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THE WAGES OF ROEDIGER: WHY THREE DECADES OF WHITENESS STUDIES HAS NOT PRODUCED THE LEFT WE NEED

CEDRIC JOHNSON

The popular claim that Trump's election signified resurgent white supremacy is not only wrong—it's dangerous. It grants more power to the fascist right than it deserves. Different voters and constituencies supported Trump for different reasons, not all of them rational. His "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan worked in multiple registers. On one level, his rhetoric

gave comfort to nativist fears of undocumented immigration, terrorism and outsourcing of U.S. jobs, and stoked the racist anxieties of some whites, fearful of the well-publicized demographic "browning" of America. On another and perhaps deeper level, Trump's rhetoric, like that of Reagan's "Morning in America" a generation earlier, promised a return to the affluent society of the Post World War II era. In this regard, Trump's campaign was iconoclastic, promising to staunch the bleeding of job loss and capital flight produced by bi-partisan international free trade agreements. His "put America first" protectionist sentiment had a visceral appeal among some voters, but such rhetoric oversimplified the relations between international trade and domestic job growth, and while singling out specific firms as scapegoats, he absolved the investor class as a whole as responsible for decisions about production technology and restructuring that have downsized American manufacturing.

The economic appeal of the Trump campaign, and his success in parts of the Midwestern industrial heartland has provoked a rash of explanations and invective centered on the "white working class." But the "angry white worker" line misses too much. Trump did not grow the GOP base substantially, though he outperformed McCain in 2008 and Romney in 2012 by over 2 million votes. More importantly, Trump did not secure a larger share of the white vote than Romney did. Trump performed well among blue collar voters, former Obama voters, wealthy whites, non-unionized workers in coal country, the steel-producing belt and Right to Work states, building trades and contractors, proto-entrepreneurs, *and* minorities. One-third of Latino voters supported Trump, as did 13% of African American men.

The answer to why Trump was elected lies in the ideological crisis of the Democratic party, and more specifically in the implosion of Hillary Clinton's campaign, both problems having their root in the New Democrats' neoliberal political agenda and pro-corporate strategic and governing priorities. To the extent that party insider Donna Brazile's new memoir corroborates other accounts, the New Democratic leadership of the party worked to sabotage the challenge mounted by democratic socialist candidate and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, especially after his New Hampshire primary victory.[1] The antipathy towards white workers found its most forceful expressions early in the 2016 election, most often in the

statements of party operatives and the liberal commentariat, who attempted to derail Sanders' bid for the Democratic presidential nomination by portraying him as the candidate of white working-class men, and a relic of the old-style New Deal liberalism. Even after Hillary Clinton's embarrassing defeat, many clung to this logic that rustbelt voters didn't matter, the working class was dead, and the future of the party lay with African Americans, Latinos and women, as if those groups do not comprise the working class. MSNBC personality Joy Reid summed up the New Democrat's anti-worker electoral calculus, "Because Democrats, although they understand, I think, deep down that they are the party of black and brown people, of gay people, of marginalized people...they still long to be the party of the...Pabst Blue Ribbon voter...the Coors Lite-drinking voter."[2] Reid doubled-down on the New Democratic shtick that first gestated in the wake of the unsuccessful presidential challenges of Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, when the Democratic Leadership Council was formed and committed to an electoral strategy predicated on making symbolic overtures to the constituencies that once made up the New Deal coalition, while adopting a neoliberal agenda. That agenda, despite the pretense and optics of social liberalism, has been ongoing throughout the administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, and the campaign platforms of numerous candidates before and after them, typically hostile towards working-class interests in practice. "The problem with this line is not just that it's gross and elitist—it's that it's not even true," as Connor Kilpatrick noted in the throes of the 2016 primary season, "The working class is bigger than ever, is still really white, and is broadly supportive of a progressive populist agenda."[3] The "white working class" is a powerful political myth, one that services the corporate-centered agenda of Democratic elites, but its origins lie in academic left attempts to make sense of the historical difficulty of achieving socialism on U.S. soil. Born out of noble intentions, it is a dangerous myth nonetheless, one that distorts our sense of history and politics and how we might build social forces capable of contesting the power and interests of capital in our times.

