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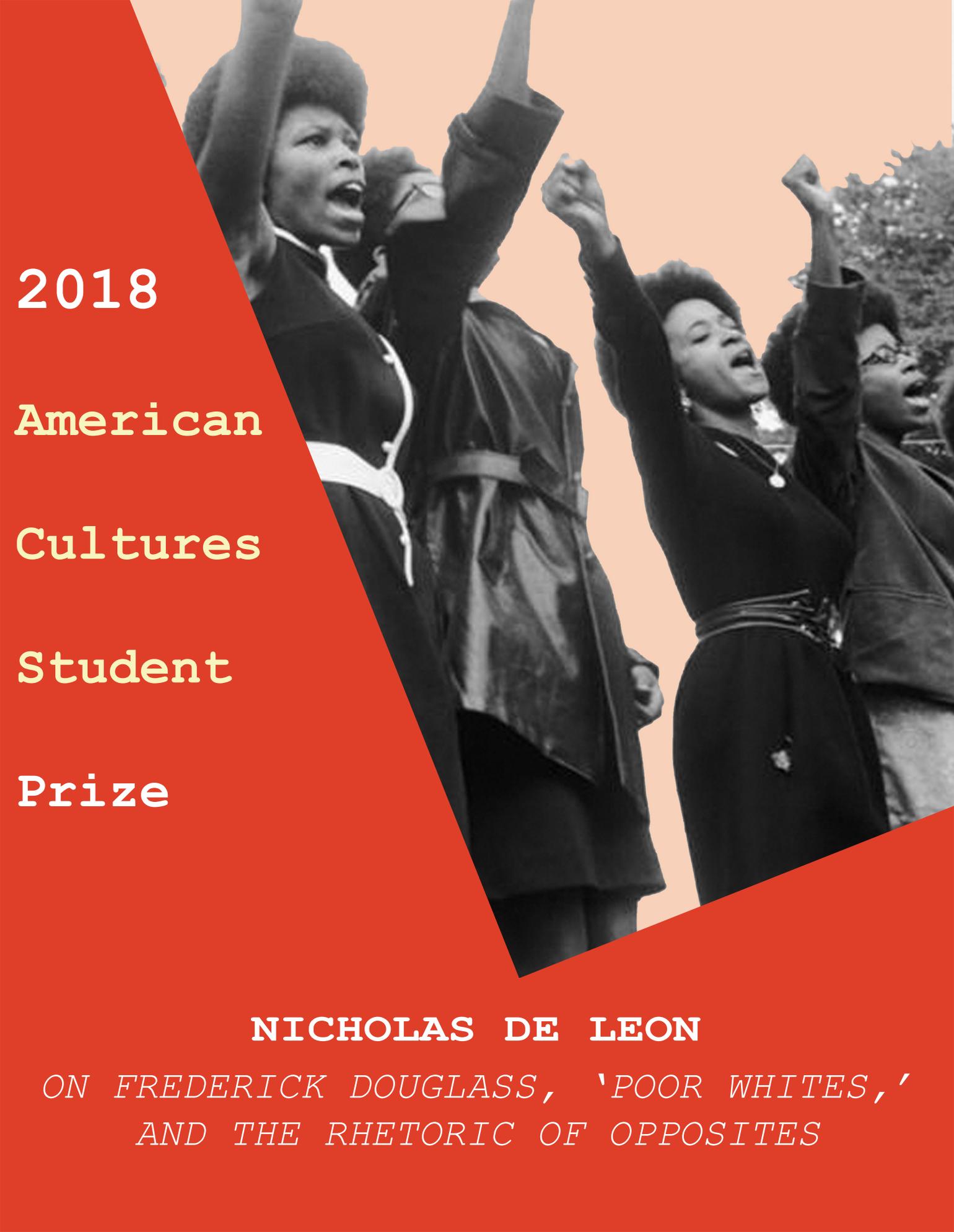
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NICHOLAS DE LEON

*ON FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 'POOR WHITES,'
AND THE RHETORIC OF OPPOSITES*

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The American Cultures Student Prize

