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Matthew Lessig

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MATTHEW LESSIG
SUNY Cortland

Mongrel Virginia: Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* and the Curse of Tenancy

IN HER 1925 NOVEL *BARREN GROUND*, ELLEN GLASGOW CAMPAIGNS FOR A modernized South, rejecting plantation romance for rural realism, Southern womanhood for feminine sexual autonomy, aristocratic rule for Jeffersonian democracy, and plantation for industrialized agricultural production, a combination that inspired the novel's publisher to claim that "with *Barren Ground* realism at last crosses the Potomac" (Scura, *Contemporary* 241). While presumably highlighting the novel's role in bringing Progressive political values, realistic narrative techniques, and a new critical consciousness to Southern letters, the publisher's trope of regional crossings hints at the novel's still unremarked location amid a broader array of regional exchanges that accompanied the collapse of the plantation economy in the South and that marked a critical moment in the making of race in America. In the early decades of the twentieth century, financial capital traveled South, along with new technologies of industrial agriculture, labor management, and scientific racism, to fuel both New South economic development and a corollary crisis in traditional paternalistic racial relations. Meanwhile, some 600,000 African Americans practiced their own brand of realism by abandoning the plantation South for the urban and industrial North—having determined that "migration from the South was the most realistic option available to improve [their] standard of living" (Mandle 71). By the mid 1920s, their migrations precipitated what Matthew Guterl has labeled a "southernization of northern racial discourse," in which a "southern tradition of negrophobia" supplanted Northern nativist fears of racialized new immigrant groups (12, 13). Matthew Jacobson argues that this new biracialism in American racial discourse would, in the decades following the passage of the 1924 National Origins Act, enable the "consolidation of a unified whiteness" (93), as once suspect, non-Nordic European identities were assimilated to "a pattern of Caucasian unity" (91). Yet even as the South exported white supremacy, economics and eugenics

conspired to generate new divisions within whiteness through the racialized figure of the Southern poor white. As Neil Foley has argued,

While immigrant Jews, Slavs, Italians, and Irish were “becoming white” in the urban areas of the East, poor whites . . . in the South were heading in the opposite direction—losing whiteness and the status and privileges that whiteness bestowed. Poor whites in the cotton South came not only to be seen as a social problem but also to be located in the racial hierarchy as the “trash” of whiteness. (6)

Drawing from these contemporary racial logics, Glasgow envisions a modernized rural South that is underwritten by agricultural labor and articulated through a “biological interpretation of history” (*Barren* 461). Glasgow’s novel chronicles thirty years in the career of Dorinda Oakley from approximately 1894, when Dorinda is twenty years old, to 1924. The restless daughter of a supposedly middling Virginia tobacco farming family, Dorinda is betrayed in love by a young local doctor, Jason Greylock. After an errant rifle shot at Jason, Dorinda runs away to New York City, where she is hit by a cab, loses her pregnancy, gains wealthy benefactors, and studies agricultural science. Forsaking romance and sexuality, Dorinda applies herself to reclaiming the family’s struggling farm. She borrows two thousand dollars from her Northern friends, hires a number of mostly black local laborers, and transforms the family’s failed tobacco farm into a thriving dairy operation serving the Washington DC hotels. By the novel’s end, a middle-aged Dorinda is able to face “the future without romantic glamour, but . . . with integrity of vision” (525). In *Barren Ground*, Dorinda Oakley’s success in reviving the family farm—and by extension the rural South—depends on her ability to secure black labor and to discipline that labor to an industrial work regimen. In the process, Dorinda emerges as a modern white Southern bourgeois subject, distinguished from the “mongrel breed” of poor whites by a gap “as wide as the abyss between alien races” (45).

Glasgow’s attention to agricultural reform and agricultural labor—what the novel calls the “curse” of tenancy (113)—provides an early example of a literature of sharecropping that would prove an important site for charting developing American race and class formations between the Wars.¹ With the demise of plantation

¹Though the terms “sharecropper” and “tenant” mark distinct forms of farm labor, I will use these terms more or less interchangeably to include all forms of landless tenancy. In doing so, I reproduce a practice common to the literary and popular

production in the 1920s and 1930s, traditional structures of racial domination in rural paternalism and economic dependence were replaced with an increasingly urban and wage-mediated society that left Southerners struggling with new challenges to white supremacy and its Jim Crow regime. While Jacobson has in mind the history of American immigration, his claim that “The contending forces that have fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United States across time . . . are capitalism (with its insatiable appetite for cheap labor) and republicanism (with its imperative of responsible citizenship)” (13) is equally applicable to the postbellum South, where republican notions of fitness for self-governance rationalized both white paternalistic racial authority and dominant understandings of white manhood that were tied to land ownership and the supposedly meritocratic logic of the “agricultural ladder.” Despite Emancipation and the Reconstruction Amendments, blackness continued to denote those qualities of subservience and dependence antithetical to republican ideals of citizenship. But with the capitalist transformation of Southern agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the displacement of increasing numbers of former smallhold white farmers into the traditionally black role of landless tenants, tenancy also became a “white man’s problem” (Foley 35). Residual republicanism and traditional stereotypes of Southern poor whites combined with eugenics and allied Progressive reform movements to produce new rhetorics of poor-white degeneracy that rationalized the rule of landed elites while delineating emerging Southern class formations in increasingly racialized terms.² The migration of poor rural blacks and whites to the North

discourses on sharecropping in the 1920s and 1930s.

²A number of studies explore how economic and cultural changes in the early twentieth-century South left poor whites vulnerable to being “simultaneously marked as white yet expelled from the privileged social domain of whiteness” (Hartigan 59). Jack Temple Kirby explains how “the whitening of the plantation districts” after 1920—with poor whites replacing blacks in the “traditionally ‘black’ status” of tenancy—“tended to expose the colorless class basis of that old order” (*Rural Worlds Lost* 237). David Roediger analyzes how poor whites’ postbellum descent into industrial and agricultural “nigger work” compromised their racial status and complicated their class consciousness (“Gaining a Hearing” 134-39). Foley examines how the confluence of economic transformations in cotton agriculture with the rise of eugenic discourse contributed to the racialization of poor whites’ class position and, consequently, their loss of racial status and privilege. Roediger, Matt Wray, and John Hartigan also discuss the cultural

nationalized concerns with their character and fitness for responsible citizenship. Thus, while often cast in terms of failure and despair, the sharecropper also served as a figure of things to come, as the rough subaltern beast slouching toward the nation's urban centers and its racial future.

Glasgow worked on *Barren Ground* from the summer of 1923 to its publication in April 1925, a period coincident with the height of the nativist and eugenicist influence in American culture and politics. Nationally, this influence culminated in the passage of the National Origins Act in 1924, which introduced severe new restrictions on immigration from southern and eastern Europe as well as Asia. In Virginia, it found expression in the creation of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America and the passage of Virginia's infamous Racial Integrity Act. Founded in September 1922 by internationally recognized pianist and Richmond native John Powell, journalist and self-styled ethnographer Earnest Sevier Cox, and Walter Ashby Plecker, director of the state's Bureau of Vital Statistics, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs claimed to support the "strengthening of Anglo-Saxon instincts, traditions, and principles" and the "fundamental and final solutions of our racial problems in general, most especially of the Negro problem" (Sherman 74-75). By 1923, the organization claimed twenty-five chapters throughout Virginia and some four hundred members in Richmond, including, by 1925, some forty members of the city's Women's Racial Integrity Club (Sherman 74; Smith 76, 85). The organization's activities also garnered sympathetic coverage and editorial endorsements from Richmond's two leading newspapers, the *Times Dispatch* and the *News Leader*.