Given the timing of its publication, David Roediger's latest book, *Class, Race and Marxism* (Verso, 2017) is addressed to this new terrain of Trumplandia, and the book's introduction takes up the debates within the American Left that reached fever pitch during the 2016 election cycle. The book, however, is not a collection of

new essays, but rather a compendium of Roediger's writings over the last ten years. As such, it is an attempt to reassert his position on how we should think about questions of race and class in American life and history, and what role Marxism might play in that process. This essay examines Roediger's latest book, but also takes stock of the interpretative assumptions of some three decades of whiteness studies in academe, and its consequences for left thought and action. Throughout what follows, I offer alternative historical analysis and case-study illustrations to demonstrate the limits of whiteness discourse, and how we might approach questions of class power and interests instead.

Whiteness studies as an academic field of inquiry was born in the waning years of the Reagan-Bush era, and its creators' motives were earnest and well intentioned. They were preoccupied with how to reverse the trend of neoconservativism and revitalize the American Left. The New Right was built in American suburbia, the southern states, and the shuttered manufacturing towns stretching from the eastern seaboard across the Midwest, and at the heart of the New Right's campaign playbook and governing agenda was the assault on the egalitarian reforms of the civil rights and second wave feminism, such as affirmative action and reproductive rights, as well as those targeted programs of the welfare state, e.g. AFDC, public housing, which were portrayed as giveaways to the undeserving black and brown poor. The problem, many would argue, lay in whiteness, as a category of material advantage and political affinity, or put another way, the New Right had emerged through conspicuous appeals to whites as a group and against urban blacks and Latinos, who were portrayed through underclass narratives as an inferior caste, lacking a work ethic and delayed gratification, immoral, prone to criminality and self-sabotage, and in the most racist articulations, biologically inferior, lacking the intellectual and social capacity that might enable assimilation as citizens.[4]

Whiteness studies had important precursors. In 1987 black political scientist Ronald W. Walters published a pamphlet titled, "White Racial Nationalism in the United States" as part of the Without Prejudice series of the United Nations' International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.[5] Seeing a clear connection between Reagan's conservative policies and the rising violence perpetrated by white supremacist organizations and vigilantes, Walters concluded that

"the current wave of American nationalism is chauvinistic not only because it is American, but also because it is white." In 1989 feminist educator Peggy McIntosh's published "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," an abridged version of an article she penned a year prior. But it was Roediger's 1991 book, *The Wages of Whiteness*, that quickly gained influence within academia and beyond, establishing the new beachhead of anti-racist thinking and activism. More than any other single figure, Roediger has helped to advance the study of whiteness as a central problem in American history and politics, having published and edited numerous books on the subject, including his *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994), *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (2005) and *How Race Survived U.S. History* (2010).[6]

In the three decades since Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, dozens of books have explored the historical process of white identity formation, such as Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White (*1995), Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996), George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998), Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (1998), Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness* (1998), dozens of scholarly and popular articles, as well as the independent left journal *Race Traitor*.[7] A one-man brand, Tim Wise has become a routine fixture on the college lecture circuit, national news and radio programs, and authored numerous best-selling books including, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (2008) and *Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority* (2012). McIntosh and Wise represent a more therapeutic, consciousness-raising approach to whiteness that has spawned a cottage industry of professional trainings, national conferences, study guides, manuals, and curricula targeting white audiences and intended to spark dialogue, personal reevaluation and behavioral modification, all in the hopes of reducing racism in its various manifestations, i.e. micro-aggressions, institutional racism, and white privilege. Such projects include the United Church of Christ's *White Privilege: Let's Talk—A Resource for Transformational Dialogue*, the film, *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible,* produced by World Trust Educational Services, and the Whiteness Project, an on-line interactive platform built around interviews, among scores of similar initiatives.

As historian Eric Arnesen pointed out in a critical overview of the whiteness studies literature, "Whiteness is, variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for 'white supremacy,' an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial 'others' and one-self that can be rejected through 'treason' to a racial category."[8] The promiscuity of the concept of whiteness, and related notions of white privilege and white supremacy make it a difficult concept to criticize, as Arnesen adds, "it is nothing less than a moving target."

Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* was unique in its focus on the complicity of white workers, and its rejection in part of earlier Marxist arguments that pinned the creation and circulation of racist ideology on ruling elites. Published a decade into Reagan-Bush's neoconservative reign, Roediger's opening salvo posed the question that many still asks about white workers' commitments to the GOP— "why do white workers vote against their interests?"—with the speaker almost always assuming that working-class interests are already self-evident, unified and simply waiting to be advanced. "White labor does not just receive and resist racist ideas but embraces, adopts and, at times, murderously acts upon those ideas," Roediger argues in that now classic book, "The problem is not just that the white working class is at critical junctures manipulated by racism, but that it comes to think of itself and its interests as white."[9]

This essay takes aim at this central premise regarding "white interests" running through Roediger's oeuvre, from *The Wages of Whiteness* to his most recent book, and widely adopted by other academics, professional trainers, activists and citizens. The academic and popular discourse of whiteness is concerned with the "souls of white folks" if you will, their predilections, behaviors and reactionary tendencies, often relying on retrospective psychoanalysis to discern the interior lives and private motives of the antebellum crowd, the minstrel show audience, southern lynch mobs and middle class suburban strivers alike, even when evidence of those motives and interests is scant.

