

Whiteness as a Fractured Construction: Race, Class, and the Internal Frontiers of White Identity in the United States

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving constructions of whiteness in the United States by bringing together two often-separated strands of critical inquiry: whiteness studies proper (with its emphasis on white racial identity and systemic privilege) and the more recent field of “white trash” studies (which reveals the internal class hierarchies and boundary work within whiteness itself). Drawing on scholarship from Peter Kolchin, Toni Morrison, Steve Martinot, Veronica Watson, Matt Wray, Nancy Isenberg, and others, it argues that whiteness has never been a monolithic or stable identity. Instead, it has continually been defined both against the African-American Other and through the exclusionary stigmatization of poor, rural, and working-class whites. The article traces these dynamics from the antebellum period to the present, showing how the erasure of white ethnic particularity, the instrumentalization of poor whites as a buffer class, and the persistent interdependence of white and black identity constructions continue to shape American racial and class formations. Furthermore, it incorporates recent developments in whiteness studies and critical race theory, highlighting ongoing debates around “whitened fascisms”, the “whiteness pandemic”, and the mobilization of white identities in contemporary politics.

Keywords: whiteness studies, white trash, ethnic-racial identity, white fragility, critical race theory backlash

Introduction

Whiteness, identity, whiteness studies have become central to contemporary discussions of race in the United States. Yet the field has long grappled with a fundamental question: is whiteness best understood in racial or in ethnic/cultural terms? As Peter Kolchin observes, the rapid growth of whiteness studies has focused primarily “on the construction of whiteness – how diverse groups in the United States came to identify, and be identified by others, as white – and what that has meant for the social order” (Kolchin 2002: 155). If whiteness is a matter of perception and historical process rather than biology, it must be seen as a cultural and ideological construction. Yet ideology is, obviously, never “neutral”; it is inevitably entangled with power, conflict, and, sometimes, with expressions of racist attitudes.

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This ideological dimension underscores how whiteness operates not merely as a descriptor but as a mechanism of dominance. From its roots in colonial hierarchies to its modern manifestations in policy and culture, whiteness has been shaped by economic imperatives, social exclusions, and political strategies. A multi-perspectival approach is essential because identities are rarely defined in isolation. They emerge in relation to an Other, in games of sameness and difference. In the American context, whiteness has taken shape primarily in opposition to African-American identity: "Whiteness is the ideological counterpart of race relations, both of them ways of skirting around the relations of political, social, and economic power that have determined the place of Afro-Americans in American society" (Fields 2001: 48). This relational dynamic is not static; it evolves with historical shifts, such as the assimilation of European immigrants into whiteness or the post-Civil Rights era's subtler forms of racial maintenance.

At the same time, whiteness has also required internal policing. The derogatory category "white trash" – along with related terms such as hillbilly, redneck, cracker, and Okie – marks the boundary where whiteness is deemed to have failed or degenerated. These labels reveal class fractures within whiteness, where poor whites are stigmatized to preserve the illusion of racial superiority for the elite. By examining both the external (black-white) and internal (classed) boundaries of whiteness, this article argues that the category has always been fractured, contingent, and maintained through simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on foundational texts and recent scholarship up to 2025, it explores how these dynamics persist in education, politics, and culture, amid rising concerns over "whitened fascisms" and the "whiteness pandemic" (as discussed in recent educational and public health discourses).

White racial vs. white ethnic identity: the erasure of difference

Sociologists Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson have noted the relatively recent shift in scholarly attention from white ethnic identity (Irish-American, Italian-American, German-American, etc.) to white racial identity (McDermott and Samson 2005). For much of the twentieth century, the assimilation of European immigrants into a generic "white" category was taken for granted. The virulent anti-Irish and anti-Catholic nativism of the nineteenth century, the restrictive immigration quotas of the 1920s, and the open discrimination faced by southern and eastern Europeans gradually receded from public memory. What had once been distinct and often racialized ethnic identities were folded into an expanded, hegemonic whiteness.

