

Southern Progressivism and William Louis Poteat's Eugenic Rhetoric:

Science as Savior

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Current issues such as abortion policy, embryonic stem cell research, genetic engineering, and immigration policy fall within a sphere of social policy issues that historically encompasses the eugenics movement. The eugenics movement, widely supported by Progressive reformers in the early 1900s, essentially sought to improve the human condition through a program of selective breeding to improve the “race.” The rhetoric surrounding the eugenics movement highlighted tensions between the individual and society, science and religion, efficiency and morality—the same tensions that characterize many controversial policy issues today. By exploring the rhetoric of eugenics, we can gain insight into the rhetorical strategies used to negotiate these tensions in the past, and perhaps better understand the foundational perspectives that impinge on much of the divisive contemporary discourse on current issues of race and reproduction. We also have the opportunity to expand our historical understanding of the developing rhetoric of science.

Until fairly recently, the eugenics movement was studied primarily as a national phenomenon and characterized in terms of its broad progressive ideals and its racist character.¹ In Marouf Hasian took a rhetorical approach to explore the way particular ethnic, religious, and political communities have responded to eugenic thought and practices.² Historians have addressed how the movement manifested or progressed differently in different regions.³ Several of these studies focus on the different path the movement followed in the south, particularly its later rise and its focus on native-born Anglo Americans rather than the southern and eastern immigrants who were the focus of the movement in the northern industrial cities. The importance of Christianity and the

distinct racial history of the south motivated a particular brand of eugenic rhetoric in the south and it is this subset of eugenic rhetoric that is of interest to the current study.

To fill in previous research on southern eugenics, I will explore the discourse of a particular leader, William Louis Poteat, who served as president of then Wake Forest College from 1905 to 1927. Poteat was known as a devout Baptist and a prominent professor of Biology who was an outspoken reformer throughout his career, teaching evolution and openly arguing against a North Carolina law banning its teaching. He spoke widely on many progressive reforms, including eugenics, which he advocated through the 1930s. I offer an analysis of his discourse drawing on three speeches that most clearly focus on heredity and eugenics. These were stock speeches that he delivered in whole or in part on numerous occasions, some of which were covered widely in the local press.⁴

I argue that through two related rhetorical strategies—first, the entanglement of semantic and poetic meaning within a materialist construction of “human life,” and second, a disease metaphor to characterize the demise of society—Poteat ultimately embraces an overarching “efficiency motive” that subsumes Christianity and makes science the literal savior of humanity. To develop this thesis, I will proceed as follows: first, I will offer a brief overview of the character of the eugenics movement in the south and of Poteat’s role as a southern reform leader; second, I will outline Burke’s discussion of semantic and poetic meaning as it relates to the concept of metaphor, or perspective by incongruity; and finally the bulk of the paper will be the analysis.

Eugenics in the South

There are several lines of thought on the primary differences between southern eugenics and the northern, or more national movement. One distinction that has been documented is that the movement in the south gained prominence some years later and generally had more modest results. The first compulsory sterilization law was passed in Indiana in 1907, but the first law in the Deep South was in Mississippi in 1928. In the 1930s, institutionalization and sterilization in the south continued to increase even as they declined elsewhere as “nurture” conquered “nature” in the national debate. Edward Larson’s broad history of the movement in the south discusses several reasons for the later rise of eugenics in the south, most notably the hold of Christianity in the region, which rejected Darwinian science as Godless; and the related values of patriarchy and the sanctity of family life as free from government interference. Another factor was that the south simply had less of an academic, and particularly scientific, infrastructure to move the ideas through.⁵

Another key distinction between the movement in the north and the south is the targets of the negative eugenic action. In the north, the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, along with freed blacks, were perceived as inferior and as both causing urban problems and threatening the quality of the human stock. In the south, the white population was comparatively more homogeneous and Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws were seen as pretty effective bars to race mixing, so racial purity was not the motivation for eugenics there. Instead, the movement reflected class bias more than racism as it sought to improve society itself by decreasing the number of dregs on society, rather than seeking to prevent the deterioration of the Anglo race.⁶

Perhaps most important to the development of eugenics in the south was the way the ideas fit neatly with the public health campaigns regarding contagious diseases there in the 1920s. Quarantine for small pox or tuberculosis victims was much like segregating the mentally retarded. Reducing infant mortality and preventing the birth of defectives were congruent goals. Mandated medical exams for prostitutes, inmates and vagrants to counter the spread of syphilis served as a tidy precedent for eugenic actions. (Larson)

