What is "White Trash"?: Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the U.S.

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What is “White Trash”? Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the U.S.

“White trash” is, in many ways, the white Other. When we think about race in the U.S., oftentimes we find ourselves constrained by categories we’ve inherited from a kind of essentialist multiculturalism, or what we call “vulgar multiculturalism.” Vulgar multiculturalism holds that racial and ethnic groups are “authentically” and essentially different from each other, and that racism is a one-way street: it proceeds out of whiteness to subjugate non-whiteness, so that all racists are white and all victims of racism are non-white. Critical multiculturalism, as it has been articulated by theorists such as those in the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, is one example of a multiculturalism which tries to complicate and trouble the dogmatic ways vulgar multiculturalism has understood race, gender, and class identities. “White trash” identity is one we believe a critical multiculturalism should address in order to further its project of re-examining the relationships between identity and social power. Unlike the “whiteness” of vulgar multiculturalism, the whiteness of “white trash” signals something other than privilege and social power.

The term “white trash” points up the hatred and fear which undergird the American myth of classlessness. Yoking a classist epithet to a racist one, as “white trash” does, reminds us how often racism is in fact directly related to economic differences. As a stereotype, “white trash” calls our attention to the way discourses of class and racial difference tend to bleed into one another, especially in the way they pathologize and lay waste to their “others.” Indeed, “subordinate white” is such an oxymoron within dominant culture that such a social position is principally spoken about in our slang, where we learn terms like “white trash,” “redneck,” “cracker,” and “hillbilly,” just to name a few.

We don’t say things like “n**gr trash” precisely because “n**gr” often implies poverty to a great extent. Are some African-Americans called “n**gr trash” because they are black, or because they are poor? There is no hard and fast answer to this one—it’s difficult to distinguish between race and class when discussing the derogatory meanings of “n**gr.” In this way, “n**gr” is a term like “white trash.” This conflation of race and class in America often mixes us up quite a bit, as most ideologies which perpetuate injustice tend to do. When people are kept guessing about what kinds of social forces oppress them, they are less able to defend themselves. Naming the connections between...
racial identification. White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside of whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other which inhabits the core of whiteness.

Finally, the term “white trash” reminds us that one of the worst crimes of which one can accuse a person is poverty. If you are white, calling someone “white” is hardly an insult. But calling someone “white trash” is both a racist and classist insult. It’s worth asking why this is so. Perhaps the scar of race is cut by the knife of class. This is not to say that race is in any way reducible to class. Clearly, the knife cuts both ways. Yet all too often in discussions of racial identity class is ignored, dismissed, and left unthorized. We argue that leaving class out of anti-racist criticism not only creates a theoretical blindspot, but can also play into class prejudice. We cannot understand many types of social injustice without deploying theories which wed anti-racist agendas to anti-capitalist ones. Analyzing white trash is one way to begin launching, and ultimately popularizing, such theories.

Some Definitions of White Trash

Historically speaking, the earliest recorded usages of the term “white trash” are found in references to “poor white trash,” which date back to the early nineteenth century. Historical dictionaries of Americanisms typically ascribe origins of the term to black slaves. If we are to believe these dictionaries, the term originated as a black on white labeling practice and was rather quickly appropriated (by 1855) by upper class whites. Both terms appear to have remained in use by blacks and whites throughout the nineteenth century. Today, although “white trash” seems to see more frequent and widespread usage, the term “poor white trash” remains with us, a reminder that it is, after all, an explicitly economic as well as racial identity. For this reason, “white trash” presents us with the possibility of a radical transvaluation of what it means to be white, poor, or both. For contemporary writers and activists like Dorothy Allison or Jim Goad, “white trash” becomes a potent symbolic gesture of defiance, a refusal of the shame and invisibility that come with being poor. It also becomes a way to call attention to a form of injustice which is often ignored, given popular conceptions of the U.S. as a meritocracy. Even if calling oneself “trash” seems to smack of self-loathing, it nevertheless serves to reveal prejudice against the impoverished in America. Sometimes it is strategic to be named something terrible rather than to have no name at all.