The primary achievement of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs was the passage of the Racial Integrity Act. Introduced in June 1923 and signed into law

history and social boundary work of the terms "redneck," "poor white," and "white trash." Several studies examine the effects of modernization, migration, and labor activism on the conflicted class and racial identities of poor whites in William Faulkner's fictions. Richard Godden reads Ab Snopes and Wash Jones as figures of a partially articulated blackness produced from poor whites' increasing role as socially and economically dependent tenants in the plantation economy. Matthew Lessig examines rhetorics of poor white degeneracy in Faulkner's Snopes fictions and in the writings of Southern Agrarian/New Critics. John Duvall argues that the Great Migration "further blur[red] the boundary between 'nigger' and 'white trash': as dispossessed poor whites replaced migrating blacks in agricultural labor, their whiteness became "simultaneously knowable and unhinged by a figurative relation to blackness" (8-9).

in March 1924, the Racial Integrity Act generated extensive press coverage and public debate in Richmond and across the state. Designed to preserve white racial purity and combat the threats of racial passing and “mongrelization,” the proposed law outlawed interracial marriage, prescribed a more restrictive legal definition of “white person” to include only those who had “no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian,” and required mandatory registration of all Virginians with the Bureau of Vital Statistics in order to legally establish the racial identity of every citizen of the state (Sherman 77). Though the Virginia legislature would soften some of the law’s harshest provisions, few among Virginia’s elite whites questioned the need to reinforce the color line or the principles of scientific racism that informed the legislative proposal.³

As historian J. Douglas Smith suggests, “John Powell and his supporters dominated racial discourse in the Old Dominion” throughout the 1920s, their several legislative efforts exposing “a fissure in elite ranks as to the most effective means of managing white supremacy: genteel paternalism or rigid extremism” (76). Virginia’s white elites had prided themselves on what Douglass Southall Freeman referred to as the “Virginia Way” of managing white supremacy through genteel paternalism and “separation by consent” (Smith 4). But as the social and geographic dislocations attending New South development and African American migration challenged traditional forms of elite white paternalistic authority, such genteel paternalism seemed “increasingly irrelevant in a modern, urban world” (Smith 5). As many of Virginia’s rural blacks (and whites) deserted its farms for its cities during the 1910s, Richmond experienced a sharp increase in its black population that combined with suburban expansion and urban neglect to erode “the physical, economic, and social bonds that held together the city’s complex community structure” (Silver 98). As Smith explains, “Black and white Virginians crowded into the commonwealth’s cities and towns, straining municipal resources, altering traditional housing patterns, and increasing competition for jobs” (5). In response, Richmond passed a

³The law allowed for voluntary rather than mandatory racial registration and installed a “Pocahontas Exception” that allowed for “less than one sixty-fourth of the blood of an American Indian,” a concession to those white Virginians who proudly traced their heritage to the state’s colonial myth of origins (Sherman 77).

revised residential segregation ordinance to coincide with the passage of the state's Racial Integrity Act (Silver 112).

With her close ties to Richmond's social and political elites and her lifelong interest in post-Darwinian biology, Glasgow would have been well acquainted with the controversies surrounding Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, as well as with the eugenic discourses that informed the program of the Anglo-Saxon clubs. In the early 1920s, Glasgow made several forays into the local public and political spheres. During the racially charged 1921 Virginia gubernatorial race, Glasgow campaigned on behalf of Republican nominee Henry Anderson—her close friend and onetime fiancé—whose party's "lily white" platform abandoned ties to its black members while advocating expanding the franchise among white voters. In 1924 Glasgow became president of the Richmond chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and immediately set about making the SPCA one of Richmond's most prominent philanthropic organizations, in part by soliciting the support of her friend Douglass Southall Freeman, editor of the Richmond *News Leader*. As well-known cultural figures and fellow members of Richmond's white elite, Glasgow and John Powell were familiar to one another, sharing an acquaintance with the novelist Joseph Conrad and corresponding on at least one occasion. Glasgow also possessed a copy of Cox's 1923 nativist screed *White America*, with the inscription "To Miss Ellen Glasgow from the author Earnest S. Cox/ Dec. 20 '23" (Tutwiler 17.257).

Furthermore, Glasgow had opportunities to experience the changes in the texture of Richmond's urban life in immediate and intimate terms. From her family's Greek Revival home at One West Main, Glasgow witnessed the increasing commercialization of one of Richmond's oldest central city neighborhoods and the encroachments of black residential areas on its margins. She and her assistant Anne Virginia Bennett frequently walked their dogs through nearby Jackson Ward, where black residential expansion shadowed commercialization, transforming the area into a "low-rent, and predominantly black, section" (Silver 115).⁴ Stationed along this route at the corner of Broad and Second Streets—on the boundary between the fading grandeur of Glasgow's Monroe Ward and Richmond's emerging "Harlem of the South"—John Powell

⁴On Glasgow's life in Richmond, see Pearsall 148; on Richmond's commercial development and black housing shortages, see Silver 113, 115.

anxiously bore witness to the dissolution of Richmond's racial boundaries. "I counted among the passers-by over 200 Negroes, of whom only five were black," Powell alerted readers of Richmond's *Times-Dispatch* in 1923. "In addition, I counted over thirty individuals of whom I could not with any degree of certainty state whether they were white or colored" (Smith 83).

Seen through the context of a contemporary crisis in urban racial relations and the "Virginia Way" of genteel paternalism, *Barren Ground* seems, despite its narrative of agricultural modernization, a nostalgic removal to the more familiar and presumably more manageable social relations of rural paternalism. Writing more than a decade after the publication of the novel, in her 1938 essay collection *A Certain Measure*, Glasgow locates *Barren Ground's* genesis amid an historical, social, and psychological landscape tellingly distanced from Richmond's tumultuous urban modernity:

For the setting of this novel, I went far back into the past. The country is as familiar to me as if the landscape unrolled both without and within. I had known every feature for years, and the saturation of my subject with the mood of sustained melancholy was effortless and complete. The houses, the roads, the woods, the endless fields of broomsedge and scrub pine, the low, immeasurable horizon—all these images I had seen with the remembering eyes of a child. And time, like a mellow haze, had preserved the impressions unaltered. (154)

Though Glasgow professes to have long distrusted "the prevailing nostalgic note" in Southern fiction (153), her reflections on *Barren Ground* venture ever further into the white Southern racial imaginary, with its characteristic conflation of "individual and regional childhoods" (Hale 53), to conjure a bygone scene of harmonious racial relations and sympathetic black character. Glasgow claims that this imagined rural community "became more real to me, more moving and living, than persons and objects in the world I inhabited" (162). She identifies the novel's most loyal and sympathetic black characters—"the coloured matriarch, Aunt Mehitable Green, and Fluvanna, the [heroine's] servant and companion"—as those most closely drawn from real life models (161). For Glasgow, going forward with the commercialization and industrialization of Southern agriculture demanded looking backward to an alleged time of racial innocence, a dynamic Grace Elizabeth Hale has termed "the funhouse mirror of New South progress, culturally anchor[ing] the authority of a rising white southern middle class while

paradoxically transforming the region into the northeastern-centered economy's developing market of choice" (53). Glasgow locates her longing for racial harmony within her own postbellum childhood, avoiding the Old South nostalgia favored by the plantation romance. But, as we shall see, this desire for black loyalty masks a dependence on black labor that threatens to compromise the novel's project of agricultural reform and rural modernization, as Glasgow's modernizing appeals to the "new agriculture" further involve her fictional representations in the contemporary crisis of paternalism and the developing American discourses of race and class.⁵

In the opening pages of *Barren Ground* Glasgow carefully constructs the social and historical stage upon which Dorinda will pursue her career. The novel delineates the three classes of Virginia whites: the aristocracy or "good families," the yeomanry or "good people," and the poor whites. Of the good families, Glasgow tells us that they have "preserved, among other things, custom, history, tradition, romantic fiction, and the Episcopal Church" (5). Of the poor whites, we learn only that they are "ineffectual spirits" who occupy the bottom rung of the white social scale (9). *Barren Ground* is most concerned with extolling the virtues of the "good people." Glasgow's text bills itself as the previously untold history of Virginia's yeoman class. Long unsung, this class is ascending, actively ushering in a new era in Southern history.