Without the kind of medical institutions and research universities that existed in the north, private physicians and mental health professionals emerged as the key advocates of eugenics in the south. Dorr explains that the “harmony between eugenics and public health in the south amplified the ‘eugenically disabling’ stereotypes of ‘born criminality’ and ‘feeble-mindedness.’ These new categories allowed doctors to merge class, race, and gender prejudices into a new concept of disability. Increasingly between 1890 and 1930, physicians conceived of disabled individuals—those with physical or mental impairments—less as a class to be cured or rehabilitated and more as a dangerous group in need of control.”⁷ Such physicians and mental health workers formed the core of the movement in the south, with strong advocacy coming from those few prominent in the academic scientific community.

William Louis Poteat

One of those reformers was William Louis Poteat. Poteat was born just prior to the start of the Civil War, first child of his father’s second marriage, into a wealthy and privileged family. His father was active in Baptist organizations and became a trustee of Wake Forest College. His mother had attended seminary. His idyllic plantation upbringing, strong Baptist faith, and his family’s paternalistic approach to slave holding

shaped Poteat's formative years. These ideals and the stability of the church were Poteat's constants through the upheaval of Reconstruction.

Poteat went on to study at Wake Forest and strongly reaffirmed his Baptist faith there. Poteat was active with the Euzelian society, one of two literary (debate) societies on campus, and was chosen as their lead orator in his senior year in 1877, with his oratory gaining praise in the local press. As the commencement speaker at age twenty, he emphasized benevolence. His particular devotion to a missionary Baptist doctrine, his classical education, and his oratorical skill left him poised to be a southern reform leader. Soon after his graduation, he published a letter to the editor of the *Biblical Recorder* speaking out against alcohol—and his life's work as a reformer had begun.

Poteat returned to Wake Forest as a tutor in 1878, just one year after graduating, and became a professor of natural history, a department that would eventually become the Biology department, in June of 1880. He was a popular teacher who built up the biology department and lectured widely in the community. Poteat dedicated himself to promoting a more liberal view of Christianity and demonstrating that the theory of evolution was not contradictory with Christianity. He focused on the idea that God had chosen evolution as his method, and claimed that in relation to Darwinism, there “must have been an intelligent and beneficent Cause at the starting point of this progress upward.”⁸ Elected president of the college in 1905, he used his elite position to advocate for reform causes throughout the south during his tenure at Wake Forest until 1927 and continuing long after his retirement. He never wavered from his commitment to his causes—child-labor reform, prohibition, care for the mentally ill, and eugenics.⁹

Poteat's advocacy of eugenics was consonant with his primary religious values of benevolence and social betterment, as well as his adherence to the contemporary findings in the science of heredity. As Poteat sought to maintain both commitments, he used poetic language in describing the materiality of life, a discourse that implies a great Creator and that we might see as a precursor to "intelligent design." Through his entanglement of the poetic and the semantic, however, he constructs a materialist and deterministic concept of human life that subsumes religion rather than the other way around (as opposed to religion transcending science).

Semantic and Poetic Perspectives

Burke is careful to note that semantic and poetic meanings are not oppositional, merely different. Semantic meaning serves a sort of pointing function. The address on an envelope points to the recipient of the letter. For the postal workers, the address serves as instructions. The significance of the address, its meaning, assumes an external structure or established organization that allows for the perfect, and perfectly neutral, description of each potential addressee. Thus, the semantic ideal is "to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe."¹⁰ Poetic "pointing" is the sort of pointing that more clearly conveys an attitude—as in "Faugh! A chair!" versus "Ho, ho! A chair!"—to use Burke's example.¹¹ Correctness is a matter of semantic meaning—as in whether or not an object is correctly identified as a chair—does the description capture the "chairness" of the chair. Such an "either-or" test would not, however, apply to poetic meaning. Instead, poetic meaning deals in encompassment, as in, how effectively or how fully a terminology can capture the intricacies of an overarching perspective, rather than capturing the strict material essence of a thing.

Semantic meaning is descriptive while poetic meaning serves more of a normative, and ultimately moralistic function. The semantic ideal seeks “*description* by the *elimination* of attitude;” while the poetic ideal seeks “*a full moral act* by attaining a perspective *atop all the conflicts of attitude*.”¹² In essence, the poetic ideal can be achieved through appeal to a transcendent, or perhaps subsuming, metaphor that encompasses all possible attitudes (metaphor providing “perspective by incongruity”).¹³ As Burke notes, poetic meanings are related to one another like concentric circles—the wider circles do not eliminate the smaller ones, but rather encompass them.

