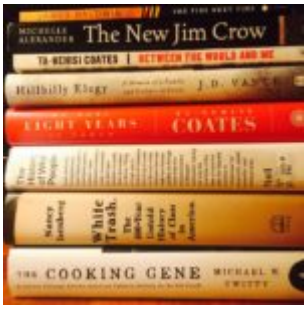
My Summer of Reading Dangerously



Summer of 2017 found me reading voraciously around considerations of race – whatever that might really be – and the legacy of America's original sin. I have been increasingly fascinated by the Civil War and both its pre- and after-maths over the past ten years or so. A few years back, an up and coming blogger at The Atlantic ran a series of posts documenting his immersion, as a Black American, into the history of that period. His name: Ta-Nehisi Coates. I became a big fan. The publication of his Between the World and Me sparked an interest in James Baldwin, and I was lucky enough to catch I Am Not Your Negro in Berkeley the week it was released. That led to a near-obsessive consumption of Baldwin.

Last spring, I noticed a young historian on Twitter plugging an upcoming book that fit into the larger themes and questions I'd been mulling. The theme struck a resonant chord. I was lucky enough to befriend Keri Leigh Merritt and meet her over drinks once in Atlanta. Her book – the one at the top of the pile in the photo – turned out to exceed high expectation, so I tried to place a review in at least a half-dozen publications. Alas, I failed. Fortunately, the book has done well without my help, appearing in paperback just last month.

Now I'm tired of sitting on this piece. It took me months to research and write. That pile of books at the top of this post is only part of the background material. In the end, I

whittled the article down to focus on four of these, but the remainder loomed large. Not to mention all the material not pictured.

So without further ado…

The Racialization of the White Underclass

Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South, Keri Leigh Merritt, Cambridge University Press (2017)
White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America, Nancy Isenberg, Viking (2016)
Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, JD Vance, Harper, (2016)
The History of White People, Nell Irvin Painter, WW Norton & Co. (2010)

The ongoing how-could-it-be narrative of our unexpected President fixes on convenient stereotype: the typical Trump voter is white and economically anxious, the forgotten average man (sic) typified by a Norman Rockwell-ish shorthand that presents small-town America as more "real" than the rest of the nation. What was it, media chin pullers pondered, that made this group susceptible to such transparent charlatanism?

Never mind that voter data shows majorities of whites across classes/genders/regions voted Trump. The idea that the aggrieved white underclass was his true base allowed liberal White America to pin the blame on its lesser brethren/sistren. The crackers. The rubes. Convenient shorthand was convenient, and accuracy take the hindmost. The historic racialization of the White underclass was gaining momentum. Again.

What explains the angst of the white underclass? So many factors; so little time. The decline of the family farm? Offshored manufacturing? The war on coal? Coastal media/banker

elites?

Maybe it's this old chestnut: the resentment of welfare state handouts to Those People™. Never mind that underclass whites benefit from these programs disproportionately more than any other population. Convenient answers are preferred.

In 2016, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* appeared astride a substantial marketing juggernaut. A handsome Horatio Alger poster child of pure pluck and will rising Phoenix-like from Appalachian squalor. An impressive story.

His memoir, not so much. *Elegy* is narratively predictable and reliant on facile description and cliché that veers into poverty porn. Just look at those wretched people! He evinces scant warmth or humor, though one could perhaps accept his defiant use of the hillbilly insult as at least a tad ironic, the white guy's version of a rapper's n-word self-identification. He can say it. You can't.

But hey! Certainly this coal country escapee – a veteran of the Marine Corps, Yale Law School, and a stint at Peter Thiel's venture capital firm – has insight into root causes and possible solutions. What is his hopeful message?

Be more like J.D.! Try harder!

Stop taking drugs, having kids, being shiftless. Work harder, quit yer damn bellyaching about the boss. If you're down, it's your fault for not grabbing the American dream, even if you were born into a dying town filled with addictions and empty of prospects. Bill Cosby's 'hillbilly' equivalent, Vance offers tough love for the losers and lets the winners off the hook.

Vance ignores structural considerations like the role of monopoly capitalism in fostering social conditions that led Rust Belt laborers into psychological dependence, not on government handouts, but on the scant largesse of company town

economics. That this might lie at the root of the near-religious devotion of coal miners to the coal economy does not merit Vance's consideration. Cradle to grave dependence on mine or factory? No worries. Dependence on government assistance to survive a dead and gone economic paradigm? Get off your ass and make something of yourself, moochers.

The comforting appeal of his fatalist message – "The poor will always be with us. Why worry?" – is undeniable: 73 consecutive weeks and counting on the NY Times bestseller list. Ron Howard has begun production on a movie adaptation; one can scarcely imagine the bathos to come.

Recall Ragged Dick: "Thank you for your kind advice. Is it gratooitous, or do you expect to be paid for it?"

Vance expects to be paid and he does what he must to cash the check. His views align nicely with those who might sign his checks. Reports have Vance in talks to join the Heritage Foundation or the Breitbart media empire. Far be it for me to question Vance's sincerity of belief. It has worked for him. He is indeed an exceptional hillbilly. We should all be so lucky.