It is difficult to determine just exactly who or what we are talking about when we use the term “white trash.” The questions “how do you define white trash?” and “who exactly are you talking about?” demand answers. These questions are basically ways of asking whether or not we think the stereotypical images of white trash America as violent, incestuous, and criminal are true. That is, most people understand white
trash not as a clearly-defined socioeconomic stratum nor as a cultural group, but rather as a complex set of social representations, an amalgam of well-known stereotypes. White trash as we know it is both an economic identity and something imaginary or iconic. When we talk about white trash, we’re discussing a discourse which often confuses cultural icons and material realities, and in effect helps to establish and maintain a complex set of moral, cultural, social, economic, and political boundaries. To interrogate this discourse, we need to ask where its representations and stereotypes come from, what motivates them, how they are produced and taken up, and by whom. From this perspective, we can begin to see how the category “white trash” is used to blame the poor both for their poverty and for social problems which can be found at all levels of the economic ladder. For example, stereotypes of white trash and “hillbillies” are replete with references to dangerous and excessive sexuality; rape (both hetero- and homosexual), incest, and sexual abuse are supposed to be common practices among poor rural whites. Yet we know that sexual abuse occurs in all segments of the population. White trash gets associated with and blamed for the kinds of sexuality people may experience no matter what class background they have. This is likewise the case when poor whites are stereotyped as virulently racist as compared to their wealthier white counterparts. As long as the poor are said to possess such traits, people can convince themselves that the poor ought to be cast out of mainstream society—they deserve what they get.

Having established that we need to critically interrogate these representations, it is important that we return to the vexing questions of just who we think we are talking about. Even those of us who would lay claim to some white trash past (say, those of us from impoverished and/or under-educated white families or communities) might find it hard to claim this identity now, due to the considerable social distances we’ve traveled to reach our various locations within the academy. How do we represent the material realities, the real life experiences of poor, under-educated, and otherwise marginalized whites in our own discourses and practices?

One way to begin to answer this question is to critically examine how we explain the marginal status of these whites. Is it, perhaps, genetic? People like Charles Murray and other proponents of the “bell curve” theory of intelligence would argue that poor whites are poor simply because they aren’t as smart nor as educable as their genetically well endowed fellow whites. Murray and his ilk are reviving an old strain of thought about race which goes back to the early twentieth century eugenics theory which Nicole Hahn Rafter describes in her White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies. More recently, other conservative cultural critics, known collectively as the “Angry White Males,” have argued that impoverished whites are in large part the product of mis-
guided social policies. According to this view, the government programs associated with The War on Poverty have failed the poor, breeding generations of welfare dependent whites. Affirmative Action policies are singled out here as well, as these critics argue that they function as little more than racial quota systems which exclude the white underclass. The end result of these programs and policies, they argue, is a growing class of poor, disenfranchised whites who share a culture of poverty that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to enter mainstream American life.

From our perspective, both of these explanatory models demonstrate the tendency of the social sciences and policy studies to pathologize certain behaviors or groups, thereby completely misdiagnosing the problem. For example, both liberal and conservative sociologists view poverty as a kind of sickness, a social ill that results from either individual or cultural deficiencies (i.e. "the poor are just lazy" or "they live in cultures of poverty") or from the history of liberal welfare state planning. In either case, poverty is not understood to be endemic to capitalist social relations. However, as Marx pointed out long ago, asymmetrical class relations and class exploitation, as well as the maintenance of a large reserve army of the unemployed, are structural aspects of any functioning capitalist order. A critique of capitalist social relations enables us to understand "white trash" in a twofold fashion. It is a way of naming actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and it is a set of myths and stereotypes which justify their continued marginalization.

White Identity in Multiculturalism

For centuries, whites in and out of the U.S. have formed their identities in largely negative terms. That is, they have known themselves not to be savages like aboriginals; they have known themselves not to be foolish and emotional like women; and they have known themselves not to be decadent heathens like "Orientals." Their self-image, as it were, was often built on the lack of certain cultural or characterological traits—and the universality or "obviousness" of their moral righteousness. But in an era when "globalization" is occurring on all levels of social relations, from the economy to popular culture, suddenly whiteness has come to seem like the only identity around which isn’t associated with a rich and specific historical tradition, or some type of separatist space sanctioned as authentically white. In a multicultural, multinational global civilization, some whites—oddly enough—feel anachronistic and displaced.