The novel begins in 1894 in the fictional Queen Elizabeth County, Virginia, an area of impoverished soil and middling tobacco farms, where "modern methods of farming, even methods that were modern in the

⁵Glasgow's 1923 story "Whispering Leaves" links this desire and dependency, idealizing the figure of the ever-loyal mammy even as it worries over the loss of black agricultural labor. In the story, written in the months before she began *Barren Ground*, the ghost of a deceased black servant haunts a Virginia plantation in order to nurture and protect a young white child whose mother has died. Only the child, Pell, and the story's Northern female narrator, who is visiting her ancestral home in old Virginia, can see "Mammy Rhody" (153), who becomes more real to them than the child's "common" stepmother and her numerous offspring (147). The ghost of Mammy Rhody displays features "irradiated by a passion of tenderness" (152) and that appear to be "love made manifest" (336) as she jealously guards her white ward from all danger and discomfort. Yet her spectral presence has caused all of the family's other black servants and laborers to flee the farm. Thus, while the frail and bird-like Pell is sustained by Mammy Rhody's eternal labor of love, the plantation's fields appear "neglected" and "abandoned" for lack of black labor (150).

benighted eighteen-nineties, had not penetrated' (4). Glasgow is careful to point out that it "had never been one of the aristocratic regions of Virginia," but was instead settled by "sturdy English yeoman" of mostly Scotch-Irish stock (5). Before the Civil War these pioneers seem to have enjoyed modest prosperity. They used slave labor, but here, we are told, slavery "had rested more lightly than elsewhere" (281). After the war, the soil lost its fertility and the local farms were foreclosed, or rented to tenants, or they struggled on in poverty. On the one hand, the novel blames the local farmers for the soil's impoverishment. Their persistent use of traditional farming practices and stubborn allegiance to one-crop, tobacco culture has exhausted the land. On the other hand, the text indicts the tenant system, which developed after the war and which, in a bafflingly mystified historical account, is attributed to the tenant farmers themselves: "The tenant farmers, who had flocked after the ruin of war as buzzards after a carcass, had immediately picked the featureless landscape as clean as a skeleton. When the swarming was over only three of the larger farms at Pedlar's Mill remained undivided in the hands of their original owners" (4-5). Elsewhere in the novel, characters cite the shortages of capital and labor which followed the war and emancipation and which contributed to the rise of tenancy and the continuing poverty of the rural South. But in the largely expository first chapter, tenancy seems the result of opportunistic "tenant farmers," migrating poor whites whose flocking and swarming somehow produces the structures of their own dependency and divides the larger farms into smaller parcels to be rented or farmed on shares.

Dorinda Oakley is the product of a yeoman mother and a poor white father, what the narrator terms a "union of the positive and the negative virtues" (9). Of her father's family we learn only that they were poor white, and for Glasgow's purposes that seems to suffice. It is Dorinda's mother's family, the Abernathys, who provide Dorinda with her "instinctive" resolve and the narrative with its political trajectory. The pioneer founder of Dorinda's family's farm, her maternal great-grandfather John Calvin Abernathy, was a retired Presbyterian preacher and missionary, who purchased fifty slaves with his one thousand-acre farm. A "thrifty theologian," Abernathy sold the slaves farther South and donated the proceeds to "the redemption of black souls in the Congo" (8). John Calvin's farm prospered, but his only son died in middle age, leaving a granddaughter to be raised by the old man. This

granddaughter, Eudora, inherited her grandfather's missionary zeal, but when her first love died doing missionary work in Africa, Eudora "fell victim to one of those natural instincts which Presbyterian theology has damned but never wholly exterminated" (9). In short, she fell in love with the poor white Joshua Oakley, who had the "eyes of a dumb poet and the head of a youthful John the Baptist" but who also had the poor white's "aptitude . . . for futility" (9). Though a "good man and a tireless labourer," Joshua, we are told, squandered his wife's "comfortable inheritance" (9).

Glasgow's renderings of Southern social history and of Dorinda Oakley's pedigree conspire to define the political implications of Dorinda's fictional career and to cast that career in terms of an ideology of modernization. Glasgow places Dorinda's narrative within a larger historical continuity that draws upon the past to legitimate one class's role in the modernization of the rural South. Glasgow's version of the traditional tripartite division of Southern whites appeals to the republican ideal of the virtuous yeomanry rather than to the plantation ideal of a leisured aristocracy. Echoing political theorists of the early American republic, Glasgow portrays her yeomanry as a virtuous "middle" class exempt from the vices of both the wealthy and the poor. They are a producer class, "small but independent farmers" who stand "as a buffer class between the opulent gentry and the hired labourers" (*Certain* 157-58). Glasgow defines her yeomanry relationally, making foils of both the elite and the subaltern by rejecting both the opulence of the gentry and the supposed shiftlessness of the poor white. Writing in 1938, thirteen years after *Barren Ground* and at the height of the Depression scandal over farm tenancy, Glasgow anxiously distinguishes between her "land poor" yeoman families—who had "owned, and had always owned, every foot of the impoverished soil which they tilled, or left untilled, on their farms"—and the "shiftless class of sharecropper or 'poor white'" (*Certain* 156). In the 1938 text, Glasgow makes explicit the novel's appeal to a pioneer heritage. The ancestors of the "good people," such as the Abernathys, "felled trees and built log cabins and withstood the red man on the Virginian frontier. . . . [T]hey were the lone fighters; they were the sharpshooters; they were the long hunters" (*Certain* 157). In setting the stage for Dorinda's fictional career, Glasgow draws upon a national heritage of republican ideology and the "generalized American pioneer" that rejects Southern exceptionalism in favor of "the raw stuff

of American civilization” (Santas 142; Glasgow, *Certain* 155). In doing so, she constructs an alternative historical tradition to the plantation mythology of the “good families” and the popular Southern romance, a tradition that foregrounds the historical role of the yeoman class while diminishing the cultural hegemony of the planter elite.

Although the narrator asserts that Pedlar’s Mill lacks such a plantation aristocracy, the text accumulates many of the Old South trappings around the Greylocks and their farm, Five Oaks. We meet two of the Greylocks, Jason and his elderly father, both given to drink and dissolution. Their fields have fallen fallow and their fences need mending. Their once proud home, built in a style “preferred by the more prosperous class of Virginia farmers” (146), is now characterized by “Dirt, mildew, decay” and a “general air of deterioration” (134, 146). The Greylocks are the only characters directly associated with the South’s heritage of slavery and miscegenation. In his drunken frenzies, Old Doctor Greylock prowls his home with a horsewhip “looking in every room and closet for something to flog” (111). Until his son returns to care for him, the old man lives alone with “his mulatto brood” who run “shrieking about the place when he [turns] on them with a horsewhip” (63). In a passage which draws heavily from Poe and anticipates Faulkner’s Southern gothic, Dorinda spends an evening of gothic terror with the old doctor at Five Oaks, a night replete with thunderstorms, sodden furnishings, creepy cobwebs, disorienting effects of light and shadow, a terrifying sense of entrapment and the drunken leerings and lurchings of her rat-eyed host. As Elizabeth Ammons argues, Old Doctor Greylock symbolizes “the inherited white male power structure in the South. He offers a horrifying glimpse of the privileged white heterosexual patriarch, conveniently released by alcohol from any inhibitions he might otherwise have and therefore naked—raw—in his exercise of power” (172-73). In fact, the Greylocks emerge as overdetermined straw men for much of what ails the South. As Dorinda’s one romantic interest, Jason represents the traditional romance plot Glasgow’s text repudiates, and Five Oaks presents a pointedly horrifying inversion of the plantation romance. The only thing cavalier about Jason—a well-born and would-be Southern romantic hero—is his treatment of Dorinda. As the novel’s only planter presence, the Greylocks take the fall for the South’s brutal heritage of slavery.

Both *Barren Ground* and Glasgow's 1938 essay on the novel consistently discuss class in terms of "blood," "breeds," "stock," and "instincts," developing what the novel terms the "biological interpretation of history" (461) and drawing from the language and representational strategies of contemporary eugenic discourse. *Barren Ground* repeatedly portrays poor whites in the animalistic terms favored by the eugenic "family studies" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rafter 26). Poor whites descend upon the war-ravaged countryside like "buzzards after a carcass." Dorinda's poor white cousin, Almira Pryde, welcomes "the yearly addition to her family with the moral serenity of a rabbit" (95). Dorinda's father smells like "an overheated ox" and seems to have "nothing human about him," living "as if he were a member of some affectionate but inarticulate animal kingdom" (118, 266). To Dorinda's mother, it seems as if "the gulf between the dominant Scotch-Irish stock of the Valley and the mongrel breed of 'poor white' . . . was as wide as the abyss between alien races" (45).

Glasgow also essentializes her aristocrats according to their hereditary qualities. Various characters in *Barren Ground* attribute the quasi-aristocratic Jason's failures to his "bad blood" and a laziness "bred in the bone" (479, 293). In the later essay, Glasgow spells out the evolutionary dynamic implicitly at work in the novel. *Barren Ground* portrays a community whose "vital stream was running out into shallows" (*Certain* 155). A "declining aristocracy" has "outlived their usefulness, and time, the arch-antagonist, was discarding them" (155). As representative of this class, Jason Greylock has "surrendered through inherited weakness. . . . His breed, unlike Dorinda's, held no immunity from the fatal germ of resignation" (161). Poor whites have "degenerated into a condition of moral inertia" (155). The contemporary yeomanry, though only "the remote shadows of a stalwart breed," possess a "deep instinct for survival" that holds the promise of cultural renewal (156).