Poteat’s Eugenic Rhetoric

Even though Poteat uses seemingly poetic language to characterize the wonderment and awe of human biology, his discourse ultimately constructs an utterly materialist and deterministic conception of human life. The materiality and the deterministic nature of human life intersect in Poteat’s concept of human heredity. Therefore, to control heredity is to solve for, or “cure,” the degeneration of human society because controlling heredity maintains the proper natural social order (of materiality and determinism) ordained by God. Thus, the efficiency motive, which places control in the hands of experts—namely scientists, becomes the transcendent or encompassing metaphor, subsuming religion and displacing God as “architect.”

In Poteat’s speeches on heredity and eugenics, the essence of human life is its materiality. The physical basis of life is primary. Early in a speech to the North Carolina Society for Mental Hygiene in 1917, Poteat lays out the primacy of the material of life:

The most wonderful substance in nature is protoplasm. Of
all substances it is the most delicately organized from the

architectural point of view, and its chemical composition is the most complex.... It is, moreover, the most important of all substances. It is the physical basis of life.... If we ever succeed in running down that elusive wizard, Life, he will be caught hiding amid the intricacies of this marvel of protoplasm.¹⁴

The language is poetic, but the perspective is clearly “semantic.” Poteat is pointing to life, describing it, describing it as marvelous, even; but its physicality is its essence. A moral or spiritual dimension is subsidiary to the physical. As he continues to discuss this wondrous materiality, he equates *all* life on the basis of its *common* materiality. He says, “...all living things from amoeba to man, from bacillus to red-wood, are composed of these protoplasmic cells and their products.”¹⁵ Materially, there is no difference; and materiality is the essence of life.

The primacy of this materiality is further developed in, “The Standard Man,” that Poteat first delivered in 1921 to the Southern Baptist Education Association. In the speech, Poteat argues that heredity is the most important of the three factors of life, the other factors being environment and training. The determinism of his view is apparent in his initial framing of the speech. He opens by referencing “the three Fates of the ancient Greek mythology and the three Norns of the Scandinavian mythology” as a “pictorial, poetic representation of the fact that there is a destiny.... [T]hey have their counterpart in modern science. Only we give them different names. Instead of Fates, we speak of Factors. They are Environment, Training, Heredity.”¹⁶ Heredity is deemed most important because it “supplies the substance of life, the material upon which the other

factors operate. It *determines* our nature, what we start life with, what [we] *are* by virtue of our ancestry.”¹⁷ Thus, the materiality of life is its own destiny.

It is in this all-important concept of heredity that the materiality and the determinism of life intersect. In further arguing the supremacy of heredity, Poteat claims

Heredity ordains our inborn gifts and capacities, limitations, weaknesses, defects. It sets the boundaries beyond which no favoring external conditions, no intelligence or assiduity of training, no passion of ambition, is ever able to transport us. Besides, while environment and training affect only the existing generation, heredity affects all succeeding generations.¹⁸

Heredity is God-like as it “ordains our inborn gifts.” Heredity is active as it “sets the boundaries.” It is a place that we can never leave. It is utterly deterministic.

The deterministic character of human heredity, and therefore life, is emphasized in the receptacle metaphor of humanity that Poteat uses in discussing the role of training or education. He says,

Our formal education is not reception, but awakening. That row of little earthen jugs on the recitation bench with the teacher sedulously pouring into them what had previously been poured into him does not represent education. Our fellowships educate us. One life signals to another. Deep calleth unto deep. The contacts, malevolent or gracious, of personal intercourse with our contemporaries or with our

predecessors surviving in books awaken and “draw us out.”¹⁹

Later he claims that fellowship calls into action our “native instincts and capacities.” Capacity is quite literal—we can hold only so much; and the amount we can hold is native—what we are born with. That inborn capacity determines our station in life.