This is not to attempt a kind of crude psychologization of contemporary white identity, but merely to suggest that historical developments in human social relations and self-conceptions have now made it obvious to many people that there can be no universal identity as
whites once described it. Furthermore, many post-colonial nations and oppressed minority groups have seriously undermined white confidence—if not white actions—associated with the idea that being good imperialists makes them a morally superior group. Doubting, if unconsciously, that universal superiority constitutes their character, some whites in the U.S. are beginning to lay claim to a different narrative with which to explain and flesh out their identities. This narrative is borrowed from the very groups that whites once defined themselves against: those marginalized peoples who, taken together, are described as multicultural.

The rise of the term “white trash” in the mass media follows closely on the heels of highly publicized debates about multiculturalism and multicultural identity. As we see it, there are two principal reasons why a sudden interest in the idea of white trash identity might be associated with multiculturalist discourse. First, white trash can function as a politically conservative white protest against so-called multiculturalist agendas such as affirmative action, revisionist education, and social welfare programs; and secondly, white trash may represent the first wave of white assimilation to multiculturalist identity, since it is a way of articulating racial disempowerment and whiteness together. Essentially, for some, the category “white trash” brings into focus the way whites are interpreted to be the victims of racism and minoritization as much or in the same ways as their fellow multicultural U.S. citizens. Whether “white trash” is used to signal a breaking or a joining with the tenets of multiculturalism, it is principally a way of explaining white identity through narratives of victimhood.

As its critics have noted, a multicultural identity is often authenticated through stories about personal or historical injury at the hands of dominant groups. Indeed, as Cornel West points out in Race Matters, black identity is largely constituted by its relationship to potential racist oppression: “After centuries of racist degradation, exploitation, and oppression in America, being black means being minimally subject to white supremacist abuse and being part of a rich culture and community that has struggled against such abuse” (25). Multicultural techniques of identity formation often get associated with the so-called victim mentality decried by Andrew Sykes in his A Nation of Victims, in which he argues that U.S. citizens seem to feel that they all, no matter how privileged, deserve to be pitied—and compensated—as victims in some situations. Within the terms of multiculturalism, being the victim of racism, sexism and homophobia often grants you a special and even sanctified identity. We believe that this is what some whites may be seeking when they lay claim to the label “white trash,” or, more generally, “victim.”

One kind of white victimization narrative comes out of “white power,” and it holds that affirmative action, immigrants’ rights, and
social welfare programs are racist attacks on whites. Generally conservative and reactionary, such stories are told by white groups which are marginal in their own right: skinheads, some Christian fundamentalist churches, members of the KKK, and allies of politicians like David Duke. More mainstream versions of the white power story, such as California Governor Pete Wilson’s anti-affirmative action policies or Newt Gingrich’s extolling the benefits of a welfare rollback, are less virulent but nevertheless demonstrate a trend toward whites finding their identities once again through lack. Because they lack multicultural cachet, whites allegedly endure social disempowerment. By painting themselves as the victims of multiculturalism, whites can go multicultural identity one better. As the victims of victims, whites can believe that they have the richest and most marginalized identities around.

But there is also another type of white victimization narrative, one which discovers in whiteness an identity which is capable of joining with multiculturalism, rather than claiming to be its victim. White trash identity as we know it in the late twentieth century—even as it troubles the idea of multiculturalism—has learned to talk about itself by hearing, reading, and seeing members of oppressed minority groups talk about themselves and their identities. In their longing for the kinds of coherent and strong identities they see minorities presenting in the mass media or common culture, some whites try to make their own racial identities conform to models they find in multiculturalism. Certainly, many representations of multicultural people in the media are negative or incomplete. However, Hollywood has recently had something of a romance with movies by and about African-Americans.8 Popular music forms like hip hop and rap are also multicultural.