This process was not benign. The price of inclusion for formerly suspect Europeans was the erasure of their own histories of oppression and a corresponding intensification of the black-white binary. As McDermott and

Samson argue, “a growing realization [emerged] that one cannot fully understand the existence of racism and racial inequality without paying close attention to the formation and maintenance of white racial identity” (McDermott and Samson 2005: 246). The consolidation of whiteness as a racial (rather than ethnic) category thus required the deliberate forgetting of intra-white conflict and ethnic particularities, and the redirection of racial anxiety onto more rigidly excluded groups: African Americans first and foremost, but also, at various historical moments, Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans.

This erasure has profound implications for understanding contemporary identity politics. In the past decade, and especially since the racial reckoning of 2020, ethnic-racial identity (ERI) exploration among white adolescents and emerging adults has become markedly more salient in an increasingly polarized sociopolitical climate (Christy et al. 2024; Svoboda et al. 2025). Longitudinal studies of predominantly white samples show that higher levels of ERI exploration and resolution are associated with lower implicit and explicit racial bias, greater support for racial justice policies, and reduced endorsement of colorblind ideology (Christy et al. 2024). Conversely, white youth who exhibit low exploration and high commitment to a default, unexamined white identity tend to display stronger colorblind attitudes and lower awareness of systemic racism (Svoboda et al. 2025). These findings suggest that the historical erasure of white ethnic particularity has left many contemporary whites with a racially unmarked identity that functions as a default, invisible norm, yet one that is now being challenged by rapid demographic change, social media activism, and curricular shifts toward critical race frameworks. The resurgence of white ethnic-racial identity development therefore represents both a potential site of anti-racist growth and, paradoxically, a defensive reaction among some segments who experience demographic and cultural change as a form of status threat (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2023; Svoboda et al. 2025).

The machinery of whiteness and the racialised state

Critical whiteness studies today operate with African-American identity as its primary alterity. Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992) remains foundational in this regard. Morrison demonstrates how canonical white American authors – Poe, Melville, Hemingway – constructed literary “American-ness” through metaphorical and literal engagements with blackness. More broadly, she argues that American democratic ideals were inseparable from the institution of slavery: “Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery” (Morrison 1992: 38). Freedom, in the American imaginary, required the unfree Black body as its foil.

Steve Martinot's *The Machinery of Whiteness* (2010) extends this insight into a structural analysis of whiteness as the foundational ideology of the modern racialized state. For Martinot, whiteness is not simply a phenotype or even a privilege; it is a performative system that produces race itself as a technology of governance (Martinot 2010: 66-84). The racialized state, he argues, emerged through the simultaneous creation of whiteness as normative citizenship and blackness as ontological exclusion. Gender and class are integral to this machinery: white women were instrumentalized as reproducers of the race, while poor whites were alternately mobilized and disciplined to maintain the system. Martinot's work, written in the immediate aftermath of the Bush years and on the eve of Obama's election, warns against declarations of a "post-racial" America. White supremacy, far from receding, was experiencing a resurgence in the form of anti-immigrant discourse, populist racism, and renewed assertions of white entitlement. Events since 2010 – the rise of the Tea Party, the Trump campaign, and the mainstreaming of white nationalist rhetoric – seem to have vindicated his analysis.

By 2025, fifteen years after Martinot's diagnosis, the machinery he described has mutated into what scholars now describe as "whitened fascisms" (Burley 2024; Teitelbaum 2025). The term, increasingly common in critical race and political theory, captures the fusion of traditional white supremacist ideology with authoritarian governance structures, aestheticized violence, and a nostalgic reclamation of a mythical white ethnostate. In the United States, this manifests most visibly in the policy blueprint known as Project 2025, drafted by the Heritage Foundation and former Trump administration officials. The document explicitly calls for the dismantling of the administrative state while simultaneously embedding white Christian nationalist principles into federal law (Heritage Foundation 2023; Dans & Groves 2024). Its education chapter, for instance, proposes eliminating the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and redefining "discrimination" in such a way that discussions of structural racism or whiteness itself would be classified as anti-white bias (Dans & Groves 2024: 319-351). This represents not a retreat from racialization but its bureaucratic perfection—the racialized state now openly policing its own critique.