The historian Barbara Fields once remarked that "Whiteness is the shotgun marriage of two incoherent but well-loved concepts: identity and agency."[10] That said, this essay seeks to begin

divorce proceedings because a keen sense of *historical interests*, the shifting, territorial demands and worlds people fight to realize in their times, is lost in the common inferences made through psychohistory and the false equation of identity and political interests, analytical moves which are central to whiteness studies, and for that matter, much contemporary thinking on blackness and race in the US. As Fields reminds us, whiteness acts as a thimblerig that "performs a series of deft displacements, first substituting race for racism, then postulating identity as the social substance of race, and finally attributing racial identity to persons of European descent."[11] And I would add, the same thimblerig enables attributing political interests to whites (and blacks) without the critical analysis and investigatory rigor that might sharpen our understanding of class and power in American history.

Marxism is a diverse, contradictory and evolving body of thought and practice, but its impetus in the historical writings of Marx and Engels, lies in the critique of capitalism, and the political project of abolishing the capitalist class relation, the production of surplus value. Analysis of historically contingent interests should lie at the heart of the project of historical-geographical materialism—to borrow David Harvey's more precise phrasing. I do not question Roediger's political commitments here, only that his arguments regarding whiteness, and approach to thinking about how class interests are actually formed, articulated and advanced, particularly among white and black workers, do not help us to advance the intellectual and political project of anti-capitalism. Whiteness has come to function not so much as an analysis of interests in historical motion, but rather, it functions as catechism—America's original sin is racism and redemption in the post-political hereafter lies in white atonement. With respect to class struggle and the maintenance of consent and order by dominant classes, the devil is in the details of history, details that fall out of focus when we evoke "white interests" as a metanarrative of what is wrong with American politics. Roediger's work has advanced an approach to thinking about history and contemporary politics that reifies whiteness, even as it explores its social construction, presupposes that racial identity is the foremost shaper of working-class thought and action, and silences interracial solidarity.

Losing DuBois, or Thinking Historically about Class Interests

In Chapter 2, "Accounting for the Wages of Whiteness," Roediger returns to the debates surrounding his most influential book, taking time to respond to some of his critics and defend the merits of his thesis. He summarizes the thrust of whiteness studies as "the argument that an embrace of white identity has led to absences of humanity and of the effective pursuit of class interest among whites."[12] I taught *The Wages of Whiteness* throughout the aughts, and for the same reasons that many others assigned the book in class. By the time George W. Bush took the oath of office, *Wages* was a widely-cherished classic in the realm of left historical writing, and the return of Republican control of the White House raised the same anxieties and frustrations about why certain segments of the population were so easily seduced by cultural conservatism and GOP tax-cuts than the New Democrats' multicultural version of neoliberalism.

The book had a certain pedagogical value on college campuses, which are spaces of middle-class assimilation, and especially the kind of small, monastic liberal arts college where I began my career. In those contexts, which are often classed along racial lines because of admissions and financing processes, with white students often hailing from middle and upper-middle class suburban backgrounds and boarding schools, and black and brown students more likely to be drawn from inner-city high schools and working-class environments, the clash of urban and suburban cultures, privileged and disadvantaged class positions take on a sharp racial character. In that context where middle class was synonymous with white, discussion of the white working class was both novel and innocuous. Over the course of my time there, I discovered that there were many white students who hailed from the old industrial towns of the Hudson valley and western New York's southern tier, but they had little means of expressing their difficulties in an environment where "white" and "working class" simply did not seem to go together. Roediger's first book then provided a way to think about American history and contemporary political conflicts in a manner that many students could identify with, but that was part of the problem.