To the same group just over a year later, Poteat expounds on the determinism of inborn capacity on social status as he speaks on “The Social Significance of Heredity.” After discussing the work of Darwin, Mendel, and Galton, as well as some of his contemporaries, Poteat lays out the very logical connection of heredity and social status:

Let me add that another conclusion of wide social bearing seems well supported by many recent and careful observations. Levels of intellectual capacity in children, above which they cannot develop, are correlated with the social status of the parents, that is to say, children of superior social status show the highest mental levels, children of unskilled laborers the lowest. In other words, the upper social strata contain a larger percentage of persons of superior natural endowments than the lower strata. Station is determined by capacity.²⁰

It logically follows that racial traits are inherited as are family traits, hence “the inborn capacity for intellectual growth is possessed by different races of men in different degrees.”²¹ The semantic nature of the discussion is overwhelming—no poetry here.

Poteat is pointing to the facts of life—the observable, material character of human life and the deterministic nature of that materiality.

If God had a role in this determinism, it was in determining the character of the individual, not the fate of society. Eugenics is offered as the ultimate solution for society's ills, and Poteat demonstrates how this scientific approach, in fact, represents "social salvation." Eugenics is not merely acceptable to Christianity, not merely a form of Christian conduct. It is an element of the "Christian standard." To control heredity is to maintain the natural order as God intended. It is both benevolent and focused on social betterment, and is therefore, the very embodiment of Christianity.

Over the years, the severity of the illness afflicting society becomes more apparent to Poteat as he ultimately outlines how society is ill and curing that illness—society's salvation—is within human control through the use of eugenics. In 1917, Poteat speaks of the ability of protoplasm to "maintain its normal efficiency against the perils of accident and disease, the whip and the halter of drugs, the domination of alien ideas, and the taint of defective heredity."²² The paternalistic role of the government in caring for "defectives" is apparent in a maternal metaphor, as Poteat notes his most important qualification for speaking on the matter: "...the earnest wish to serve the State in preserving to her all her children in the fullness of their powers, in fighting whatever tends to destroy or mar them, and, if any of them are thrown back upon her bosom in want or helpless defeat, I would save her from the shame of neglecting them...."²³ So, scientific experts must save the State, so that the State can save her children.

Poteat posits the affliction of society as nothing short of an infectious disease. Crime, hunger, feeble-mindedness, loose morals, disease, and degeneracy are a "peril"

that has been “exaggerated by the industrial revolution, which necessitated the congestion of population in the centers of manufacture and went far toward substituting the factory for the home.”²⁴ Love and sex were “commercialized in the dance hall, the gilded gate of hell.”²⁵ And now that the discipline of the war is relaxed,

It is succeeded by an artificial gaiety and the infection of moral license. It is tragic, indeed, when the peril of our children overflows into succeeding generations and spreads from centers of infection to involve thousands of innocent victims. It is hardly less tragic to continue the policy of silence and neglect and allow the waste and pollution of our best blood, which is the nation’s most precious possession.²⁶

The demise of morality takes place within the tainting of blood, the materiality of life, and spreads just as a physical illness spreads—from “centers of infection” to “overflow” through generations.

By ignoring the spread of social degeneracy, humanity has been complicit in destroying the natural order ordained by God. In 1921, Poteat laments the “conspiracy of silence” that has led to ignoring ills of society and the problems of the degeneration of human stock. He decries that “the best blood of the race has been wasted in ever-recurring wars, or polluted by unrestricted matings.” Finally, Poteat addresses the role of God directly: “The superstition that a given percentage of disease and defect is decreed of Providence has been operative. The canker and tragedy of the social evil are condoned as ‘necessary,’ humanity rots at the roots, and we acquiesce.”²⁷ Clearly, ridding society of

disease and defect is not only a matter of efficiency or sound policy; it is a moral obligation to overcome “social evil.”

The moral basis of overcoming social ills is not only a matter of benevolence toward victims. It is also a matter of maintaining the natural social order ordained by God, and maintaining order is a matter of efficiency. After explaining that “individual capacity often finds its fit place and tasks,” Poteat notes that people acting in ways that are not in keeping with their natural station leads to the failure of society:

But quite as often ambition over-reaches capacity, C men are trying to do B work, and A men, C work. In professional and business life multiplied failures bear witness to such misfits.... On the whole, human society is inefficient. The man and the job do not fit, and we seem not to know precisely why.²⁸

Poteat suggests that we over rely on empirical methods of judging applicants rather than being attuned to the proper fit of man to job according to heredity. Intelligence, he says, is of the deepest significance; and intelligence “may be scientifically ascertained” and “is determined by heredity.”²⁹

The solution, the cure for the disease afflicting society, then is the proper application of science for efficiency. Eugenics offers our “social salvation.” Poteat suggests that eugenics can save us from the “overthrow of civilized society” by the “enemies of society” who are “recruited from this rapidly increasing lower section of the population.”³⁰ He proclaims,

If anything can save American society from soon taking a plunge from the peak of its development and efficiency to a rapid and disastrous decline, it is the practical application of the new knowledge of human nature and human society to our social institutions and practices.³¹

The knowledge afforded by science is truly the savior of society.