This pervasive rhetoric of biological determinism attests to Glasgow's deep and abiding interest in Charles Darwin and nineteenth-century theorists of social evolutionism, such as Herbert Spencer. But Glasgow's terminology and imagery also invoke the central tropes of contemporary eugenic discourse: fate by inherited "germ plasm," dysgenic processes of degeneracy, and the biological and social threat of racial mixing, or "mongrelization." In deploying this last term, Glasgow links her text to

the common languages of eugenics and white supremacy circulating in both national debates over immigration restriction and local concerns with threats to the integrity of the color line. As a term for racial mixing, “mongrelization” suggests the allegedly Mendelian notion that the genetic traits of the “inferior” race prove dominant in mixed-race offspring, thus promoting the “degeneration” of the “superior” race. While nationally the term served as an inflammatory staple of eugenic and Ku Klux Klan appeals to Nordic race consciousness, the specter of “mongrelization” also figured prominently in Virginians’ debates over the Racial Integrity Act and the state’s developing racial order. In *White America* (published in 1923 with a copy of the Racial Integrity Act appended), Anglo-Saxon Club co-founder Earnest Sevier Cox confronted his readers with a stark choice between a “white America or . . . a mongrel America” (403). In endorsing the proposed Racial Integrity Act in 1924, the Richmond *Times Dispatch* warned that “America is headed toward mongrelism. . . . Thousands of men and women who pass for white persons in this state have in their veins negro blood . . . it will sound the death knell of the white man. Once a drop of inferior blood gets in his veins, he descends lower and lower in the mongrel scale” (Black 167). John Powell, defending the Racial Integrity Act against proposed revisions in 1926, cautioned readers of the *Times Dispatch* that “our civilization and our race will be swallowed up in the quagmire of mongrelization. There is no minute to be lost. . . . Virginians, awaken from your lethargy of pleasure and prosperity! The call has pealed forth for the last stand” (Sherman 87). In *The Mongrel Virginians* (1926), a eugenic study of mixed race populations in the hills of western Virginia, Arthur Estabrook and Ivan McDougle argued that mongrelization presented “an ever increasing social problem in the South” (Wray 82).⁶

It should be noted that, in judging poor whites as not quite white, Glasgow does not reflect a consensus among eugenicists or other Progressive reformers. In his influential *The Passing of the Great Race*

⁶In fact, at the time of the novel’s publication, Glasgow’s “mongrel breed” of poor whites would not have been recognized as white by the state of Virginia. With the recent passage of the Racial Integrity Act, a white person became legally defined as one “who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian” (Smith 87). Their physicians and local registrars would have been instructed by the state Bureau of Vital Statistics to register them as “mixed”; subsequently, the Bureau would have notified them that their children could no longer attend white schools or marry a white person (90-91).

(1916), Madison Grant, the New York patrician and leading eugenic authority who served as godfather to both the 1924 National Origins Act and the 1925 Virginia Racial Integrity Act, deemed Southern poor whites to be “descendants of the old borderers along the Scotch and English frontier. . . . The physical type is Nordic, for the most part pure Saxon . . .” (40). Matt Wray has shown how Progressive Era crusaders for hookworm eradication founded their reformist appeals on claims to poor whites’ “pure ‘Anglo-Saxon stock’” (120). In his 1931 sharecropper novel *Cabin in the Cotton*, author Harry Harrison Kroll pits the “Nordic purity” of the novel’s humble hill folk against the modern decadence of its Mississippi Delta planter elite (265). Yet, Mississippi Delta planter elitist William Alexander Percy, in his 1941 memoir *Lanterns on the Levee*, labels poor whites “an alien breed of Anglo-Saxon” (230). Throughout the early twentieth century, poor whites might be cast as the pure products of white America, as its degenerate underclass, or as its mongrelized other.

Barren Ground leverages miscegenation and white fears of racial contamination to undermine the social authority of both elite and poor whites who, through their inability to govern their licentious sexuality, compromise the color line. Just as the Greylocks’ poorly mended fences enable their “old black steer” to threaten the value of their neighbors’ pure breed Jersey cattle, old Dr. Greylock’s relationship with his servant Idabella, a “slatternly yellow woman,” has burdened both his family and his community with a “mulatto brood” (295, 63). Jason Greylock’s failure to rid his home of this “half-breed swarm” (63) signifies his family’s moral and physical decline. Almira Pryde’s “moral serenity” and rabbit-like fecundity conform to the same stereotypes of poor white sexuality that made poor white women suspect guardians of white racial purity and, following passage of Virginia’s Eugenic Sterilization Act in 1923, put them at risk of compulsory sterilization for being the “potential parent of socially inadequate offspring” (Wray 92).⁷

⁷Virginia’s Eugenic Sterilization law was affirmed in 1926 in the US Supreme Court’s eight-one decision in *Buck v Bell*. During testimony in a 1925 Circuit Court challenge to the law, H. H. Laughlin, Superintendent of the Eugenics Records Office, characterized Carrie Buck as a representative of the “shiftless, ignorant, worthless class of anti-social whites of the South” (17). In eugenic discourse, such “worthless” poor whites were often cast as weak links in the color line. Wray observes that the eugenic family studies “constructed the degenerate poor white as a biologically inferior type” whose characteristics often included “promiscuity and licentiousness (especially among

Barren Ground deploys sharply delineated and generally static class identities informed by a traditional white Southern conflation of land ownership and moral character and expressed through a language and logic of human character borrowed from eugenics. With adherents in the state government, on the editorial pages of major newspapers, and in the halls of the University of Virginia, eugenics provided “educated, self-consciously modern Virginians with a new method of legitimating the South’s traditional social order” (Dorr 259). As Gregory Dorr argues,

Eugenics provided a potential solution for nettlesome social problems—a way to dispense with poor white trash and the so-called Negro Question while ushering in modern liberal-industrial society in one motion. As a modern science, eugenics legitimized dominant social prejudices by justifying widely held beliefs on the basis of apparently objective, scientific observations. The racism of eugenics reinforced the social hierarchy that elevated the elite, extolled sedate whites as fit, and considered troublesome whites, poor whites, and all others to be genetic defectives in need of control. The eugenicists’ appeal to scientific expertise to achieve “social efficiency” mirrored both liberal and conservative reform movements during the Progressive Era. (262)

By invoking the “biological interpretation of history,” Glasgow aligns her text and its heroine with a discourse that had broad appeal among Virginia’s white elites and that linked the state’s emerging professional middle class with dominant national Progressive trends. Dorinda acquires her knowledge of both scientific farming and scientific racism during her time in New York with Doctor Faraday, the novel’s representative benevolent professional and Progressive reformer. As an act of class formation, naming poor whites a “mongrel breed” marks a boundary between rural capital and labor while simultaneously conjuring middle-class professionalism through the language of eugenic knowledge. Glasgow’s “biological interpretation of history,” as expressed in *Barren Ground* and *A Certain Measure*, charts the evolution of the South’s traditional class categories in carefully scripted ways that resign

the women) . . . and a recurring history of miscegenation” (83). As Wray notes, eugenically informed antimiscegenation laws, such as the Racial Integrity Act, “were directed primarily at people of color and at low-status, disreputable whites, the poor white trash who refused to uphold the color line” (82). Texas researcher and novelist Edward Everett Davis claimed, in the preface to his 1940 novel *The White Scourge*, that farm tenancy attracted “lowly blacks, peonized Mexicans, and moronic whites” (Foley 6). Davis advocated for immigration restrictions on the basis that “the ‘lower races’ . . . frequently intermarried with ‘marginal’ whites” (Foley 6).

the “good families” to the dustbin of history while promoting the “good people” to the vanguard of modernization and yoking poor whites and blacks to its machinery.