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NICHOLAS DE LÉON

"On Frederick Douglass, 'poor whites,' and the rhetoric of opposites", Rhetoric 152AC "Race and Order in the New Republic.", Instructor: Nadesan Permaul

The essay builds from Frederick Douglass's consideration of non-slaveholding whites in 'My Bondage, My Freedom' (1855), rendered as a looking glass through which to "analyze modern poor whites in the contexts of social class, labor economics, and race relations." In doing so, the essay draws upon this vital historical text and integrates his central arguments within a fabric of modern macroeconomics, racial terminology, autobiography, and modern political rhetoric. This interweaving of analysis and conversation between the past and the present, elucidates the potential commonalities amongst poor, working class whites and racially marginalized communities, in ways that challenge the political efficacy of racial binaries, and gives light to potential structures for coalition-building.

Nicholas de Léon
University of California, Berkeley

For Dr. Nadesan Permaul, Adjunct Faculty in Rhetoric and Political Science
An essay entitled, "*On Frederick Douglass, 'poor whites,' and the rhetoric of opposites*"

In the fall semester of 2017, I entered the 152 AC course offered by the rhetoric department, "Race and Order in the New Republic." Unbeknownst to me at the time, that course would become one of my more impactful experiences thus far in my academic career; challenging, informing, and enriching my being not only in the realms of intellectual speculation or the theoretical, but also in the real practice and labor of my social and cultural experience as an American.

The essay I present for submission was a term paper assigned about halfway through the semester, and the texts up to that point had included James Fennimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, Mark Twain's *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, and Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage, My Freedom*. Of the prompt options given to us, I found each to be stimulating, but also reserved in a way that restricted me from viewing the practical world around me through these canonical pieces of literature. As he often did, he listened to what I had to say, and considered me as well as the value of my perspective before judgment. I only mention this because professor Permaul allowing me to pursue a thesis of my own design was an essential and integral component of this experience, and, consequently, served to validate the core of the American Cultures course curriculum.

The aim was to use Frederick Douglass's "*My Bondage, My Freedom*" as a lens through which to view and analyze the poor, white working-class in contemporary America. I wanted to view poor white Americans, particularly those living in rural areas like Appalachia, as in many senses the same poor, white working-class "slaves" Douglass discusses in chapter 20 of his autobiography. This language choice on behalf of Douglass was not meant to demean, ridicule, or subjugate these individuals (as is continually done in American society); so, neither was the intent of my essay to be cruel or dismissive. Nor was my intent even to simply draw correlations between different marginalized groups. Instead I wanted to suggest the commonality of marginalization, especially in the socio-economic sense, as a potential basis for multi-racial recognition and reconciliation.

By engaging with such a significant articulator of the American experience, I hoped to explore potential commonalities amongst poor, working-class whites and racial minorities in ways that challenged the political efficacy of racial binaries, and give light to potential structures for coalition-building. I didn't and still don't suggest this as a golden solution, by any means. Rather, I offer it more so as a counter to the emphasis on racial and cultural difference along exploitable lines in the rhetoric of opposites. I believe Douglass was a man who had every right to hate those who oppressed him, but instead made great strives to understand them, even when they understood neither him or even possibly themselves. It seems that, though we are centuries removed into the future from his time, much of what Douglass witnessed and experienced on the docks in Baltimore can be seen

and felt in our Nation's present moment. It is often difficult to locate an instance in which Douglass' example of empathy is alive in modern discourse. Perhaps it has been absent throughout American history, except for the rare instance. If ever alive, empathy in understanding 'the other' seems to have long since died. I believe it's imperative that it be revived.

The essay sought to "employ Douglass' impression of the non-slaveholding whites" in *My Bondage, My Freedom* as a looking glass through which to "analyze modern poor whites in the contexts of social class, labor economics, and race relations." In doing so, it was important for me to draw upon historical texts and integrate them within a fabric of modern macroeconomics, racial terminology, autobiography, and modern political rhetoric. It was important that I reach into the past to retrieve what I thought still to be one of the more powerful lessons for the present-day.

