

Declared Defective: Native Americans, Eugenics and the Myth of Nam Hollow. By Robert Jarvenpa. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 258 pages. \$60.00 cloth and electronic.

In 1912, Arthur Eastabrook and Charles Davenport published *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics*, a study of the Nam family of Nam Hollow (Stockbridge Mohican), which was undertaken in order to answer the question of whether degeneracy could be biologically inherited. The 1912 “Menace in the Hollow” eugenics study claimed that the people had biologically inherited indolence, feeble-mindedness, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, and criminality. *Declared Defective*, Robert Jarvenpa’s historical anthropological study, examines the Eastabrook and Davenport eugenics study and posits his theory for reidentifying the Nam family as Stockbridge Mohicans. He also describes *cacogenics*, a term used to “denote bad genes or, in the parlance of that time, defective “germ plasm” (1).

A sociocultural anthropologist, Jarvenpa outlines the story of the Van Guilders, their part in the story of eastern colonial frontier, and some of the ways in which Native Americans became “alienated from their ancestral lands, displaced and dislocated, only to become ‘hidden’ or submerged from public view as they intermarried with European Americans and others” (3). The book traces the ethnogenesis of the Nam people, following them on a migration from western Massachusetts in the eighteenth century to Washington County, New York, then culminates with Eastabrook and Davenport’s “research” in the early-twentieth century: “Losses of indigenous lands and livelihoods kept the Mohican and other Indian groups in a constant state of flux, uncertainty, movement and retreat” (13).

Chapters 3 and 4 then outline the changing conditions in Washington County that led to the increasing poverty and social marginalization of the Van Guilders, including the nineteenth-century period when they initially relocated to the county through Eastabrook and Davenport’s eugenic study *The Nam Family*. This period included gradual loss of the family’s lands and hence a shift away from a community of self-sufficient farmers to one of poorly paid farmhands, day laborers, and millworkers. Joseph Van Guilders and Mary Holly (Molly) Van Guilders (née Winchell) were a part of the Stockbridge Mohican group in Massachusetts who moved on to Guilders Hollow in Washington County, New York (101). Once there, they set up lives and homes, from which their six offspring also went on to live their lives. In hard times, they lived by sharing their limited resources with networks of relatives while falling back upon historically and culturally familiar livelihood strategies such as hunting and fishing, small-scale horticulture, plant gathering, basketmaking, and peddling (5). Comparatively few Van Guilders became paupers supported by town or county governments.

The author aims to analyze the eugenics-based analysis of the Nam and Nam Hollow in the context of a wider discourse about the marginalized, mixed-raced rural poor, seeking to deconstruct Eastabrook and Davenport’s narrative and probe beneath its dehumanizing cant of “cacogenics” to discover a real people and their actual historical experience (4). The story of the Nam study is a story of scientific or pseudoscientific zealotry, Jarvenpa argues, one that balances an unholy line between an ignorance and

misunderstanding of persisting Native American behaviors and institutions, on the one hand, and mischaracterizing the coping strategies of the rural poor as due to genetic defectiveness, on the other. Ultimately, this is a story about the convolutions and contradictions of race and class in America: “Estabrook and Davenport’s genre of eugenics echoed many of the fears and class prejudices of the American public and, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to the further stigmatization of one of the least known sectors of the Native American community: the admixed, or mixed-race communities of the East” (3).

As Jarvenpa argues, the story of the Van Guilders is perhaps a story of “an enclave of poor, marginalized mixed-race people making do with scarce resources during an era of tumultuous political and economic change” rather than the Eastabrook argument of defective genetics leading to ostracism and defectiveness (2). The author analyzes the conditions experienced by Eastabrook and Davenport and their comprehensively constructed genealogies—eight generations and 1,795 individuals—work that was completely undermined by their heavy reliance on hearsay testimony (98). Jarvenpa argues that “their work was flawed by a relentless, if not reckless, pursuit of a caco-genic explanation for all behaviors deemed objectionable” (6). The author concludes by arguing the perils of promoting biologicistic explanations of human behavior in the absence of serious historical and cultural inquiry.

This book’s primary value is not in its revisiting of eugenics and its ad-hoc application in the 1912 work, but rather in its questioning of the motivations that take researchers to the field to construct work that ascribes genetic defectiveness to a community that clearly has economic issues. The fact is that the Nam Family study did not seek strengths and resilience in the face of overwhelming dislocation and disenfranchisement. It is perhaps a weakness that this book labors through material focusing on the eight generations covered by the 1912 work, rather than further developing aspects of cultural resilience.

Although this book’s specific focus into the 1912 research project and its “scientific” paradigm might hold limited interest for some readers, its contributions are quite useful in two particular areas. One, of course, is its further illumination of pockets of communities of blended heritages and the way their identities and genealogies are constructed. This identity construction can have larger impacts, such as the creation of a recognition process for tribes where there is a presumption that they no longer exist. The second area of usefulness is the focus on eugenics and any potential links to so-called “Native DNA” and genetics. The broader genetics-related conversations are public, national, and international, and hold much interest for Indigenous people around the world. Eugenics and the genetics-based research of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has much currency in current plights in the recognition of sovereignty, land access, and land possession across Australia, the United States, and Canada as it critically links to “where did we come from” debates. These two areas are of significant interest to Native Americans and those other Indigenous groups who are interested in discussions around positive national and local recognitions of heritage.

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