Glasgow also turns local social history to her ideological ends by exaggerating the republican simplicity and agricultural backwardness of her local farmers. Glasgow based her fictional Queen Elizabeth County on her childhood memories of Louisa County, Virginia, where she spent many “happy summers at the Glasgow home, Jerdone Castle” (Scura “*Barren*” 549-50), and her portrait of local life reflects this privileged perspective. Though less affluent and more provincial than the Tidewater aristocracy, thousand-acre Piedmont farmers like the Oakleys, Greylocks, and Ellgoods would have constituted a local elite rather than a humble yeomanry, controlling their county’s politics and patronage. Thomas Watson, for example, operated a 945-acre farm in Louisa County in the 1880s, exported his produce to Richmond, Baltimore, and England, and sent his son to Virginia Military Institute, where Thomas Jr. befriended classmate Robert Beverley, son of a wealthy landowner and descendent of one of the Old Dominion’s earliest and most renowned families (Shifflett 62). In diminishing slavery’s role in the antebellum Piedmont economy, Glasgow tries to further distance her “good people” from the South’s compromised history of chattel slavery and, thus, to distinguish their supposed republican independence and virtue. It is difficult to judge precisely what Glasgow means in saying that “Slavery in Queen Elizabeth County had rested more lightly than elsewhere” (*Barren* 281), but as a tobacco-growing region, Louisa County had a sizable slave and, later, free black population. According to historian Crandall Shifflett, “Louisa had in its population a black majority, which lasted into the twentieth century” (xi). Tobacco is a labor-intensive crop which, in slave times, required “about two acres per slave . . . under ideal conditions” (Shifflett 6). In fact, it seems unlikely that Dorinda’s great-grandfather could have operated a profitable tobacco farm without slave labor. John Abernathy had but one son to help on the family farm; wage hands would have been cost prohibitive and difficult to come by considering antebellum whites’ distaste for any work associated with slave labor.

Glasgow’s portrayal of the region as backward and benighted allows Dorinda to emerge as a pioneer of agricultural reform. Dorinda is not

alone in attempting what the text figures as the missionary work of bringing scientific agriculture to a barren land. Nathan Pedlar is a “prophet” of crop rotation and alfalfa cultivation, but the majority of local farmers see him as a hair-brained buffoon (18). The Ellgoods have made a go of large-scale stock farming, but no one else in the county has followed their lead. Jason Greylock makes a half-hearted attempt to “enlighten the natives” about the evils of the one-crop and tenant systems but his efforts meet with indifference (31). According to Glasgow, most of the local farmers are ignorant, prejudiced, and tradition-bound; they suffer from what Dorinda’s mother terms the “mental malaria” of the South (293).

But by the time the novel is set, let alone when it was published, Louisa County’s farmers were well on their way to abandoning tobacco culture for “dairying, livestock, and grass farming” (Shifflett 58). Soil depletion had been a problem since before the Civil War, but with slave labor and supportive markets, antebellum tobacco farmers had been able to turn a profit. To revive their impoverished soil, these farmers practiced “crop rotation and diversification, contour and deep plowing, and the application of lime, guano, marl, and plaster, or the planting of clover as a cover crop” (Shifflett 8). After the war, the loss of slave labor, fierce competition from Carolina tobacco growers, and the demand for dairy and poultry products in expanding urban markets from New York to Richmond convinced many Louisa farmers to forsake tobacco (60-61). According to Shifflett, the change from tobacco farming “is difficult to date but it began soon after the Reconstruction era, grew steadily in the 1870s, and accelerated in the 1880s” (58). In 1880, in response to the overproduction of tobacco, Virginia’s commissioner of agriculture “called upon Virginia farmers to give up tobacco-farming and replace it with stock raising” (60). By 1894, when the novel begins, “Virginia’s tobacco crop was valued at less than half the value of any crop since 1880, except 1888” (60). Soil depletion, one-crop agriculture, tenancy, and outdated farming techniques were problems in Southern agricultural production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Glasgow rightly suggests. However, Glasgow, exaggerating the benightedness of the Virginia farmers she claims to represent, sets the stage for her iconoclastic “Joan of Arc” of the Virginia Piedmont to carry forward her modernizing mission (464-65).

The novel advances this modernizing mission primarily through the narrative of Dorinda's "achievement," the reclamation of Old Farm. Within the thirty years covered by the narrative, Dorinda transforms the impoverished farm into a thriving agribusiness and extends her domain from one horizon to the other by acquiring the Greylocks' foreclosed estate. The text attributes her success to hard work and determination, to enterprise and scientific management, to an inherited "vein of iron" and a mystical kinship with the land. This last quality has been especially beloved by critics, who have thematized this mystical kinship variously as ancestral tradition (Santas 140-41), "pastoral vision" (Bond 567), "'feminine' transforming power [turned] outward" (Anderson 393), and "matrifocal" artistry (Ammons 174). While such interpretations may usefully map political, generic, and feminist themes onto the novel's oft-maligned narrative of agricultural reform, they do not register their own reproduction of the novel's mystified relationship of farmer to land, a relationship which masks the mediating and subordinate role of hired labor in agricultural production and which contradicts the text's own representations of what constitutes Dorinda's "work." Glasgow asserts that "Only by giving herself completely, only by enriching the land with her abundant vitality" could Dorinda restore Old Farm, but Glasgow repeatedly shows us scenes of Dorinda hiring, supervising, and critiquing her hired labor (*Barren* 409). Dorinda's real work in the novel consists in imposing capitalistic labor discipline—"regular, timed and routinized labor"—upon herself and her mostly black laborers (Roediger, *Wages* 96). Demystifying Dorinda's relationship to both the land and labor in this way helps us to understand Glasgow's narrative of one woman's "heroic quest for self" as a drama of personal and social reconstruction (Anderson 384). With her work ethic, "enterprise," postponement of gratification, faith in science and progressive reforms, Dorinda embodies and proselytizes a bourgeois capitalist ethos perfectly in tune with the dominant, national middle-class ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If, as Glasgow's publisher claimed and her early reviewers concurred, realism crossed the Potomac with the publication of *Barren Ground*, it was ferried across by this bourgeois capitalist ideology, which reproduces itself in a Southern setting under the banner of literary realism.

This ideological project aligns *Barren Ground* with contemporary Progressive movements for rationalizing agricultural production and

reforming rural life. As William Conlogue argues, Dorinda's transformation of Old Farm into a new farm dramatizes the central tenets of the new industrial agriculture, which sought to "replace haphazard tradition with rationality, systematization, efficiency, organization, professionalization, and an identification of farming with urban manufacturing" (16). Meanwhile, urban middle-class reformers, concerned with rural-to-urban migration and what seemed the increasing gap between urban and rural standards of living, promoted the Country Life Movement to bring farm life into line with the educational and social tenor of urban middle-class life and consumer culture. Championed in the agricultural press, the New Agriculture and the allied Country Life Movement gained federal support in 1907 with Theodore Roosevelt's appointment of a Country Life Commission and in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, which established the Farm Extension Service (Danbom 167-68, 173-74).

In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow articulates her feminist thematics within the gender politics of the Country Life Movement and the New Agriculture. Where farm women had traditionally played important if burdensome roles as producers both in the fields and in the home, Progressive Era rural reformers coached farm women in the ways of middle-class domesticity, transforming their roles from "producer and laborer into that of homemaker and consumer" (Foley 143). As Foley observes, "The gendered ideology of the 'new agriculture' sought to impose rigid boundaries between men's work and women's work, the separate spheres of middle-class urban life, with women working principally in the home and men running the farm" (143). Such efforts did not go unremarked or unchallenged. In the wake of the Country Life Commission's 1909 report, Charlotte Perkins Gilman criticized the commission for failing to include a single woman and for failing to recognize farm women as farmers themselves, instead treating them as "mere feminine connections of men" (Conlogue 64). A North Carolina woman complained in a letter to the *Progressive Farmer* that the "farm woman has been the most neglected factor in the rural problem, and she has been especially neglected by the National Department of Agriculture" (Foley 158). Contrary to the Country Life Movement's advocacy of middle-class domesticity, many women found that the New Agriculture, with its emphasis on mechanization and management,

offered new opportunities for them to be owner-operators rather than “mere feminine connections.”

While Dorinda’s management of Old Farm may defy “the distinction between men’s work and women’s work that Smith-Lever had enacted” (Conlogue 87), it reproduces the Country Life Movement’s investments in middle-class whiteness. By industrializing farm production, the New Agriculture proletarianized agricultural laborers and rearticulated class distinctions among the landed and landless to urban models of capital and labor. In addition, the Progressive Era’s heavily racialized formulations of class identity readily aligned with traditional agrarian associations of land ownership with whiteness. Foley notes that “the entire reform effort of the Country Life Movement was aimed at predominantly middle-class white women farmers who were likely to have the resources to acquire labor-saving devices for their household work” (151). Extension Service agents cast their concerns for white farm women’s health and appearance in terms of racial pride and racial survival. “The woman is the mother of the race,” wrote one agent, “and only in proportion to her strength will the race be strong” (Foley 159). In constructing her feminist heroine of the New Agriculture, Glasgow participates in the construction of a modern white Southern bourgeois subject carefully demarcated from the black and poor white lower orders.