In all honesty, I cannot say that my essay fulfilled its endeavor. Although it received high marks, I am still left with the feeling (a familiar feeling) of slight pride overshadowed by inadequacy. However, I submit this essay for consideration, because I still believe, for all it lacks, that it not only exemplifies the fundamental goals of the American Cultures curriculum, but also made the AC course experience a crucial component of my time here at Berkeley.

Coming from a Black, Asian, and Hawaiian background, it first occurred to me to write the paper from the experience of an ethnic minority, a place of familiarity. It surely was the logical thing to do, both being a minority and having read Douglass' autobiography. But what struck me most was Douglass' treatment of poor whites, and how he seemed to suspend hatred and even judgment in order to reach the understanding that they were, in fact, much more like himself than they knew. It was the power of empathy in this suspension of judgment and the art of listening that moved me more than anything else, and this is why I chose the subject I did.

This is what I believe is most central to the American Cultures curriculum and why I recognize the need for its presence at Cal. I think of that class, the environment professor Permaul created and nurtured, the student colleagues I engaged with and learned from, and I am reminded of what still lingers in our great American experiment. This is still a place of great wealth and diversity of experience, culture, and identity. Through all of its injustices and agony, I wish to see my country as Douglass saw it. Not simply through disparaging or overly reverent eyes, but with patience for and a better understanding of all those who constitute the collective fabric of American society. Frederick Douglass gave us a bridge upon which to meet; it is time we stepped out onto it.

Nicholas Lawson

Rhetoric 152AC

Professor Permaul

November 20, 2017

Prompt 4

On Frederick Douglass, 'poor whites,' and the rhetoric of opposites

A man once said that, "Any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another."¹ Now, perhaps it was due to his intended application to Athens and other city-states or a merely marginal existence of racism among citizens of the ancient world, but the philosopher Plato may have more aptly said that a city is divided into not two, but a multitude of warring parts. Living in present-day America, one need only glance at the nearest city or town to see this occurring; perhaps not in the streets but in the lives of the citizens that walk them, their competition emboldened by intense diversity, varying social mobility, and ever-widening economic disparity. The coexistence of race, class, and wealth not only cuts a city three ways, but, intersecting in different combinations, creates a variety of mechanisms by which individuals and communities are separated and stratified, formed into "drivers" and "field hands", "masters" and "slaves." Some of these designators, while seemingly heavy-handed, are useful in invoking the racial and economic relationships between groups of an earlier era, an era perhaps more similar to our own than commonly acknowledged.

Entering into dialogue with a time and place separated by nearly two centuries from one's own can prove difficult. Save for those with degrees in historical studies or natural inclinations towards such subjects, a world that predates film, sound recording, and even photography can seem quite foreign to a citizen of the global age. A child acquainted with the thrills of virtual reality, perhaps, cannot be blamed for seeing only dust on the pages of Steinbeck or Thoreau. So, it is likely a great testament, not only to his prowess as orator and wordsmith, but also, to his near incomprehensible capacity for empathy and reason that the philosophy and perspectives of Frederick Douglass still resonate so loudly in the mind of the modern. In a society so immersed in its myths of exceptionalism and rugged individualism, yet avoidant of its racial and class history, it may be a more appropriate time than ever to reengage with that great agitator of the American conscience.

¹ Reeve, C.D.C. ed., Plato's Republic, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, p. 106

The intention of this essay is to employ Douglass's impression of the non-slaveholding whites he encounters in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a lens through which to analyze modern poor whites in the contexts of 1) social class, 2) labor economics, and 3) race relations. There is much that can be extrapolated from Douglass's assessment of 19th century America, and it is certainly not the aim of this essay to suggest that the aspect chosen is in any way more profound or important than another. Douglass's contributions to the emancipation of African Americans, both from the fetters of the body and the spirit, as well as the advancement of women, cannot be understated. But at this current moment of such political and social upheaval, it seems especially critical to address those problems that have afflicted this nation since before its inception.