At the transnational level, the resurgence is equally stark. In Europe, far-right parties in Sweden, Italy, Hungary, and France have achieved historic electoral gains by framing immigration from the Global South as an existential threat to "European civilization" a code word for whiteness (Rydgren 2024; Teitelbaum 2025). In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, once a neo-Nazi fringe group, became the second-largest party in 2022 and now exert considerable influence over government policy. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, whose logo still contains the tricolor flame of the postwar fascist MSI, won the 2022 elections on a platform of "defending God, country, and family," a slogan

which, for some, might be disturbingly reminiscent of 1930s fascist rhetoric. Scholars note that these movements do not merely exploit whiteness; they aestheticize and sacralize it, transforming it from an unmarked norm into an explicit object of veneration (Burley 2024).

Whiteness in the classroom: colorblindness and racialized harm

Even ostensibly progressive spaces remain structured by whiteness. Ryden and Marshall's *Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness* (2012) challenges the early-2010s fantasy of a colorblind academy. They document how composition classrooms and writing programs continue to reproduce white normativity, often through disavowed emotional investments in whiteness itself (Ryden and Marshall 2012). Leigh Patel pushes the critique further, arguing that the education system functions as "one of the primary conduits for racial stratification" while obscuring that harm beneath discussions of "best practices" and "achievement" (Patel 2016: 81). The casual deployment of texts like *Huckleberry Finn* – replete with the unabridged racial epithet – becomes, in this reading, a ritual reenactment of white centrality.

Robin DiAngelo's concept of "white fragility" and her own confessional mode of anti-racist pedagogy can be situated within this lineage (DiAngelo 2018). DiAngelo's public performances of guilt and vulnerability illustrate what Veronica Watson has termed "white double consciousness" – an internalized awareness of the unearned privileges conferred by whiteness and the psychic tension that awareness produces. Recent developments amplify these concerns; for example, the University of Minnesota's 2025 resources on the "whiteness pandemic" urge white parents to re-educate themselves, framing whiteness as a public health issue intertwined with systemic racism. Critics from the left have accused her of pathologizing ordinary white emotional responses and of offering a therapeutic rather than structural analysis (Thompson 2021; Ross 2023). Yet even these critiques concede that her framework has become the dominant vernacular for discussing whiteness in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training: by 2023, over 80 % of Fortune 500 companies had incorporated some version of "white fragility" language into mandatory anti-bias programmes (Hughes & Giles 2024).

The political reaction against Critical Race Theory (CRT) represents the most organized counter-offensive to this pedagogical turn. Beginning in late 2020 with Christopher Rufo's viral Fox News appearances branding CRT as "anti-American indoctrination," the campaign eventually devedoped into state legislation: by mid-2025, thirty-five states have enacted or proposed laws restricting how race, racism, and American history can be taught (Penney 2025; Ray & Gibbons 2025). These bills typically prohibit teaching that "an individual, by virtue of their race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously" or that "meritocracy or

traits such as hard work are racist or sexist” (Florida HB 7, 2022; Texas HB 3979, 2021). Although CRT is a graduate-level legal framework developed by Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others, the term has essentially become a catch-all for any discussion of systemic racism, whiteness, intersectionality, or white privilege (Crenshaw 2023)

White double consciousness and the literature of white alienation

Watson’s *The Souls of White Folk* (2013) offers one of the most sustained African-American interventions into whiteness studies. Coining the phrase “the literature of white estrangement,” Watson traces a century-long tradition of Black writers (Du Bois, Chesnutt, Hurston, Yerby, and others) who critically dissect whiteness as a social construction (Watson 2013). Far from treating whiteness as an unmarked norm, these authors expose it as a traumatized, alienated identity - alienated, above all, from its own humanity. Watson adapts Du Bois’s famous concept of double consciousness to whites themselves. White double consciousness names the dissonance experienced by those who benefit from systemic racism yet intermittently recognise its moral and existential cost. The phenomenon manifests in guilt, disavowal, performative allyship, or, in more extreme cases, reactionary backlash. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), for example, demythologizes white femininity and the white domestic ideal, revealing the violence and fragility at its core.