Barren Ground directly relates Dorinda’s hard work and her prospects for success to the need to supervise and train her farm labor and to the alleged shortcomings of Southern labor in general:

Only by doing the work herself and keeping a relentless eye on every detail, could she hope to succeed in the end. If she were once weak enough to compromise with the natural carelessness of the negroes, she knew that the pails and pans would not be properly scalded, and the milk would begin to lose its quality. . . . There were times when it seemed to Dorinda that this instinct to slight was indigenous to the soil of the South. In the last six months she had felt the temptation herself. (310)

Earlier in the text, while discussing with her mother the difficulty of finding reliable farm labor, Dorinda voices this same charge against the postbellum South, informing her mother that “it is slighting that has ruined us, white and black alike, in the South” (269). Dorinda here echoes a claim made by many of the South’s business progressives. As the Richmond *Whig* opined in 1886, the “true remedy” for the South’s

economic ills lay in “educating the industrial morale of the people” (Gutman 67). With her father, Francis, a managing director at the Richmond plant of the Tredegar Iron Works, Glasgow was likely exposed to the social debates and daily dramas of Southern industry’s attempts to forge a disciplined work force from a traditionally rural, pre-industrial population.

Barren Ground participates in another episode of the ongoing process of disciplining pre-industrial populations to industrial labor regimes which has, as Herbert Gutman and subsequent American labor historians have shown, been a recurring feature of American social history. American social history has been marked by “capital’s increasing demands for regular, timed and routinized labor,” from the proletarianization of the native-born artisanal laborers of the early republic through the various immigrant and native-rural populations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Roediger, *Wages* 95-96). For America’s laboring classes, these demands have “entailed a severe restructuring of working habits—new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively” (Thompson 57). They have, of course, also entailed the loss of traditional forms of work, leisure, and community life, losses which those laborers have always struggled to negotiate and have often actively resisted, whether covertly or overtly, individually or collectively. For America’s employer classes, such efforts to reform laborers have “reinforced the biases that otherwise distort the ways in which elite observers perceive the world below them” (Gutman 71), contributing to views of such laborers as irregular, irrational, and irresponsible and precipitating casual stereotypes, legal strictures and, with the creation of labor management as a field of professional study, new knowledges.

The Southern rural poor, white and black, faced analogous charges in the decades following the Civil War as an expanding market economy and staple-crop production drew new segments of the Southern population into their web. Freedmen, aspiring to economic independence and rejecting labor arrangements that smacked of slavery, defined their newly acquired freedom in great part by the right to own land and to avoid white supervision of their labor. As Barbara Fields points out, “their choice was likely to disappoint those eager to reconstitute the staple economy” (166). Southern planters showed little concern for freedmen’s desires but were, instead, bent on reviving the

plantation order through hired gang labor worked under close supervision. Federal authorities and other Northern participants in Reconstruction sought to instill the former slaves with free market and free labor values, promoting wage labor through annual contracts between planters and black laborers. Sharecropping, then, emerged as a compromise between planters and free blacks, offering freedmen some measure of labor autonomy while securing annual labor for staple production. Poor and yeoman whites also fell victim to the expanding plantation economy. As postbellum changes in crop lien, fencing, and tax laws undermined traditional subsistence cultures and jeopardized small farmers' land tenures, many poorer whites lost their land and were reduced to dependent economic status as tenants and sharecroppers. The tensions generated by these new social conditions combined with elite whites' longstanding prejudices toward both blacks and poor whites to produce new discourses of labor's indolence and intransigence. "Complaints about undependable work habits," writes Fields,

echo and re-echo in the sources concerning the freedmen—and, for that matter, the antebellum free blacks. But they have also appeared again and again, in every part of the world, whenever an employer class in process of formation has tried to induce men and women unbroken to market discipline to work in exchange for a wage. The planters, indeed, made the same complaints about the people whom they contemptuously labeled crackers, rednecks, sandhill tackeys, and the like. (165)

Former subsistence farming whites, raised on traditional values of republican independence and accustomed to the less rigorous labor demands of extensive farming, resented their new economic dependency and struggled to adapt to the new demands of supervised work in more labor-intensive, staple-crop farming. In turn, they were characterized as belligerent and shiftless. For making the "crucial distinction between wage labor that benefited an employer and subsistence activities that benefited themselves" (Jones 32), freedmen were labeled idle or impertinent.

These historical struggles inform not only *Barren Ground's* portrayals of postbellum Southern rural life but also the very construction of Dorinda Oakley's character as the persevering and progressive hero of a revived Southern landscape. Dorinda's heroism is defined by her struggles to secure and discipline farm labor. The novel is fairly haunted by the history of black labor withdrawal. In the years following the Civil War, black labor, as measured in hours worked per capita, "dropped by

about one third . . . largely because all former slaves were determined to work fewer hours than under slavery, and many women and children withdrew altogether from the fields” (Foner 139-40). In Louisa County, freedmen “denied their labor to local patrons” by migrating in large numbers to towns and cities (Shifflett 48). The novel registers this labor crisis as Dorinda recounts the history of Old Farm—“After the war my father couldn’t hire labour, so he had to let all the land go bad” (241)—and the need to procure labor punctuates Dorinda’s saga. Both Foner and Shifflett describe the withdrawal of black labor as a form of economic and political agency. For Foner, it represents an exercise of “power” arising from “black families’ determination to use the rights resulting from emancipation to establish the conditions, rhythms, and compensation of their work, and to create time to pursue [their] personal and community goals” (140). Shifflett writes that Louisa County whites saw these “obvious expression[s] of resistance” as “Nigger impudency” and met them with “browbeating, threats to life, and refusals to pay wages” (48, 49). Glasgow’s text similarly denies its black laborers agency and rational self-interest. When her workers forsake the farm to take advantage of the higher urban wages that accompanied the First World War, Dorinda bemoans their “aversion from work” (463). Dorinda fears that without her black laborers, “the farms she had reclaimed with incalculable effort would sink again into waste land” (469). Discussing the problem, Dorinda and her step-son, John Abner, resort to a grim, racist humor: “‘Perhaps,’ she suggested hopefully, ‘when the negroes have spent all they’ve saved up, they’ll begin to feel like working.’ John Abner grinned. ‘Perhaps. But it takes a long time to starve a darkey’” (469). Even as the text promotes industrial production and capitalistic values, it resists blacks’ participation in a free labor market, clinging instead to received stereotypes that qualify African Americans’ capacity for self-government and rational self-interest.⁸

⁸Glasgow seems to have read *Nigger Heaven*, Carl Van Vechten’s controversial 1926 novel of jazz age Harlem, as a referendum on African Americans’ capacity for self-governance and responsible citizenship without the guiding hand of white paternalistic authority. In her July 28, 1926 letter to Van Vechten, Glasgow confesses that “What interested me tremendously [about *Nigger Heaven*] is the way the Negro reacts to the freedom of Harlem. . . . The serene fatalism, the dignity of manner, the spiritual power, all these qualities decayed, it appeared, with the peculiar institution” (*Letters* 80-81). Ultimately, Glasgow judges Van Vechten’s novel to be “the best argument in favor of African slavery that I have ever read” (80).