First, an analysis of poor whites in the context of social class. In chapter 22 of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass recollects his arrival in New Bedford, Massachusetts as a free man, awestruck by the "solid wealth and grandeur" of the city, stating that he had imagined the condition of a white population without slaves would mirror those non-slaveholders in the South.² "A free white man, holding no slaves, in the country, I had known to be the most ignorant and poverty-stricken of men, and the laughing stock even of slaves themselves—called generally by them, in derision, '*poor white trash*' ...I supposed the northern people like them, also, in poverty and degradation".³ Here, it is not the "wealth and grandeur" that is worth noting, but the attention Douglass gives to the condition of non-slaveholding "poor white trash" in relation to their affluent counterparts. A critical look at the term, white trash, and its origin may prove to be a fruitful starting point.

As popular phrases and terms naturally seem temporal, only relevant to a specific time, it may surprise the reader to hear such a familiar derogatory term for impoverished whites deployed by Douglass. In fact, the term "white trash" can be traced in print as early as 1821, although it

² Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 210

³ Ibid

wouldn't likely be till some years later that it would gain such widespread popularity.⁴ Author Nancy Isenberg points to a Washington City newspaper article from 1845, which described the funeral procession of president Andrew Jackson, as one of the early public uses of the term⁵. "As the poor crowded the street, it was neither 'crackers' nor squatters lining up to see the last hurrah of Old Hickory. Instead, it was 'poor white trash' who pushed the poor colored folk out of the way to get a glimpse of the fallen president."⁶ While certainly not the first use of the term, this example is a notable illustration of the normative contempt felt on behalf of many affluent whites towards the impoverished members of their racial community. Taking this into account, it is then important to understand how affluent whites differentiated themselves from this underclass.

The term white trash is sometimes treated as distinct from other 'deviant' white subclasses, but what is important in the context of this essay is not these distinctions but what they *reveal* about social class distinctions *within* a given race, in this case among whites. "White trash southerners were classified as a 'race' that passed on horrific traits, eliminating any possibility of improvement or social mobility...they marked an evolutionary decline."⁷ Some distinctions in usage do bear relevance. For instance, while some Northerners, like author George M. Weston, declared poor whites to be victims crippled by an institution of free black slave labor, proslavery Southerners endorsed the structure of class as a natural outcome of one's biology, justifying the class stratification of white society as the result of one's pedigree⁸. This perception was well established, not just among Southern affluent whites, but also in the Northern states and as far west as California, reflected in the writings of such figures as Daniel Hundley and Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁹ However, what these views all shared was the belief that class was not simply a sociological

⁴ Isenberg, Nancy, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America, Penguin Random House LLC, 2016, p. 135

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ op.cit, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America, p. 136

⁸ Ibid

⁹ op.cit, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America, p. 137

construction, but a biological fact. And while taking up this belief would appear overtly cruel, to believe this perspective of class remained in the 19th century would be mistaken.

The view of class as defined, in part, by one's genetic makeup continued through the 20th century and still exists today. Starting in the 1840s and 50s, "North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia kept poor whites at bay by retaining property qualifications for holding office."¹⁰ From 1880 to 1920, the U.S. Genetics Records Office (ERO) "produced fifteen different 'Eugenic Family Studies,' wherein the researchers sought to demonstrate scientifically that large numbers of rural poor whites were 'genetic defectives.'"¹¹ In an example as recent as the 1990s, Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* resurrected "this line of biological determinist thinking, blaming white trash [among other groups] for many of the nation's ills."¹² Among these three examples of biologically based class distinctions is the commonality of economic incentivization for the affluent white stratum. Whether to keep poor whites from obtaining political and economic leverage, or use "pseudoscientific eugenic theory to call for an end to the welfare state," social class is a powerful political tool.¹³ Just how powerful, America would witness in the presidential election of 2016.

On September 9, 2016, speaking at a campaign fundraising event, democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton made what is now one of the more infamous mistakes of her campaign, describing "half of Trump supporters" as the "basket of deplorables."¹⁴ This comment referred not to poor whites or the general base, but little to none of that mattered. The Trump campaign, which had at that point labored for over a year to appeal to the white working class, leapt at the opportunity to describe the comment as Clinton's "true contempt for everyday Americans."¹⁵ The

¹⁰ op.cit, [White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America](#), p. 149

¹¹ Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee, [White Trash: Race and Class in America](#), Routledge, 1997, p. 2

¹² op.cit, [White Trash: Race and Class in America](#), p. 3

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Reilly, Katie, [Red Hillary Clinton's 'Basket of Deplorables' Remarks About Donald Trump Supporters](#), TIME Magazine, Sept. 10, 2016

¹⁵ Ibid

narrative of social elite contempt for poor whites played so well for Donald Trump, in large part, because the real story of poverty, unemployment, and neglect among poor whites was so strong.¹⁶¹⁷ To illustrate this, it is fruitful to turn, momentarily, away from the national, political conversation and engage with a personal account of life as a poor white living in contemporary America.