Multicultural products like movies and music are appealing to a mainstream white audience in part because their characters or contents can express a deep and enduring sense of community and purpose forged by racial or ethnic ties. Often the positive aspects of identity in multicultural productions are represented as inextricably linked to the experience of racial injustice. Calling themselves white trash is one way whites can identify as both racially marked and oppressed; and it is also a way to begin excavating a uniquely white version of what West calls “a culture and community that has struggled against [racist] abuse.” There are a growing number of mainstream products and representations which attempt to offer whites (and non-whites) a version of white identity which can be integrated into a multiculture, either by choice or through social marginalization. A recent and highly popular film about multicultural drag queens on a road trip, To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar (1995), is about how citizens of a rural “redneck” town visited by the drag queens are able to cross both racial and gender lines in order to form bonds of friendship and gain strength. In this movie, whiteness and maleness are not privileged in the usual
sense, and are indeed most seductive when they seem mixed up with non-dominant forms of identity. In addition, we are currently witnessing something of a resurgence of stories about impoverished whites who are degraded and traumatized by dominant culture. E. Annie Proulx, Carolyn Chute, and Harry Crews' fiction and autobiographical works address what it means to be white and marginal. Likewise, self-identified "Okie" Roxanne Dunbar, like many critics of whiteness, has discussed her own life experiences within the context of historical migrations of poor whites from farmlands to industrial factory towns. Dunbar strives to create a personal and political history which calls attention to the way poor whites are part of a community with a complex background of oppression and subversive practices.

Trash in the Mass Media

As we have repeatedly argued, one thing that marks off trash from the rest of white folks is class. But class in the U.S. has always been a tricky category, often used metaphorically to designate forms of pathology and taste rather than literally to designate economic position. In the popular imaginary, there is often a confluence between white poverty and white criminality, deviance, or kitsch. Tobe Hooper's famous 1974 cult horror movie *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* portrayed poor, rural whites as cannibalistic, deformed and homicidal. Another cult director (who has since gone mainstream), John Waters, got his start making satirical movies about the kitsch, disgusting habits of Maryland white trash. *Pink Flamingos* (1972), one of his best-known arthouse hits, is named for the lawn ornaments in front of protagonist Babs' trailer park home, a cliché fixture of white trash living. Played by crossdressing actor Divine, Babs and her family vie with another couple to earn the title of "the filthiest people alive." Being filthy, in Waters' movie, means being poor, stealing, raping, engaging in bestiality, enjoying tacky clothes or furniture, and generally embodying many of the stereotypical attributes of "white trash." Babs finally wins the contest by exuberantly killing her competitors and then eating dog shit while making "yummy" noises.

During the 80s and 90s, white trash stories went mainstream. This was at roughly the same time that the essentialist identity of the 70s politics were giving way to new ideas about social constructivism within the academy and multiculturalism was becoming a staple of mass media discourses on liberal education and minority concerns. Two "celebrity" stories of these decades seem to us to epitomize the way white trash has come to be understood as a marginalized white identity which nevertheless peculiarly evades disclosing its own class-based origins and experiences of injustice. The stories we refer to are those of infamous victim of castration John Wayne Bobbitt and popular TV star Roseanne.
During the summer of 1993, Bobbitt made headlines—and punchlines—in the U.S. and outside. His wife Lorena cut off his penis with a carving knife while he was sleeping after he allegedly raped and physically abused her for years. Once she had castrated him, Lorena jumped into their car and tossed her husband’s penis out the window at an intersection. Found a few hours later by police, Bobbitt’s severed penis was taken on ice to him at the hospital, where it was sewn back on. Much of his reconstructive surgery was paid for through funds raised during a cable television special hosted by “shock jock” and author Howard Stern. A year later, Bobbitt decided to appear as the star in a pornographic movie called John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut (1994), essentially to prove that he was still potent in spite of his wound. The movie is largely unremarkable as far as pornography goes, and its entire appeal seems to depend upon its audience’s fascination with Bobbitt’s re-attached penis.