Responding to charges of Glasgow's racism, Pamela Matthews argues that in *Barren Ground* Glasgow, while blind "to subtleties of her own racism," criticizes a "generalized oppression that gives rise to its more specific forms, such as racism" (161). For Matthews, Dorinda's management of the family farm and her close, personal relationship with Fluvanna, her black employee, provide Dorinda with the opportunity to "revise a patriarchal heritage of 'condescension'" (162). At times, *Barren Ground* does champion the progress and character of what Dorinda's mother calls the "new order of darkeys" (253). The text gives implicit approval to the education of blacks and explicitly praises the "intelligence and industry" of a former tenant who has saved enough to buy his own small farm (77). There is also some small praise in the narrator's admission that "the better class of farmers preferred the intelligent coloured neighbor to the ignorant white one," though both are deemed "social inferiors" (282). But set against contemporary proposals for more extreme remedies to the "negro problem," these comments seem less a revision of traditional racial relations than a reassertion of the "Virginia Way" of genteel paternalism. For example, white supremacist Earnest Cox—with an eager nod to United Negro Improvement Association leader Marcus Garvey—argued for black repatriation to Africa: "If the negro is not removed from the United States the future American will be a mongrel" (Cox 316). Clarence Poe—"archetypal southern Progressive" and editor of *Progressive Farmer*, the South's leading journal of the new agriculture (Crow 216)—used his considerable influence to campaign from 1913 to 1915 for a segregated rural South, in which whites and blacks would reside in separate rural enclaves, modeled on the emerging system of apartheid in South Africa. While a proponent of improving education for rural blacks in order to combat the problem of the "ignorant negro field hand" (Crow 224), Poe feared that increased black land ownership would come at the expense of white owners, called for the use of "good white labor" (Crow 238) rather than reliance on black farm labor, and insisted that while "A black man might be 'a good hand' on the farm . . . he was not 'a good neighbor'" (Kirby, "Clarence Poe" 31). Poe's proposal for a segregated "great rural civilization" in the South was attacked by W. E. B. Du Bois and opposed by Westmoreland Davis, editor of Richmond's *Southern Planter*, "the *Progressive Farmer*'s largest competitor in the Upper South" (Kirby, "Clarence Poe" 37). Although both Glasgow and Poe

bemoan the inefficiency of black labor—Poe cast “ignorant” black laborers as “the South’s greatest economic burden,” estimating that the “efficiency of the Negro was only one-half that of the white man” (Crow 222, 223, 226)—and celebrate the Jeffersonian vision of an independent white yeomanry, *Barren Ground* cultivates the sort of racial intimacy characteristic of the “Virginia Way” of racial paternalism and antithetical to calls for repatriation or more rigid schemes of segregation.

As soon as Dorinda begins to hire black labor, black behavior and character become objects of labor discipline and paternalistic reform. Glasgow constructs Dorinda’s heroic work ethic in response to the alleged shortcomings of black labor and the repeated burdens of discipline and supervision that such labor imposes. Dorinda’s mission to restore Old Farm relies on her ability to mold a reliable and pliable black proletariat. Her “relentless eye” supervises the “natural carelessness of the negroes” (310). She milks her own cows because “With negroes you never can tell. . . . [T]hey don’t take the trouble to milk them thoroughly. And they won’t be clean, no matter how much you talk to them” (294). On the evening of her wedding to Nathan, Dorinda feels compelled to don her overalls and head out to the barn:

She knew that the milkers were probably slighting their work, and it made her restless to think that the cows might not have been handled properly. The negroes were cheerful and willing workers, but ten years of patient discipline on her part had failed to overcome their natural preference for the easiest way. (380)

Even her close companion Fluvanna disappoints Dorinda. On the day Dorinda’s mother must testify to a grand jury on behalf of her son Rufus, Fluvanna “contrive[s] to be late” (328). Contrary to Matthews’s claim that the text presents Dorinda’s “inherited feeling of condescension” (*Barren* 349) toward Fluvanna as a “patriarchal heritage” (Matthews 162) that their female friendship is in the process of overcoming, the novel casts Dorinda’s relationship with Fluvanna and her other black employees within the ideology of benevolent paternalism. Despite its occasional nods to black self-help, the text generally presents blacks as an adolescent, if not child-like race in need of white patronage. Dorinda, “endowed with an intuitive understanding” of this “immature but not ungenerous race,” is favorably equipped to preside over a people who “still attached [themselves] instinctively to the superior powers” (281, 282). As part of her bourgeois missionary agenda, Dorinda not only

keeps a watchful eye on her laborers but also introduces them to the regime of the clock, lectures them on the virtues of cleanliness, and scrupulously corrects their grammar. Dorinda also secures the loyalty of the black community through the kind of political theater that is a staple of rural paternalism. She laughs when speaking to her new employees because “the negroes would work twice as well for an employer who laughed easily,” though she fears they may detect “the hollowness of the sound” (282). When the county is struck with an epidemic of influenza, Dorinda, mounted on “her big white horse with the flowing mane and the plaited tail. . . like some mature Joan of Arc,” visits the homes of the afflicted, dispensing “peach brandy and blackberry cordial” (464-65). Dorinda is rewarded with loyal workers during a labor shortage. Ultimately, she does not reciprocate such loyalty. As a final solution to her labor woes, Dorinda mechanizes her dairy farm, replacing her black laborers with the “invisible power which possessed the energy of human labour without the nerves that too often impeded it, and made it so uncertain a force” (468). When push comes to shove for this agribusinesswoman, pastoral falls to profit, paternalism to proletarianization.

If black labor mediates Dorinda’s struggle with the barren land, poor white character shapes what the text figures as her inner struggles. As the product of yeoman and poor white parents, Dorinda and her two brothers embody this “union of the positive and the negative virtues” (9). Among these siblings, the cultural and historical divide between preindustrial and industrial subjectivities plays out as a naturalistic dynamic of heredity, circumstance and individual will. Josiah, Dorinda’s elder brother, takes after his poor white father. Josiah lacks his father’s “tireless” industry, but, like Joshua, he appears to Dorinda as an “appalling [example] of inherent futility” (302). Observing Josiah, Dorinda ponders the complexities of circumstance and heredity which produce individual character, resolving that “if the fight had narrowed down to one between herself and her surroundings, she was determined to conquer” (303). For her younger brother Rufus, Dorinda has hopes, but Rufus eventually succumbs to the “climatic inertia” of his surroundings (303). In other words, Rufus turns poor white, slighting his farm duties to hunt game, collect honey, gamble, and drink with the poor white Prydes. There is a gender agenda at work in the fate of this

“worthless boy” who is “obliged, through some obliquity of nature, invariably to appear as a braggart and a bully,” and who, because of his indiscretions, eventually leaves his sister and mother to manage the farm (324, 321). But there is also a class agenda to the portrayal of Rufus’s poor white masculinity. In part, what is at stake here is the proper definition of work. For subsistence farmers and poor whites like the Prydes, hunting game and honey is gainful employment and not merely the avoidance of work. The fruits of such labor could provide necessary supplements to the meager diet of those living outside, on the margins, or at the bottom of the cash economy. As tenants,

These men were obligated to put their wives and children to work chopping cotton and worming tobacco plants and to forgo any kind of household industry that would have rendered their families less beholden to local storekeepers. The reduction in household foodstuff production—the ears of corn replaced by cotton bolls, the vegetable patches disallowed by annual contracts, the hogs and cattle denied an open range for grazing—amounted to the most compelling symbol and potent cause of rural Southerners’ abject poverty throughout the late nineteenth century. If in the prewar period this class of whites adhered to a “leisurely” way of life (due to their practice of extensive agriculture), then their postbellum “laziness” gave evidence of widespread, chronic anemia produced by protein-deficient diets. (Jones 68)

Of course, necessity and recreation both may play their parts in gendered cultural activities such as hunting, and another part of this portrayal of poor whites is an attack on the sorts of preindustrial cultural practices which violate the novel’s advocacy of the bourgeois work ethic.

In this regard, the novel’s portrayal of poor whites resembles George Rawick’s characterization of the rise of racism among the developing Anglo-American bourgeoisie, whereby a “reformed” bourgeois creates “a pornography of his former life. . . . In order to insure that he will not slip back into the old ways or act out his half-suppressed fantasies, he must see a tremendous difference between his reformed self and those whom he formerly resembled” (132-33). The emerging Southern rural middle class used bourgeois conceptions of self-discipline and the work ethic to rationalize the expanding gap between landed and landless whites that developed with the rise in tenancy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the numbers of white tenants rose, landlords increasingly suggested that “white tenants were inherently flawed and lacked certain qualities of whiteness” (Foley 70). Agricultural economist William Spillman drew sharp distinctions

between “high-minded, self-respecting small proprietors” and the “discontented, thriftless, tenant class,” whose failure to climb the agricultural ladder proved their “unfitness for American citizenship” (Foley 69).