In his novel, *Hillbilly Elegy*, author J. D. Vance details the life of the rural white poor with stories from his upbringing in Middletown, Ohio and Jackson, Kentucky. Both places lie in what is referred to as the Rust Belt, a Midwestern region once the heartland of American industrial manufacturing that has fallen victim to outsourcing, unemployment, economic decline, and subsequent decay.¹⁸ Middletown, Vance remarks, is a “steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope for as long as I can remember.”¹⁹ What was once a robust and thriving economic sector, “the engine that brought [Vance’s grandparents] from the hills of Kentucky into America’s middle class,” has since almost entirely vanished, leaving in its wake some of the country’s poorest communities.^{20 21} While not the sole contributors, economic factors of globalization, such as the internationalization of American manufacturing and domestic automation, have increased industry labor competition with the crippling consequences previously described.²² The intersection of social class and labor economics often can produce serious consequences for communities. For more illumination on this, a return to Frederick Douglass proves insightful.

In chapter 20 of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass recounts being employed towards the end of his enslavement in the city of Baltimore by Mr. William Gardiner, “an extensive

¹⁶ Wise, Mike, *Under the Affluence*, City Lights Books, 2015, p. 37, 48-49

¹⁷ op.cit, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, p. 177-189

¹⁸ Crandall, Robert, *The Continuing Decline of Manufacturing in the Rust Belt*, Brookings Institution, 1993, p. 2

¹⁹ Vance, J. D., *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, HarperCollins, 2016, p. 1-2

²⁰ op.cit, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, p. 55

²¹ op.cit, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, p. 177-189

²² Alder, Lagakos, and Ohanian, *The Decline of the U.S. Rust Belt: A Macroeconomic Analysis*, 2013, p. 1-32

ship builder on Fell's Point...engaged in building two large man-of-war vessels."²³ It was there that Douglass worked alongside poor white apprentices who, not the least bit inclined to labor aside a black slave, would verbally threaten him, and, on occasion, physically harm him.²⁴ According to the author, this cruelty was not simply spawned out of the poor white's own dislike for him as a black slave, but induced on behalf of the "slaveholders": wealthy, white bosses and owners.²⁵ "The slaveholders, with a craftiness peculiar to themselves, by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks, succeeds in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself."²⁶

Changes in labor economics acting as an element of control upon working society can be seen at all stages of American history, from the first settlements to our current day. In his 1968 book, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, author Winthrop D. Jordan echoes many of Douglass's observations and elaborates on the white resentment of black labor.²⁷ "Protests against Negro slave competition were slanted principally at the employment of Negroes as skilled craftsmen, porters, and boat pilots," occupations typically held by white workers.²⁸ Undoubtedly, the racial discomfort of working alongside black slaves was, in part, what motivated those protests, but what is more important to note here is the resentment towards blacks as job competitors.²⁹ Jordan states that the presence of large numbers of black slaves in the South created the fear that poor white laborers would be not only outnumbered, but rendered unnecessary by the availability of black skilled labor.³⁰

²³ op.cit, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 187

²⁴ op.cit, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 188

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Reader, Jordan, Winthrop D., *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, p. 222

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

The incentive for these wealthy white employers is clear: “[They] wanted Negroes because they were cheaper to buy and keep than white men.”³¹ Thus, it is important to understand that changes are beneficial and often directed by the wealthy, proprietary class. Douglass notes that bosses like Mr. Gardiner encouraged the “enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks,” appealing to their pride as white men endowed with innate superiority, all the while keeping the poor white workers ignorant to the system of labor competition they, the “slaveholders”, benefited so greatly from.³²