In Poteat's conclusion to his 1921 speech on "The Standard Man," the supremacy of scientific efficiency displaces God as the architect of life, and eugenics rests atop the hierarchy of determinism.

The twist and taint consolidated in a long line of continuous germ-plasm need to be corrected and expunged. The capacities given in heredity need to be called out, newly related, controlled and directed to worthy ends. The standard man will be well born, well conditioned, well trained, but also born again. Accordingly, I propose a modification of the triangle of life given earlier in this address, in order that it may embody the Christian standard. I name the three sides *Eugenics*, the science of being well born, *Euthenics*, the science of being well conditioned, and *Anagenics*, the science of being born again.³²

The transcendence is complete. The "triangle of life," whether conceived as the fates of mythology or the factors of modern science, is deemed to "embody the Christian standard." In naming the three sides, eugenics is primary. It is the base and foundation

of all else. Because it upholds the materiality of life through the control of heredity, eugenics is the ultimate Christian activity. By maintaining the natural social order, eugenics is the new savior.

Conclusion

Work in progress/HELP!:

1. Poteat's linkages of heredity → substance → capacity → social status → efficiency → the natural order of life create an overwhelmingly materialist and deterministic vision of humanity.
2. Through the development of these linkages, Poteat's language shifts from the poetic to the semantic.
3. As the language shifts, we are directed to perceive in terms of social welfare over any concept of benevolence toward any individuals.
4. Adopting a semantic vocabulary, scientific perspective, and efficiency motive as a transcendent rhetoric leads to losing site of individual well being, morality, and benevolence.

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- ¹ Daniel L. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995); Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1968).
- ² Marouf Arif Hasian, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*. (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia P, 1996).
- ³ Gregory Michael Dorr, "Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5(2006) 359- ; Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. P, 1995); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).
- ⁴ Texts are drawn from MS 91, William Louis Poteat Papers 1856-1938, Z. Smith Reynolds Library Special Collections and Archives, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA.
- ⁵ Larson.
- ⁶ Larson.
- ⁷ Dorr 359.
- ⁸ Randal L. Hall, *William Louis Poteat: A Leader of the Progressive-Era South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 49.
- ⁹ Biographical information from Hall.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973): 141.
- ¹¹ Burke, *PLF*, 143.
- ¹² Burke, *PLF*, 147-148.
- ¹³ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1954): 89-90.
- ¹⁴ William Louis Poteat, "Address on the Occasion of accepting the Presidency of the North Carolina Society for Mental Hygiene, January 12, 1917," typed manuscript, folder 949, Poteat Papers. Hereafter, WLP, 1917, 1.
- ¹⁵ WLP, 1917, 1-2.
- ¹⁶ William Louis Poteat, "The Standard Man:...Presidential Address to the Southern Baptist Education Association, Birmingham, Ala., December 3-5, 1921," clipping from *Baptist Education Bulletin*, folder 1085, Poteat Papers, 4. Hereafter, "The Standard Man."
- ¹⁷ "The Standard Man," 5.
- ¹⁸ "The Standard Man," 5.
- ¹⁹ "The Standard Man," 5.
- ²⁰ William Louis Poteat, "The Social Significance of Heredity:...Presidential Address to the Southern Baptist Education Association, Memphis, February 21, 1923," clipping from *Baptist Education Bulletin*, folder 1078, Poteat Papers, 5. Hereafter, "Social Significance."
- ²¹ "Social Significance," 5.
- ²² WLP, 1917, 3.
- ²³ WLP, 1917, 1.
- ²⁴ "The Standard Man," 6.
- ²⁵ "The Standard Man," 7.
- ²⁶ "The Standard Man," 6-7.
- ²⁷ "The Standard Man," 6.
- ²⁸ "Social Significance," 6.
- ²⁹ "Social Significance," 7.
- ³⁰ "Social Significance," 7.
- ³¹ "Social Significance," 7.
- ³² "The Standard Man," 7.