Within contemporary eugenics, poor whites’ failures to uphold the axiomatic relationship between whiteness and republican citizenship did not necessarily lead to views of poor whites as racial others or mongrels. John Hartigan argues that the eugenic studies tended to portray poor whites as threatening white racial health from within the race rather than from without, producing “an image of Self imperiled, where the ground of anxiety is that of the Same” (78). With the notable exception of Estabrook and McDougle’s 1926 *Mongrel Virginians*—the research for which was conducted at the same time Glasgow wrote *Barren Ground* and some sixty miles southwest of the novel’s Louisa County setting—the popular eugenic “family studies” of the early 1900s typically portrayed poor white families of reliably Anglo-Saxon heritage who, nonetheless, displayed patterns of what the studies took for inherited racial degeneracy. Moreover, these “degenerate” white branches were often genealogically connected to respectable middle-class families through unfortunate sexual alliances. This threat of “bad blood having been brought into the normal family of good blood” generated intense forms of self-anxiety and self-scrutiny among middle-class whites who feared that their own genetic heritage might be, or might have already been, compromised (Hartigan 88). Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, a host of popular books and articles encouraged middle-class whites to “think eugenically” by promoting a middle-class sexual etiquette that emphasized race conscious behaviors (Hartigan 93). Within this discourse, race consciousness became increasingly “a matter of internalized, disciplined bodily orders, actively maintained through attention to class distinctions” (Hartigan 98).

This theme is especially evident in the contrast the novel develops between Dorinda and her poor white cousin Almira Pryde. The novel introduces Almira in a chapter that establishes the gender and class politics for Dorinda’s romantic and sexual careers. The chapter begins as Dorinda appears in a new Easter dress she has purchased to gain the attentions of Jason Greylock. It ends as she ponders her mother’s injunction not “to let any man spoil your life” and resolves to avoid Jason in the future, a resolution the text describes as “the inevitable battle

between the racial temperament and the individual will" (106, 107). Considering that Dorinda will eventually forsake romance and sexuality to dedicate herself to the reclamation of Old Farm, Almira seems cast as a class-inflected foil:

She was a pink, flabby, irresponsible person, adjusting comfortably the physical burden of too much flesh to the spiritual repose of too little mind. All the virtues and the vices of the "poor white" had come to flower in her. Married at fifteen to a member of a family known as "the low-down Prydes," she had been perfectly contented with her lot in a two-room log cabin and with her husband, a common labourer, having a taste for whiskey and a disinclination for work, who was looked upon by his neighbors as "not all there." As the mother of children so numerous that their father could not be trusted to remember their names, she still welcomed the yearly addition to her family with the moral serenity of a rabbit. (94-95)

The Pryde pathology contrasts sharply and poignantly with the middle-class values Dorinda will come to champion. Dorinda, "armoured in reason" (282), represses the desires of her flesh (and maintains a fit figure well into her middle-age). The Prydes' lack of ambition and disinclination for work counter Dorinda's enterprise and industry. And, while frequent pregnancies were a burden and bane to poor women like Almira, her supposedly casual sexuality and maternity clearly demarcate Almira from the middle-class morality of a text that cannot utter the deed which results in Dorinda's own ill-fated pregnancy.

Unlike her brothers, Dorinda is not fated for poor white futility. The text clearly associates Dorinda's success in reviving Old Farm with her mother's yeoman "breed" through language which evokes her maternal great-grandfather. When, during her stay in New York City, Dorinda resolves to "meet life standing and . . . with her eyes open," the "unflinching Presbyterian in her blood steel[s] her against sentimentality" (202). When pouring her "abundant vitality" into the reclamation of the family farm, Dorinda toils "as resolutely as the pioneer must have toiled when he snatched a home from the wilderness" (409). In imposing industrial discipline on her black laborers, Dorinda adapts and advances her great-grandfather's missionary zeal and her mother's missionary dreams, providing "concrete expression" to "her mother's frustrated passion to redeem the world" (346). But to repress her other, poor white "nature," to guard against the "mental malaria" of pre-industrial subjectivity, Dorinda must also discipline herself, must simplify her life "into an unbreakable chain of habits, a series of orderly

actions at regular hours” (389). The cost of such discipline is an awareness that “this monotony of contentment had no relation to what she had called happiness in her youth” (389), an awareness of the emotional and physical life that Dorinda must repress to achieve business success and to secure her precarious bourgeois subjectivity.

In fact, *Barren Ground* constructs Dorinda’s emotional maturity in a manner reminiscent of other roughly contemporary representations of bourgeois “whiteness.” Richard Dyer, in his analysis of cinematic representations of whiteness, shows how whiteness is constructed as one term of a binary in which white comes to represent “values of reason, order and boundedness” (53). While justifying white superiority and authority, this logic also produces the “belief or suspicion that black people have in some sense more ‘life’ than whites” (55). As Dyer explains,

‘Life’ here tends to mean the body, the emotions, sensuality and spirituality; it is usually explicitly counterposed to the mind and the intellect, with the implication that white people’s over-investment in the cerebral is cutting them off from life and leading them to crush the life out of others and out of nature itself. The implicit counterposition is, of course, ‘death.’ (56)

Dyer traces this logic through films such as the 1938 Hollywood plantation romance *Jezebel*, in which black characters are used to “bodily express [white] desire” while the “white calm” of the heroine is revealed as “an imposition, a form of repression of life” (58). While *Barren Ground* cannot, of course, use the visual strategies practiced in film, the novel still uses black characters to develop Dorinda’s repression of sentimentality and bodily desire. When, after years of virtuous “thrift,” Dorinda allows herself the pleasure of new Sunday clothes, the text celebrates the occasion through Fluvanna’s “admiring ejaculations”:

“You look like a queen, Miss Dorinda,” Fluvanna exclaimed. “Thar ain’t nothin’—”
 “Anything, Fluvanna.”
 “There ain’t anything that gives you such an air as one of them willow-plumes.”
 “Those, Fluvanna. Yes, it does look nice,” Dorinda assented, after the correction.
 (367)

When, on the day of her rather somber wedding to Nathan, Dorinda enters the kitchen to help with the dinner preparations, her black cook

chases her out with the telling admonishment, “I don’t see . . . why anybody wanted to have a poky wedding like this. There ain’t even a fiddle to make things lively” (378). Fluvanna later adds, “I declare I couldn’t help feelin’ all the time that I was baking a cake for a corpse” (379). In both scenes, Dorinda suffers conflicting emotions that complicate her responses—in the first, the anxieties of her return to public life; in the second, the doubts associated with a marriage of convenience rather than passion. Still, both scenes rely on a subordinate black character to register their emotional potential and to highlight Dorinda’s more cerebral conduct, her maturity.

But it is not only Dorinda’s black employees who help to construct her “white calm.” Almira Pryde serves much the same function in the Easter scene previously discussed. As Dorinda emerges in her new blue dress, waiting anxiously for the wagon that will take her to church and to Jason, Almira fusses over Dorinda’s “stylish flare” (95). The text grants poor whites an ambivalent racial status. They are a “mongrel breed” and an “alien” race (45). Dorinda can find no place for them in her new economic and social order. For her dairy farm, Dorinda hires only black laborers. Though twice she hires on shares a poor white man to act as manager of the farm, the text makes clear that this is merely a concession to social conventions and plantation tradition. After purchasing the Greylocks’ former estate, Five Oaks, Dorinda installs the white Martin Flower to manage her new property, but she adamantly refuses Nathan’s suggestion to rent the farm to Flower on shares. Dorinda refuses on principle to enter into tenant contracts. Her stance seems to be partly informed by the text’s assertion that tenant farming has ruined the region’s soil. But—as seen in Glasgow’s nervous distinction between the “shiftless class of sharecropper or ‘poor white’” and her “land poor” yeoman families who had “owned, and had always owned, every foot of the impoverished soil which they tilled, or left untilled, on their farms”—it is also informed by a residual republicanism in which citizenship and whiteness are underwritten by land ownership (*Certain* 156).

For Glasgow, tenancy represents a curse on the Southern land and an obstacle to the formation of a rural Southern white bourgeois subject because tenancy produces and sustains poor whites. In dispossessing poor whites of their land and reducing them to the status of “common labourer[s]”—a status traditionally reserved for blacks in the rural

South—the tenant system undermines their whiteness and makes them an embarrassment to an emerging Southern middle class deeply invested in white supremacy. To forge such a subject and to save Dorinda’s farm, Glasgow purges Dorinda of her poor white heritage and exiles her shiftless brother, replacing the first with the capitalist work ethic and the second with closely supervised black wage laborers. In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow polices agrarian whiteness by harnessing traditional republicanism and the racialized logic of the agricultural ladder to the modernizing and nativist discourses of Progressive Era rural reform and class politics.

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