

From the privy to the paper: Excrement, public health, and discourses of race in the Progressive Era U.S. South

Jared Kazik Asser [University of Georgia]

In 1909 the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission (RSC) embarked on a massive public health campaign to eradicate hookworm – a parasite that spreads through eggs laid in human excrement. A blight on the Southern U.S. states, in some places hookworm infestations tormented 75% of the general population. The RSC aimed to eliminate the parasite by disciplining Southern defecation practices, largely through campaigns of free public education and the construction of ‘modern’ privies. Taking this campaign as its focus, ‘From the Privy to the Paper’ deals with excrement at the intersection of the history of medicine and the politics of race during the Progressive Era.

It builds on the work of Nayan Shah (2001) to understand how public health shaped constructions of race. While science has always helped shape race, public health was a new and intimate kind of knowledge and this research shows how it brought domestic life to the forefront. The paper accomplishes this in two moves; first, it draws on the professional and administrative papers of a key scientist and public health reformer for the RSC to examine the development of a public health campaign to end hookworm, through defecation education. It then proceeds to use newspapers to examine how this medical discourse changed once in public: blaming Black Americans for the origins and spread of this parasite – ultimately this discourse framed hookworm as a Black assault on the white community. This investigation moves outward from North Carolina, during the years 1898-1930.

Finally, it concludes with directions for future research.

CV:

Education

The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 2020-
PhD – History
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario 2018-2020
M.A. – History
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario 2011-2016
B.A. – Combined Honours in Music and History.

Publications

Eight book reviews in peer-reviewed journals. One article and book chapter manuscript in progress.

Presentations (One of Seven)

“Emotions in the Reconstruction Archive,” at Louisiana State University
Special Collections 2022