Roediger's extrapolation of George Rawick's comment that enterprising, colonial whites encountered slaves in a manner akin to a reformed sinner confronting a comrade of his previous debaucheries, as "pornographies of their former selves," was

powerful as a speculative claim, one which allowed students to think through the process of industrialization as a social and cultural experience, and not merely a technical and economic one. "As proletarianization brought new losses of access to the commons and new forms of time discipline and social regimentation to far greater numbers of people," Roediger writes, "workers processed loss by projecting onto Black workers what they still desired in terms of imagined absence of alienation, even as they bridled at being treated as slaves, or as 'white niggers.'" In his discussions of the evolution of racial language and racist ideas, Roediger may be at his best, detailing the subtle and not so subtle, regional and incremental changes in language, tracing the etymology and evolution of racial categories and slurs as well as shifting nomenclature of the industrial order, the meanings of "master," "boss," "factories," and so forth. As someone who came of age in French-speaking Southwest Louisiana during a period when the phrase "coon ass" still prevailed as a term of endearment among Cajun whites and an insult against them, I appreciated his discussion of the circuitous route this phrase took historically from the antebellum uses of the word "barracoon" to the anti-black epithet of Jim Crow discourse.

Roediger's analysis of the evolution of whiteness, and in particular how this historical development was related to the interconnected processes and social dislocations of immigration, urbanization, industrial discipline and urban political incorporation was highly generative and made for great classroom discussions. Teaching Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* helped to underscore the ways that race is socially-constructed, an invention of historical processes, but also to examine how notions of social consciousness and historical interests are contingent, never given or static. It is on this very subject of historical interests, however, that discourse analysis and retrospective psychoanalysis lose their power and fail to capture how particular class interests are congealed, articulated and advanced.

The wide-interpretative license Roediger takes, moving from the consumer habits of antebellum white workers, e.g. their presence in the crowd at Jonkonnu celebrations or as patrons of the black-faced stage show, towards making firm conclusions about the choices made in their political lives, is not particularly helpful as

historical analysis. This problem derives in part from his use of W.E.B. DuBois as inspiration, and in particular, DuBois at a moment in his long career that was marked by transition and a rather uneasy commitment to both bourgeois liberal politics and a nascent interest in socialism—not quite the "great African American thinker and militant" Roediger praises. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* was powerful as an antidote to those who lampooned black citizenship, but it also reflected his standing skepticism of interracial working-class solidarity as a path to socialism during the Great Depression.

In a sub-section of the introduction to *The Wages of Whiteness*, titled "The Essential DuBois," Roediger attributes the book's title and thesis to DuBois's *Black Reconstruction*. That 1935 book was a revisionist history that challenged the prevalent, racist Dunning School interpretation, which held that Federal Reconstruction was a failure simply because freed slaves were not prepared socially or intellectually to assume the role of self-governing citizens. DuBois not only sought to highlight the role that blacks played in their own emancipation before and during the Civil War, but to illustrate the reactionary tide that would undermine the extension of republican manhood suffrage across the color line. In the waning pages of that book, he takes up the plight of the white worker noting that "while they received a low wage," they were "compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage." "They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white," DuBois adds, "They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness."[13] DuBois's accounting of why the white worker, though sharing similar material conditions with newly freed slaves, would gather under the political banner of white supremacy and against Reconstruction is rather alluring. At the time of his writing, the vast majority of southern blacks were still without basic citizenship rights, and while the frequency of lynchings had begun to decline, the threat of anti-black violence was still pervasive and all too real. Following DuBois, Roediger claims "whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline."[14] Although Roediger sees DuBois's work as essential for understanding these matters of race and

class, there are many reasons why we should not.

DuBois's comments reflect as much about his views on working-class organization and interracial solidarity at the time of his writing, as they do about the tragedy of Reconstruction. DuBois was skeptical of interracial unionism, and that attitude is clearly reflected in the "wages" passages that many contemporary historians have embraced.[15] Instead of advocating black participation in trade unionism, he was at that moment more committed to the pursuit of black entrepreneurship and cooperatives as a means of addressing economic inequality. While some latter-day historians have found value in DuBois's depictions of white workers, adopting his historical summation as a metanarrative of America's reactionary tendencies, some of his black intellectual contemporaries were less enthusiastic about his perspective. DuBois's critics viewed his advocacy of separatist economics as a losing strategy, one that would not benefit the vast majority of black laborers, and they openly criticized his conservatism on matters of working-class unity and anti-capitalism.