Lucky for aging, Southern white guys like me (statistically, you would be forgiven for mistaking me as a Trump voter), there is plenty of literature available to help understand the racial dynamics of our society and how my tribe arrived at this historic moment of culpability and opportunity.

Nancy Isenberg, Professor of American History at Louisiana State University, offers a considered look at the mechanism and fallout of White underclass racialization from Colonial America to the present in *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold Story of Class in America*. Isenberg made the NYT list for a shorter time than Vance, though it recently re-appeared on the list in paperback. Let's hope this more affordable version gives it second wind.

Published in May, 2017, Keri Leigh Merritt's debut book lends detailed support to Isenberg's survey. *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, is a vivid and nuanced look at the impacts of slavery on the White underclass in the Deep South. Her approach is broadly interdisciplinary, with a keen eye for intersections of economics, labor, education, and law enforcement policies that create conditions that define the underclass and limit its means of rising to prosperity.

First, let's consider an older book: *The History of White People*, published in 2010 by Nell Irvin Painter, Emeritus Professor of History at Princeton and one of our most cogent thinkers on the irreality of race and the realities of racism. It is impossible to read at any length about race theory without encountering Painter's work. Fortunately, she matches her scholarship with an exceptionally readable style; her books are hefty, but they read fast.

Painter reaches even farther back than Isenberg to look at the roots of racial conceptualizing in ancient Greece. Then as now, these categorizations were based in the need to rationalize domination and enslavement of one group of people over another. Racializing the conquered applied moral salve to the act of enslavement.

Until relatively recently, racial classification had little to do with skin tone and everything to do with geographic origin and the supposed ingrained traits created by certain climates, topographies, and humors of the blood. (Yes, it is as crazy as it sounds.) The people we think of as White Europeans were finely sliced into an almost innumerable set of categories.<fn>The Finns were an especially disdained people. Go figure.</fn> Even better, categorical definitions were malleable, subject to the whims of armchair racial "scientists" over the ensuing centuries.

As Enlightenment Europeans (men, naturally) began to dominate

the field, they turned to more scientific metrics like the cephalic index; sizes and shapes of human skulls were thought to hold the key to understanding racial differences and the innate superiority/inferiority of the different races.

In the end, science was the undoing of racialist theory. The human genome map puts paid to any assertion that race is biologically determined. Never mind the hopeful television commercials offering to pin down your ethnicity via genetic testing: the identicality of 99.9% of the human genome across skin colors, cultures, and ethnicities backs up Painter's contention that race is a purely social construct. In September, 2017, she offered this uncategorical refutation of racial categorization: "There is no such thing as the "white race" – or any other race."

Painter and Isenberg highlight that the first indentured cohort in America was largely White, albeit whites of lesser humanity: waste people, disposable and endlessly replaceable. Skin tone as the primary demarcation of racial identity came later, coincident with the Africanization of the slave trade. When slave identity became overwhelmingly melanin-based, expiation of the original sin demanded a melanin-based theoretical underpinning. Such science simplified enforcement as well.

Painter and Isenberg present mutually reinforcing histories. Where Painter tracks evolving justifications for racialization in general, Isenberg focuses on specific mechanisms that brought underclass whites to heel. Beginning with the forcible ejection of Europe's degenerate class to the "waste firm" of America, the colonies became the convenient dumping ground where "the surplus poor, the waste people of England, could be converted into economic assets."<fn>See also, Australia.</fn>

The vast majority of European settlers traveled to America under terms of indebted servitude. Once in America, their fortunes rarely improved. Convicts, offered the carrot of

freedom in return for a set term of servitude, “would be employed at heavy labor”. Few received wages. Many died. But that was fine; there were plenty more where those came from. This callous disdain for the humanity of the underclass – regardless of skin color – remains a fixture of American life 400 years along.

Significantly, white servants at least held out hope for eventual liberation where their enslaved counterparts knew they must either escape or die in slavery. It is one among many of the “hey, at least we’re better off than those folks” ideas that persuaded a substantially oppressed and denigrated underclass to side with their overseers and against their logical allies. Keeping poor whites even a baby step above the lot of Black folks has been a hallmark of divisive manipulation in America from the beginning.

(Sadly, this kind of slicing stratification – Creole v. Black, Catholic v. Protestant, Hutus v. Tutsis, &c. – remains a global phenomenon.)

Isenberg’s history traces the othering of “white trash” into the present, through the caricatures of Depression era cartoons like Lil Abner, the personae of Elvis Presley and Andy Griffith, and 60s sitcoms like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and its kissing cousins. These stereotypes find more recent form in the mockeries of shows like *Duck Dynasty* and the Honey Boo-boo clan. No matter that the purveyors of these tropes make fun of themselves; while they laugh all the way to the bank, their antics give the rest of America permission to scorn everyone who fits under their umbrella, evoking pride of heritage even as they make it ridiculous. Is the anxiety so surprising?