The Bobbitts’ story, and their subsequent trials for assault and rape respectively, focused almost entirely on issues of gender and race; John Bobbitt was often represented as a “macho man,” and Lorena his timid, Venezuelan bride who naively married him in her pursuit of the American Dream. A Vanity Fair article by Kim Masters on the couple is typical, describing John as “a martial-arts buff who would sign in at the apartment pool as ‘Jean-Claude Van Damme’” (168-72). Accompanying this somewhat tongue-in-cheek account is a picture of Lorena in a pool, hands clasped under her chin, hair wet, with eyes gazing upward at the camera in a position which makes her appear prayerful and seductive at once. She looks like a travel ad for Latin America—all Catholic innocence and Latin sexiness. Yet underlying these representations of the tough guy and his demure Third World bride is an implicit discussion of lower-class behavior in America, especially among men. Bobbitt met his wife at a Virginia club frequented by enlisted men; a Marine, he made so little money that the Bobbitt’s honeymoon consisted of breakfast at Bob’s Big Boy restaurant. They moved into a studio apartment with no furniture, where they lived with one of Bobbitt’s cousins, a drug addict. Bobbitt himself was often drunk, and was fined several times by the Marine Corps for showing up late to work. After leaving the Marines, Bobbitt held nineteen different jobs during two years, according to Lorena’s lawyer. He often beat his wife, and flaunted the fact that he was having affairs with other women. Bobbitt’s life story reads like a textbook case of white trash; incapable of holding a job, he turned to boozing, promiscuous sex, and wife-beating. During their marriage, Lorena was working at a nail salon, from which she stole thousands of dollars because Bobbitt spent the family income on alcohol and parties. At the same time, Lorena admits she was trying to get money so that she could have the middle-class life she observed on American television when she was growing up in Venezuela. One of
the things she purchased with the money she stole was a satellite dish. If we view the Bobbitt's marriage through Lorena's eyes, we are again invited to see John as low class and hence a failure—he provided her with so little and hurt her so much that she was forced to steal.

Much of the coverage of the Bobbitt case focused on so-called "feminist" reactions to it: on television and in the newspapers, one saw women who showed up at court to cheer Lorena on, or proclaimed her violent act a victory for women in the war between the sexes. There were no stories about men championing John Bobbitt, or even feeling sorry for him (unless it was in the context of comedy, such as the Howard Stern special). Ultimately, Lorena was the victim and John was the joke. As much as we might want to, we believe it would be foolish to think that "pro Lorena" stories were a result of some kind of feminist consciousness raising: there are other factors which aroused so much glee in women and men alike when hearing about John's castration. We would suggest that part of this glee came—perhaps unconsciously—out of a sense that Lorena's blow was struck not for women, but for the middle-class, against lower-class men.

Anti-welfare critics such as Charles Murray and George Gilder describe the "rogue male" as one of the major problems produced by the welfare state. Essentially, the rogue male is a counterpart to the "welfare mother," dependent on government checks or underemployment—and socially destructive as a result. Bobbitt embodies the myth of the rogue male exactly: incapable of committing to a job or a family, he becomes a criminal or a public nuisance. If we see him in this light, we might understand Bobbitt jokes and "feminist" celebrations of Lorena as something far more vicious and sinister than they appear on the surface. Rather than a melee in the sex war, perhaps Bobbitt's castration was a casualty of the class war in America. Public fascination with the Bobbitts might then be associated with a middle-class distaste for under-class physicality, sexuality, and supposed inability to conform to the "work ethic." As a manual laborer and Marine, Bobbitt's masculine body was his source of work and income. Cutting off his penis therefore robbed him, symbolically, of his identity as a member of the (potential) working class. Interestingly, Bobbitt was again able to get work, starring in John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut, once his penis had been restored. Because Bobbitt's class position is so intimately bound up with his gender and sexuality, it is all too easy to confuse our laughter at his compromised machismo with a snicker at the weaknesses and inferiority of the white male underclass.

"White Trash with Money"

While Bobbitt's castration and subsequent fame represent lower-class white identity in connection with sexual victimization and humiliation, the 80s and 90s success story of TV star Roseanne offers an
image of white trash identity as hinging on marketable style rather than economic class. Roseanne’s smash hit television show Roseanne, along with shows like Married with Children and more recently Grace Under Fire, helped to make white trash a new form of chic. Roseanne is a star who identifies herself openly as white trash (contrast this with John Bobbitt, who identified himself as “Jean Claude Van Damme,” a movie star). Indeed, Roseanne’s former husband Tom Arnold once described himself and Roseanne as “America’s worst nightmare: white trash with money.”