Applying this basic framework of relations to labor economics of the modern day reveals little discrepancy. The poorest sectors of society still compete for limited jobs, while the wealthy proprietary class benefits from and, in many situations, induces higher levels of competition. While this analysis is clearly simplistic, it nonetheless fleshes out the fundamental roles that social class and labor economics play, both in Douglass’s time and our own. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, as levels of globalization continued to increase, the United States lost an estimated 500,000 auto industry jobs and 350,000 steel industry jobs.³³ “These job losses were concentrated in roughly 140 of the 3,000 counties in the United States,” the vast majority located in Rust Belt states.³⁴ This trend has since continued in other sectors such as energy, leaving many working white families without jobs, in communities with rising crime and drug use, reduced opportunities in education, and little to no hope for future investment.³⁵ The effects of this seismic shift bore serious implications, not only for these communities, but the entire nation following the presidential election of 2016.³⁶ Attempting to grapple with these issues, how they affected so many working white communities, and how these in turn affect politics can potentially be made more

³¹ op.cit, White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812, p. 223

³² op.cit, My Bondage and My Freedom, p. 188

³³ Feyrer, Sacerdote, and Stern, Did the Rust Belt Become Shiny? A Study of Cities and Counties that Lost Steel and Auto Jobs in the 1980s, Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Affairs, 2007, p. 41

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ op.cit, White Trash: Race and Class in America, p. 177-189

³⁶ Montarnaro, Domenico, 7 Reasons Donald Trump Won The Presidential Election, NPR, November 12, 2016

manageable by understanding the concept of cultural trauma and its role on group psychology and choices.

In the opening chapter of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffrey C. Alexander states, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness.”³⁷ Built upon theories of individual trauma, cultural trauma seeks to explain how “external shattering events” can affect groups.³⁸ However, unlike the logic of individual trauma, the entire group does not have to experience the event for cultural trauma to occur; rather, “it is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.”³⁹ Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of cultural trauma is the need for a “collective actor” who provides a singular representation of the event to the group.⁴⁰ “These group representations can be seen as ‘claims’ about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply.”⁴¹ It is reasonable to assume that if collective actors are necessary to this process, the influence they possess can be quite great. For insight into this influence, one final consultation with Frederick Douglass may prove as valuable as it has been thus far.

Returning to the scene depicted in chapter 20 of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass elaborates on the ways in which the slaveholders “with a craftiness peculiar to themselves” control the working-class whites. “[The slaveholders] appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation, as tending to place the white working man, on an equality with negroes, and, by this means, they succeed in drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact, that, by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave.”⁴² Wielding

³⁷ Reader, Alexander, Jeffrey, Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, University of California Press, 2004, p. 20

³⁸ op.cit, Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, p. 22

³⁹ op. cit, Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, p. 25

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² op.cit, My Bondage and My Freedom, p. 188

their influence over the collective of working-class whites, these slaveholders are able to redirect feelings of hostility born out low social class and vulnerability to changes in labor economics into the familiar channel of racial hatred. This final section will discuss just how race relations can be affected in this way.

Despite such strong, visceral hatred towards blacks in the antebellum South, the overwhelming number of slaves and poor, landless whites was evidence enough to instill fear of a biracial alliance in wealthy southern leaders.⁴³ Race and the rhetoric of opposites proved to be of the most effective methods for reducing that fear. “Democratic leaders, of course, did everything they could to exploit, whenever necessary or possible, the racial anxieties, enmity, and pride of poor whites as a way of insuring loyalty to the Democratic Party.”⁴⁴ The comprehensive disenfranchisement of blacks, which continued long after the Civil War had ended, served the dual function of persuading poor, landless whites of their superiority to slaves, while keeping them obliged to the wealthy who held them at a similar distance.⁴⁵ “Economic hardship and dependence remained a constant for poor whites, the political voices of the poor could still be thwarted by those with more power, and racial antagonism continued to keep the southern poor divided against themselves.”⁴⁶

Race relations are powerful tools for collective actors seeking to garner and solidify their own power. Presidential ads such as those featuring Willie Horton or Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick were effective means of deploying this tool, but perhaps no contemporary usage exemplifies the ability of race relations to so drastically alter the political landscape like the campaign of Donald Trump.⁴⁷

