better, violating Jim Crow laws when it came to situations with white women. To make matters worse, there was very little, if anything, that black southerners could do to defend themselves from these lynchings. Lynchings had no trials, and there was no retaliation or justice against the people conducting the lynching. Often, word would spread about a new lynching that was to occur soon, and thousands of white southerners would travel to watch the public spectacle. White southerners were not afraid to be seen, as most officers would stand by and watch the spectacle as well.⁸ If there were any questions raised, white people could simply change the story that they are accused of, and they could put the blame on a black person, thereby eliminating any risk of association with the lynching.

Outside of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, forced sterilization and anti-miscegenation laws had a big impact on black Americans. In Virginia, an anti-miscegenation law called The Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 was passed, making interracial marriages a felony. Mixed couples would either have to face prison time, for anywhere from one to five years, or leave the state, effectively segregating relationships within state boundaries. One couple, the Lovings was charged with breaking this law, pleaded guilty, and was banished from Virginia for 25 years. But they refused to leave Virginia, living with close family and friends in secret. The husband later

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/10/us/history-of-lynchings-in-the-south-documents-nearly-4000-names.html?emc=eta1>.

⁸ James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Sante Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2012).

argued that The Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 violated the 14th amendment.⁹ He was right, of course, but this law would not be ruled unconstitutional until 1967. The rights of mixed couples who wanted to get married were violated for more than 40 years.

Laws like The Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 existed in many forms across the country. There were variations in what constituted a mixed marriage. For example, some states would not consider a person to be black if they had less than one-eighth of African descent,¹⁰ thereby allowing that person to marry a white person. These anti-miscegenation laws extended to Hispanics and Asians as well as black Americans; all with the common interest of preserving “white race purity.”¹¹

Near the end of George Starling’s life, we learn that he is shocked to see a mixed couple casually holding hands with seemingly no consequences. The psychological impact of Jim Crow laws and anti-miscegenation laws have made it the norm to be surprised to see an interracial couple, as if it is unnatural.

In addition to anti-miscegenation laws, forced sterilization was particularly disproportional towards black Americans, specifically towards poor black women. Black Americans had been deemed unfit throughout U.S. history with slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the Binet-Simon tests, but they were still able to have children, until now. Eugenicians promoted the

⁹ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 187.

¹⁰ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 189.

¹¹ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 188.

idea of a “fit” society by weeding out the poor and feeble-minded. These ideas were implemented by locating the poor and feeble-minded, and sterilizing them.

Proponents of sterilization discussed the financial advantages of having the feeble-minded sterilized. In Virginia, an estimated \$10 million was spent annually to treat people that were determined to be unfit,¹² and eugenics supporters would conclude that it would be much more efficient and inexpensive to simply sterilize these people and not have to worry about them anymore. This was not an economic issue, however, that could or should be reasoned with money. Proponents of sterilization were essentially playing God. One victim of sterilization, Lewis Reynolds, was sterilized at age 13 because he had injury-induced epilepsy. His inability to have children ruined his marriage, and he later stated, “I just feel [those who sterilized me] took my life away from me.”¹³ Lives like Reynolds were permanently destroyed because of eugenics policies.

Sterilization laws would be challenged in court, but in the 1927 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*, sterilization laws in Virginia were upheld. The injured party, Carrie Buck would be ordered to undergo sterilization, because as Chief Justice Holmes puts it in his ruling, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough”¹⁴ (referring to Carrie, her mother, and her grandmother all being diagnosed as feeble-minded). These sterilization policies, like anti-miscegenation laws,

¹² “Sterilization Urged for Weak-Minded (April 25, 1934),” *The Washington Post* (WP Company), accessed December 2, 2020, <https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/local/sterilization-urged-for-weak-minded-april-25-1934/32/>.

¹³ Fredrick Kunkle, “Va. Eugenics Victims Would Receive Compensation for Sterilization under Proposed Bill,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 30, 2013), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/va-politics/va-eugenics-victims-would-receive-compensation-for-sterilization-under-proposed-bill/2013/01/30/eebad4de-6b0d-11e2-95b3-272d604a10a3_story.html.

¹⁴ *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927).

would not be overturned for several decades. Virginia would not overturn its sterilization law upheld by *Buck v. Bell* until 1974.

Initially, sterilization was not racially charged, but implemented on those with “diseases” like alcoholism or promiscuity, or those diagnosed as insane or mentally challenged.¹⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, however, it became clear that these programs shifted and targeted black people more often than before, and at a higher percentage of all forced sterilizations, as in North Carolina, “an increasing number of those sterilized were black women.”¹⁶ The manner in which these sterilizations commenced is quite disturbing. People would enter the operating room under the understanding that they were getting a different procedure, like an appendectomy for example, and would wake up sterilized. In several southern states, these sterilization programs continued into the 1970s, even after the Civil Rights Movement.

To help put this in perspective, Nazi Germany took these ideas of sterilization and eugenics from America and used them during the Holocaust. Nazi Germany would argue that if the United States, the symbol of democracy and freedom, and the leader of the free world was performing sterilizations, then surely, they could as well. German eugenicists saw Hitler as “an opportunity to apply the principles of race, genetics, and selection to practical politics.”¹⁷ The United States also inspired Nazi Germany with the ideas of anti-miscegenation laws and “racial hygiene.” Needless to say, Nazi Germany took the ideas of eugenics to morbid extremes with the

¹⁵ Valerie Bauerlein, “State Mulls Amends for Sterilizations,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2011.

¹⁶ Valerie Bauerlein, “State Mulls Amends for Sterilizations,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2011.

¹⁷ *Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2002), 248-249.

Holocaust, but it is still disturbing to understand that America provided a basis, if only a small amount, for these crimes against humanity.

If it is any consolation, decades after World War II, American state officials would realize in retrospect that their domestic eugenics policies resembled policies implemented during the Nazi era and wanted to provide compensation and reparations. Very little compensations have actually been paid out, however. A state task force in North Carolina proposed to pay \$50,000 to each victim of sterilization that is still alive, but ethical questions arose concerning how to put a price on something like sterilization.¹⁸ The entire period of eugenics was unethical though, so it is interesting to see where state officials draw the line on this subject. Regardless, the sentiment remains that “the government owes these people.”¹⁹ Virginia and several other guilty states would offer apologies for their sterilization policies.

What began as valid scientific observations on evolution and natural selection became a vastly distorted pseudoscience that produced dangerous, deadly, and racist results when applied on humans. Eugenics permanently changed the lives of thousands of Americans and later spread internationally, influencing fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini. Eugenacists attacked the helpless whom were deemed to be unfit by barriers they could not control like education. Eugenics became intertwined with and supported Jim Crow laws, creating further legal segregation with anti-miscegenation laws and racially charged sterilizations. These laws combined with eugenics provided even more confidence and assurance for white southerners to

¹⁸ Goldschmidt, Debra. “North Carolina Task Force Recommends \$50,000 for Sterilization Victims,” CNN (Cable News Network, January 10, 2012), <https://inamerica.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/10/north-carolina-to-decide-how-much-to-compensate-victims-of-forced-sterilization/>.

¹⁹ Valerie Bauerlein, “State Mulls Amends for Sterilizations,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2011.

conduct lynchings and white violence. Black Americans would be ridiculed for trying to earn an occupation that demands respect and would be denied at every possible opportunity. They were relegated to the hard, backbreaking manual labor that white Americans did not want to do but was necessary for the economy. Eugenics policies lasted beyond the Civil Rights movement, and it is yet to be seen how the survivors of these policies will be compensated, if at all.