The idea that white trash can have a great deal of money, and yet still somehow remain “trash,” seems contradictory, particularly when we consider that trash get marked by their position at the bottom of the white socio-economic ladder. However, “trash with money” is precisely the way white trash have been made accessible to Americans as a kind of cultural group with whom they might like to identify. For example, Roseanne’s work demonstrates the way white trash identity comes across simultaneously as a form of class consciousness and a campy, stylized set of consumer items or taste preferences. Roseanne’s early comedy act and her self-publicized autobiography both emphasize her status as poor, vulgar, and proud. In an HBO comedy special, Roseanne poked fun at middle-class white culture by joking about the way she felt left out of it: “There’s Malibu Barbie, but there’s no abused trailer park Barbie,” she commented. Her sitcom, featuring the working-class Conner family, is likewise notorious for foregrounding issues associated with the working-class, including episodes dealing with the characters’ unemployment, financial difficulties, and lack of education. Recently, the show has focused on the economic fates of the Conner daughters, one of whom, Becky, has moved into a trailer park with her husband, while the other, Darlene, is successfully going to art school on a scholarship. In one episode, Roseanne expresses sadness that she was unable to help her daughters “get a headstart,” and blames herself for Becky’s living circumstances. At the same time, proud but ironic references to their status as white trash—or to their community as white trash—are common on the show.

Of course, Roseanne is not the only celebrity to claim white trash identity as a form of personal style; “alternative” and grunge rock musicians such as the late Kurt Cobain (of Nirvana) often perform a kind of camp white trashiness, if they do not overtly claim the label. As if to underscore the connection between campy “trash” performance and a more familiar camp tradition, Cobain was often photographed in drag wearing “white trash” dresses in rayon with floral prints. These costumes, coupled with his much-discussed childhood in industrial ghost town Aberdeen, WA, lent Cobain what can only be described as an air of “white trash chic.” The hugely successful Nirvana album Nevermind not only revolutionized alternative rock, but also changed the face of
youth fashion. Featured on MTV in torn jeans, thermal underwear, faded flannel, engineer’s boots, and thrift store “unstyle,” Nirvana and other alternative bands like Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, and Dinosaur Jr. popularized a kind of “trash drag” style known as grunge. White trash identity was packaged as a series of commodities one could buy at Urban Outfitters, The Gap, or Tower Records. My So-Called Life, a short-lived but critically acclaimed TV series about middle-class high school students in the mid-90s, consistently dressed its heroine Angela in bulky work boots, several layers of flannel, and faded t-shirts. Certainly, this was the show’s attempt to represent youth fashion accurately, and indeed it does: like teenagers across America, Angela was dressing up like someone who might work by doing manual labor and “getting grungy.”

While “dressing down” in grungewear does feed class stereotypes, this particular fad also acts out the middle-class’ profound confusion regarding the origins of class identities. One might read the grunge craze as an example of how the middle-class interprets poverty as a consumer choice, rather than an economic condition of scarcity and deprivation. If a popular TV star like Roseanne can be white trash with money, then it “makes sense” that money can buy white trash culture and style. Dressing up in white trash drag is a strategy of denial which allows the middle-class to think about class difference in terms of images rather than material realities. If the middle-class can purchase white trash style, then class is merely an image; and real impoverished people can be understood as happily hip, or even secretly members of the middle-class in trash drag. White trash cultural commodities are in many ways an appropriate ideological development for post-Reagan America, in which the Republican party line is, in effect, that the poor want to be poor and could recover if they really tried. That anyone can choose to look like trash seems—illogically—to prove their point.

Mapping White Trash America: Class Matters

Understanding the social structures and the processes of representation which produce any group of people is a difficult task. As cultural materialists, we hold that economic structures and conditions are crucial forces in shaping and forming identities of individuals and groups. Certainly, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences are all deeply involved with class formation. But these notions of difference, so often foregrounded by postmodern social theorists, often serve as a means for talking about class difference without actually using a language of class analysis.11

Put another way, class difference is often read through these other discourses of difference and vice-versa. This is not to say that class is in any way the determining structure of domination in American life. But it is all too often neglected and ignored by some academics, activists,
and public intellectuals in favor of discussions and movement building around other forms of difference. The result of this neglect of class has been to overlook the workings of capitalism as a system of domination and oppression. And to the extent that identity-based political movements and social theory have not been consciously critical of capitalism, they have served to reproduce and perpetuate capitalist structures of domination.