Appealing to poor whites by placing their cultural trauma front and center, the candidate

⁴³ Bolton, Charles C., Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi, Duke University Press, 1994, p. 184

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ op.cit, Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi, p. 185

⁴⁷ Lerman, Amy and Weaver, Vesla, Race and Crime in American Politics, The Oxford Handbook of Ethnicity, Crime and Immigration, 2013, p. 1-4

maintained the ability to triangulate the collective identity of his supporters, and even paint himself as someone they could identify with. And while it can be argued, rightfully so, that not every supporter of Trump harbored overtly racist motivations, it becomes much more difficult to deny even slight knowledge of complicity with a campaign openly supported by the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁸ Whatever the case may be, increasingly more Americans believe race relations are deteriorating, and the evidence at least seems to corroborate this.⁴⁹

However, critics of the Trump administration would be right to criticize its exploitation of race relations for political gain. The scapegoating of racial minorities, immigrants, and Muslims is not only morally deficient, but it does not solve the systemic issues facing so many of the poor whites that voted for Trump.⁵⁰ Supporters of the President might point out that the country is only one quarter of the way through his first term, and that changes shouldn't expected to occur so soon. But with so much of the evidence so far pointed towards policy goals in service of the powerful elite and little more than symbolic gestures made towards his poor white voter base, president Trump has thus far proven to be much more to the likeness of the crafty "slaveholders" Douglass so keenly understood.⁵¹ ⁵² Whether the exploitation of poor, white working-class Americans eventually gives way to a similar awareness and subsequent shift away from the administration, only time will tell.

Before concluding, this essay has thus far attempted to engage three facets of poor white society in America, beginning each examination from the words and perspective of Frederick Douglass. Admittedly, at this present stage it could be argued that this analytic device has been nothing more than novelty, and to bring Douglass in for the simple purpose of jumpstarting the

⁴⁸ Holley, Peter, [KKK's official newspaper supports Donald Trump for president](#), The Washington Post, November 2, 2016

⁴⁹ Dann, Carrie, [NBC/WSJ Poll: Americans Pessimistic on Race Relations](#), NBC News, Sept 21, 2017

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Amadeo, Kimberly, [Trump's Tax Plan and How It Would Affect You](#), The Balance, November 20, 2016

⁵² Paquette, Danielle, [Carrier factory where Trump touted saved jobs is laying off hundreds](#), Chicago Tribune, May 25, 2017

process of analysis is curious, and at worst, offensive in its shallow usage of such a profound individual. This is neither intended nor accurate.

Due to limited space, the scope of this essay could not accommodate a critique of the political left's derision of the poor white working-class in America, but it is surely nonetheless an issue. Policies and political rhetoric from both major parties have contributed to the current state and treatment of these individuals and communities, Democrats holding their own share of the blame.⁵³ It is the opinion of this essay that the time for engaging in the rhetoric of opposites has long since passed, and with it the social allowance of racial and class ridicule. Frederick Douglass not only offers readers a powerful image of America, past and current, but the tone and perspective that can, in the words of Lincoln, help "bind up the nation's wounds."⁵⁴ Douglass does not simply recount history, he offers up his incomprehensible capacity for empathy and reason as tools for a nation with which to begin rebuilding itself.

In concluding this essay, it has here been attempted to employ Frederick Douglass's impression of the non-slaveholding whites he encounters in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a lens through which to analyze modern poor whites in the contexts of 1) social class, 2) labor economics, and 3) race relations. By doing this, the intention was to shed some light on the current political and social upheaval, making an attempt to counter the rhetoric of opposites. If poor whites can begin to self-identify as a classed group that has historically been manipulated through social class, labor economics, and race relations, perhaps new coalitions can be formed along interest lines that transcend both race and class. Perhaps with Frederick Douglass's empathetic understanding, we as a nation can begin that long process of reconciliation.

⁵³ Rensin, Emmett, [The smug style in American liberalism](#), Vox, April 21, 2016

⁵⁴ Bredhoff, Stacy, [President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address](#), Our Documents, November 11, 2017