Racialization of poor whites was a continent-wide affair, with various waves of European immigrants (Irish, Italian, German, and especially Jews) bearing the brunt of the previous wave’s frustration at being racialized. But it was especially acute

in the Deep South.

In *Masterless Men*, Merritt explores the realities of White poverty in this culture. This group was generally illiterate, so primary sources are rare. Merritt overcomes this documentary gap through examination of official documents in small town and county courthouses. Civil and criminal court proceedings/pleadings illustrate the tenuous lives of the underclass. Primarily non-propertied, this largest segment of Southern whites derived no benefit from slavery. Arguably, the massive source of free labor via slavery ruined the labor value of white workers. On top of that, the ability of landowners to leverage slave value – in the form of their labor and collateral property value – gave the aristocracy outsized power over less wealthy whites to enlarge their landholdings and dominate commerce in their constrained economic realm. Little surprise then that underclass support of secession and war was thin and riddled with resentment. Rich man's war, poor man's fight.

Interaction among poor whites and slaves, both economically and socially, fostered anxiety among the elite. Sexual liaisons created offspring that defied easy categorization – hence the fractional madness of quadroons, octoroons, one drop rules, &c. Owners of humans also feared the idea of slave/white commerce: stolen food and tools exchanged for liquor and other goods, maybe even escape. But the greatest fear of all – a broad class alliance that might portend revolt – haunted the landowners. Legalistic control mushroomed, including confiscatory taxation and limits on voting rights.

The greatest tool in the aristocracy's arsenal was the Olde English prohibition of vagrancy. Broadly defined, vagrancy statutes allowed landholder-dominated local governments to punish anyone outside the ownership economy. Ostensibly designed to discourage citizens from being lazy layabouts, those who labored least – e.g., landed slave holders – were exempt by virtue of property ownership.

Convicted vagrants were provided to property holders who would pay their fines in exchange for a period of servitude. Convicted servants received little to no pay, yet another suppression of the value of labor as measured by wages. On top of providing valuable labor at low cost, these legal instruments were about keeping people in their place. The word vagrant was synonymous with epithets for poor whites: hobo, tramp, trash. The waste people.

Vagrancy statutes were also useful in controlling female sexuality. Women who traded their bodies for money – or even those who expressed themselves through drink and "lasciviousness" – were targets. This fear of loose morality – especially acute in light of Southern anxiety about the purity of its women – found further expression in miscegenation statutes. Taken together, the legal and economic restrictions on poor whites were as effective as the control conferred by slavery, albeit far less violent and at least offering the illusory hope of escaping the leash. But with the disruption of families, lack of work opportunities, and the all but absolute refusal of the landed elite to fund education for the masses, any meaningful escape was unlikely.

In cruel irony, Emancipation's aftermath found the Southern ruling elite shifting these same tools – vagrancy prosecutions chief among them – to facilitate the conversion of Black laborers into unpaid convicts and to deprive Blacks at large basic civil rights. Suspected miscegenation between Black men and white women was typically handled extra-judicially and horrifically, while sexual exploitation of Black women by white men was an assumed benefit of white manhood; punishment was deemed unnecessary. Finally, the South's persistent hostility to universal education and suffrage, especially for Blacks but extending to poor whites, built a social superstructure that still exerts downward pressure on the Black and White underclass.

Painter, Isenberg, and Merritt serve up scholarship that is

diligently resourced for anyone inclined to dig deeper. But while their formal structures are built to endure peer contention, their accessible and clear prose invites us into the material. They connect their research with current dynamics, a practice strangely controversial among some traditionalists who suggest such engagement might undermine academic impartiality. Naturally, this imaginary 'view from nowhere' posits a baseline worldview that has been dominant for centuries; ongoing upheavals in class/race/gender dynamics renders irrelevant this imaginary impartiality.

These scholars illuminate the exceptional precision with which the beneficiaries of division wield their pressures and propagandas. Historically, these efforts reach highest expression when economic and social conditions are at their most tenuous. We see this today in the rise and appeal of the alt-right, a movement largely steered by cossetted children of privilege – and various loyal climbers deemed worthy of ascent from the underclass – and filled out at the bottom by the undereducated, resentful, and easily manipulated targets of underclass racialization.

Critically, none of these writers equate white underclass sufferings to the depredations of slavery and Jim Crow. Rather, all three demonstrate that the parallel racializations of Blacks (as a whole) and underclass Whites (as a degenerate sub-population) constructed a hierarchy that places the White underclass fractionally above people of color, the better to encourage their counter-productive alliance with the predominantly-white upper class. White Americans of all social strata have proven enormously resilient in our adherence to the racially based hierarchy, economic self-interest be damned. The intentional racialization of underclass whites instills a dual sense of misplaced inferiority and aspirational identification toward a privileged class that is the natural enemy of the 'waste people'.

White America can no longer compartmentalize what was once

called the “Negro problem” any more than we can interrogate the discontents of poor Whites in isolation from other racialized groups. The racial divide is an invention based on false science, but the social costs of this structural inequity and manipulative miseducation are all too real.