This framework of white double consciousness first articulated by Watson has gained new traction in the post-2020, post-BLM “racial reckoning” and continues to shape scholarship in 2025. Contemporary theorists now apply the concept far beyond literary analysis, using it to explain the psychic fracture visible in everything from suburban “racial reckoning” book clubs to the explosive growth of “decentering whiteness” workshops in corporate and university settings (Hughes & Giles 2024; Parks et al. 2025). It can be argued that for many progressive-identifying white Americans, the sudden mainstreaming of terms such as white privilege, white fragility, and systemic racism triggered precisely the kind of internal splitting Watson describes: an intellectual acknowledgment of complicity in racial harm paired with an emotional refusal to fully inhabit that knowledge.

The internal faultline: white trash and the class limits of whiteness

If whiteness has been defined against the African-American Other, it has also required an internal Other against which “respectable” whiteness can measure itself. The figure of “white trash” performs precisely this function. As Matt Wray argues in *Not Quite White* (2006), the category emerged in the early nineteenth-century South as a stigmatizing label for poor, non-slaveholding whites who threatened the racial order by their proximity - economic, social, and sometimes sexual - to enslaved blacks (Wray 2006). The phrase “white

trash" is, like the N-word (although not nearly as taboo), a deeply troublesome identity marker. Employed by Americans of all ethnicities and classes, it has served to humiliate and degrade a segment of the population perceived as degraded alterity. Yet, as Wray demonstrates, the boundary is performative: "The attribution of 'groupness' to a particular collection of individuals sets the process of social differentiation in motion" (Wray 2006: 141). White trash exists primarily as a symbolic boundary that allows hegemonic whiteness to define itself through disidentification.

Historical antecedents abound. In the antebellum South, perhaps 70-75 percent of whites owned no slaves and lived in conditions not radically dissimilar from those of many enslaved people (Lockley 1997). Poor whites and blacks traded, drank, worshipped, and occasionally committed crimes together – forms of solidarity that terrified the planter elite. Eugene Genovese notes that "fear of slave rebellion with the aid of poor whites who resented the planter class fostered the hostile attitudes toward white trash" (Genovese 1973: 23). The derogatory label thus served to police class solidarity across the color line. The pattern repeated itself in the industrial era. Appalachian migrants to Detroit in the 1940s-60s were derided as "hillbillies" by established working-class whites; Dust Bowl migrants to California became "Okies" (Hartigan 1997). In each case, intra-white class contempt reinforced the broader racial order by ensuring that the bottom rung of whiteness remained visibly degraded.

Literary and popular culture have been crucial sites for the production and contestation of the white trash stereotype. Faulkner's Bundren family, Steinbeck's Joads, Erskine Caldwell's characters, and later television portrayals from *The Beverly Hillbillies* to *Honey Boo Boo* all participate in a long tradition of caricaturing poor whites. Yet, as Tasha R. Dunn's *Talking White Trash* (2019) shows through auto-ethnography and media analysis, working-class whites themselves negotiate these representations in complex ways, sometimes embracing and other times rejecting the label as a form of defiant identity (Dunn 2019). An influential and deeply controversial intervention came in 1997 with Jim Goad's *The Redneck Manifesto*, a raw, profane and abrasive polemic that flipped the script by celebrating "redneck" identity as the authentic voice of the white working class, mercilessly attacking liberal elites, journalists, academics, and the entire edifice of whiteness studies for class blindness. Goad's book sold hundreds of thousands of copies, gained significant media attention (including a spot on Bill Maher's show *Politically Incorrect*) and prefigured the anti-elite, anti-PC sentiment that would later fuel Trumpism, even though Goad himself would later drift further to the right and further away from mainstream acceptance as a writer.