As minority groups enter the middle-classes, target markets aimed specifically at soliciting consumption from African-Americans, women, Latinos, etc., have been very successful indeed. Clearly, engaging in capitalist consumer culture, and by extension enjoying a standard of living which helps perpetuate class difference, is in no way an activity limited to white folks. Power feminist Naomi Wolf, in her recent *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*, encourages women who feel marginalized within public life to embrace capitalism as a form of empowerment. She urges women to get in touch with their “will to power,” and by this she means their desire to take control over “the weak” just as white men have historically. Like other pro-capitalist members of minority groups, Wolf promotes one form of liberation—specifically, feminism—by also promoting a system of economic inequality which marginalizes a large proportion of the population. In other words, freedom for racial, gendered, or sexual minority groups does not necessarily equal freedom for everyone, especially the underclasses.

Another obvious and persistent form of economic domination can be seen in the global geography of uneven capitalist development. The massive and ever widening gap between rich and poor countries, are a direct result of long histories of colonial and imperialist exploitation of the Third World by industrialized First World nations. Historically, the rise of capitalism as a global phenomenon has been marked by this uneven development, by both territorial expansion and contraction, bringing economic booms and busts to different geographic regions at different times. Similar patterns of uneven development have shaped U.S. history and society. The long post-Depression boom which gave U.S. industrial workers a chance to lead middle-class lifestyles of relative luxury is just one example of the cyclical movement of capital involving tremendous regional and even national economic growth. During this time, hundreds of thousands of American workers migrated to find good paying jobs in heavy industries in northern cities like Chicago and Detroit and western cities like Oakland and Los Angeles. These vast internal migrations of millions of mostly white American workers, prompted by the new flows and circuits of capital that emerged from the economic restructuring of the 1930s, resemble in many ways a twentieth century American working-class diaspora.

Often the idea of a diaspora has been deployed—quite effectively—to describe the way racial groups find themselves scattered across the globe in contemporary life, unbound to the country or continent of their
origin (perhaps by many generations, as well as many thousands of miles). Scholars and critics who describe postcolonial racial and religious identities invoke “diaspora” as a way of articulating the sense of homelessness and loss felt by minority groups who find they have no extended communities or places to call their own. These diasporic identities are forged in the fires of capital—Asian immigration to the U.S. throughout the twentieth century, for example, was largely a response to economic opportunities of the sort which mobilized white working-class populations already living here. Certainly, African-American populations in the U.S. were forcibly created in order to support the Southern agrarian economy; furthermore, without imperialist expansion associated with early stages of capital accumulation, the U.S. would not have been able to procure an African slave population in the first place.

Capital, because it requires class division and uneven development to function, is a social system which encourages formerly whole communities to become diasporic, like capital itself. If workers wish to stay afloat on the seas of economic change, they must be prepared to follow capitalist wealth from region to region, or country to country.

In keeping with our understanding of whites as a racialized group and our desire to understand the economic and social construction of different forms of whiteness, we see these economically driven internal white migrations, these “poor white diasporas,” as important factors in the shaping of white identities. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, generations of white (usually male) workers have left their families and communities in search of jobs and the promise of economic prosperity, following the dispersal of capital, establishing new identities, communities, and families in faraway regions and distant states. As economic restructuring brought previously separate and distinct groups and communities into contact with one another, as southerners met northerners and new white immigrants met white “natives,” new tensions and conflicts began to form. Out of these tensions, new prejudices and new stereotypes arose. White trash was just one of the many hateful names given to those who seemed out of place, who seemed to pose a threat to the existing economic and social order.