The political salience of this demographic became unmistakable in 2016, when two books published almost simultaneously offered diametrically

opposed readings of the same social group. Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016) is a sweeping, meticulously documented historical study that traces the origins of the term back to early British colonial attitudes toward indentured servants and "waste people," arguing that class has always been the dirty secret of American democracy in the United States. Isenberg rejects cultural-pathology explanations, insisting instead that poor whites have been systematically excluded from the American Dream by elite policy and rhetoric that naturalizes their poverty as moral failure (Isenberg 2017). J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), by contrast, is a memoir framed as a quasi-sociological analysis: Vance recounts his escape from Appalachian poverty and addiction through personal discipline, Marine Corps service, Yale Law School, and venture capital success. The book became a runaway bestseller and was widely and enthusiastically embraced by conservative commentators as proof that the white working class suffers primarily from a self-inflicted "culture of poverty," a narrative that conveniently absolves structural socioeconomic inequality and elite policy choices (Vance 2016).

The two books could not be more different in tone and implication, yet both exploded into the national conversation at precisely the historical moment when Donald Trump swept the de-industrialized Midwest and rural South. Isenberg's structural, class-oriented critique was largely ignored by mainstream pundits, while Vance's feel-good, personal-responsibility story was elevated into the dominant explanation for Trump's victory, despite the fact that exit polls showed Trump voters were, on average, wealthier than Clinton voters and not quite the dispossessed insurgent rabble that partisan commentators sometimes imagined. Vance himself has since transformed from elegist of the white working class into one of its most prominent political antagonists: as Ohio's junior senator, he has championed anti-immigrant rhetoric, opposed student-debt relief, and aligned with the same billionaire class he once criticized; and as vice president, he unambiguously embodies the billionaire-friendly, libertarian wing of the GOP. The *Hillbilly Elegy* phenomenon thus illustrates perfectly how the "white trash" figure can be mobilized either to expose class oppression (Isenberg) or to obscure it behind right-wing bootstraps mythology (Vance), and how quickly the latter narrative can be weaponized for elite interests.

Conclusion

Whiteness in the United States has never been the monolithic privilege it is sometimes imagined to be by academics and political activists. It is a fractured construction, continually renegotiated through external opposition to blackness and internal disavowal and demonization of "white trash." The crystallization of formerly distinct ethnic Europeans into a generic white racial

identity required the forgetting (or whitewashing, if you will) of their own history of oppression or marginalization; the maintenance of class-coded white supremacy required the degradation of poor whites as a buffer class. African-American writers from Du Bois to Morrison to Watson have long understood this interdependence, theorizing whiteness not as an essence but as a relational and traumatic cultural formation.

Understanding contemporary racial politics, from enduring and stubbornly persistent disparities in wealth, education, and criminal justice to the resurgence of white populist grievance politics requires sustained attention to both the external and internal boundaries of whiteness as. Critical whiteness studies and white trash studies, when read together, reveal an identity category that has always been more fragile, controversial and contested than its defenders would like to admit. Yet the same scholarship also shows that whiteness retains remarkable adaptive power: it can absorb once-despised ethnic Europeans, re-brand poor whites as either noble victims or cultural pathologies depending on cynical political need, and reassert itself through law, policy, and culture. The challenge for future research may therefore be not simply to continue “dismantling” or “abolishing” whiteness,” as some scholars and activists would have it, but to map with greater nuance and precision how whiteness continues to evolve, whom it includes or excludes, and what material and symbolic interests those shifts serve. A balanced, less ideological or partisan analysis may be a more useful lens to explain the persistence and nuances of racial inequality, and why class divisions among white Americans remain one of the most significant fault lines in contemporary U.S. politics.

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