The Dust Bowl migrations of poor whites from Oklahoma and the Southwest to California’s agricultural fields and the subsequent wave of “defense Okies” who flooded California’s burgeoning defense industry sectors in the 1940s are prime examples of how newly arriving whites became scapegoats for unwanted changes brought on by both economic boom and bust. To this day, many of our most familiar stereotypes of poor white trash emanate from this historical period and these places. In this way, these migrating white workers have had a profound effect on not only on California’s political and social life (to this day, in the minds of many Californians, “okies” is synonymous with “white trash” [see Gregory]), but on the nation as a whole.
In the current U.S. scene, this inconstant geography of capitalism we have been describing has been a matter of tremendous human pain and suffering for those left behind in the wake of the juggernaut of capitalist growth. The Rust Belt cities of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Gary, and, above all Detroit, are tragic examples of the immeasurable effects of deindustrialization processes which began in the early 1970s. Capital and new production technologies have proven to be far more mobile than the auto and steel workers for whom the “American dream” of a middle-class lifestyle has quickly turned into a living nightmare (see Davis). Whole communities which bloomed around regional growth centers have withered as corporations, struggling to maintain profitability in the face of increasing global competition and productivity, have abandoned those same communities, locales, or regions in their ceaseless search for new resources, new markets, and new labor pools (see Sayers and Walker). Workers of all races have found themselves physically dislocated from their homes, used as cheap labor, and abandoned.

As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her book *Fear of Falling*, the *arriviste* American middle-classes are generally fearful about losing whatever level of status and economic privilege they have gained and Americans facing economic decline are especially anxious about the threat of downward mobility. This fear and dread of falling into the lower classes is, she argues, what lies behind many of the stereotypes of and prejudices against poor Americans. Images of the poor are used in mainstream culture as repositories for displaced middle-class rage, excess, and fear. These images and representations are then sold to the public as the *real* poor whites, thus effectively hiding who actually existing poor people are and what their struggles might be. Because images of the poor in the media seem so rich and fascinating, the social causes of poverty and economic neglect are easily overlooked. We are left with provocative stereotypes, stripped of historical and social context. “White trash” is clearly one such stereotype and, from this perspective, it should not surprise us that images and fantasies about low-class whites are enjoying such popularity at this particular juncture in American history. During times of economic uncertainty or downturn, poor white trash is the ghastly specter which haunts the white middle class.

Notes

1Vulgar multiculturalism is a term we've coined with our colleagues on the *Bad Subjects* electronic mailing list to refer to essentialist multiculturalism and racial theory which posit that whites are a monolithic and unified group yielding absolute, racist power across lines of class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of difference.

2See Goldberg and the Chicago Cultural Studies Group. Goldberg’s entire volume is dedicated to scholarship which, in one way or another, challenges vulgar multiculturalist orthodoxies.
3 Although if conservative African American media entrepreneur Ken Hamblin has his way, “black trash” could become a household word. He uses it frequently in interviews and on his syndicated radio show, making explicit the class dimensions of racist slurs. See Hamblin’s exchange with filmmaker John Singleton.

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5 According to one dictionary, “poor white trash” dates to 1833: “The slaves themselves entertain the highest contempt for white servants, whom they designate as ‘poor white trash’.” See Matthews for other references to these terms.

6 See, for example, Dorothy Allison’s preface to Trash and Jim Goad’s “Statement of Intent” in ANSWER Me!

7 Like “IQ” theory, eugenics science held that certain “characterological deficiencies” were based in biological inheritance—hence, for example, a tendency toward poverty or manual labor might be genetic. On this see Rafter.

8 We see this, for example, in the popularity of nearly all of Spike Lee’s movies; Menace II Society (1993); Boyz N the Hood (1991); and Straight Out Of Brooklyn (1991). The same might be said about the Asian-American film, The Joy Luck Club (1993).

9 In Losing Ground Murray offers slightly different accounts of the kinds of men produced by welfare—but in both works, they are characterized as animalistic, violent, uncontrollable, and connected to mothers on welfare.

10 In her biography, Roseanne discusses her history of poverty and abuse. She then explains how she recovered from drug and spousal abuse, but continues to enjoy “trash” culture which she associates with her life as a poor white. See Arnold.

11 As anthropologist Sherry Ortner puts it: “Class is central to American life, but it is rarely spoken in its own right. Rather, it is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race, and so forth” (164).

Works Cited