Foremost among DuBois's critics was the economist and Howard University professor Abram Harris, who published a scathing 1935 review of *Black Reconstruction* for *New Republic* magazine. "DuBois cannot believe that a movement founded upon working-class solidarity and cutting across racial lines can afford any immediate relief to the Negro's economic plight or have any practical realization in the near future," Harris wrote, "He is a racialist whose discovery of Marxism as a critical instrument has been too recent for it to discipline his mental processes or basically to change his social philosophy."[16] Harris also rejected DuBois's characterization of the mass exodus of blacks from plantations to the Union army camps as a "general strike," seeing that use of the term as a corruption of its discrete political meaning—"the general strike has come to mean the organized stoppage of work by labor on a national scale either to force immediate economic or political concessions from employers or the government, or to capture the state itself and socialize industry." "Whether used in a conservative or revolutionary manner, the general strike implies a real consciousness not only of the class issues that make its use necessary but also of the ends deliberately sought by those who use it," Harris added, "The Negro slaves' so-called general strike

grew out of no such consciousness of the issues or of the significance that their 'escape to freedom' would have upon the ends of the war." Harris may diminish the decisive role that so-called "contraband" would play in winning the war, bearing in mind that the influx of black enlisted men replenished many battle-worn and depleted Union regiments, but his critical point about DuBois's interpretative license are well-taken, especially since this problem persists in whiteness studies.

Historian Jonathan Scott Holloway argues that the bitter tone of Harris's review derived from his own professional struggles and ambivalence about his role as a black intellectual, as well as his deep ideological aversion to the racial chauvinism that DuBois still abided. I would add as well, that Harris probably harbored some resentment regarding DuBois's new found appreciation of class analysis, especially since four years prior, Harris and political scientist Sterling Spero had published a book titled, *The Black Worker*, which actually used Marx's industrial reserve army as a way to frame northern manufacturers' mobilization of black southern migrant labor during the opening decades of the twentieth century.[17] This may explain his motivations for publishing such a sharp review of *Black Reconstruction*, but his criticisms of DuBois's politics at the time, which were leftist in aspiration while remaining rather conservative in substance, were shared by others who either held the old man in too high esteem to cross him, or simply did not feel well-positioned enough to voice their misgivings publically. One such person was George W. Streator, a devotee of DuBois who grew increasingly frustrated by his mentor's views on working-class solidarity.

Unlike Harris, Streator took up his disagreement with DuBois in private, in a series of letters where he challenged DuBois's skepticism of interracial working-class solidarity, and the contradictions between his newfound commitment to socialism and advocacy of Negro business development as a practical solution. Streator led a 1925 student strike at Fisk University and later worked under DuBois at the *Crisis* magazine, before diving into union work. In July 1935, while working for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in Virginia, Streator wrote to DuBois to express his disappointment with the anti-unionism he witnessed among elements of the black professional-managerial class in Norfolk, where the Amalgamated was engaging in a "strenuous effort to organize colored workers

along with the white".[18] According to Streator's report, the local black leadership element responded to the unionization drive with lip service, "a dozen evidences of sabotage," and "the usual drivel about 'being careful about the AFofL' even though a genuine effort to organize is being made." "[W]here are your racial loyalties?" Streator wrote, goading DuBois, "I want to know how you arrive at your conclusions that the lower middle class Negro who has absorbed the capitalist ideology will somehow be enlisted for socialism without disturbing his class allegiances?"[19] Streator's impatience with DuBois rivals Harris's and he closes out the letter with this barb: "You didn't see fit to answer my last letter to you, and I'm sure it's too hot to answer this one. But for me, I am through with any doctrine of 'racial solidarity' as a way out."[20]

My point here in introducing Harris and Streator as critics of DuBois is not to encourage the construction of another, better canon, but to reject this process of canonization altogether, because it urges the valorization of individual black thinkers, and in a manner that loses sight of the rich internal debates that have always defined black political life. Instead of enlisting black luminaries to authorize contemporary intellectual positions, we would be better served by studying them in their historical context and trying to understand their particular motives and preoccupations. In other words, we should do the tedious work needed to understand their times and our own.

DuBois's account of white workers is poetic and tragic, but inaccurate. He presents white workers as widely enjoying civic and economic benefits that many never possessed. There is ample evidence that the defeat of Reconstruction actually hurt white workers, and that many were aware enough of this fact to find common cause with blacks despite the rising reactionary tide. "It is difficult to see where the great gains for lower-class whites are to be found in this situation," sociologist Jack Bloom wrote of the fall of Reconstruction, "Many of them lost the right to vote. They were subject to the harsh terms of their employers, and they remained without labor unions, to counter the power the wealthy retained. When they did try to form unions, they found the region's tradition of violence turned against them."[21] Working-class whites fared better relative to blacks, in many cases, but the greatest gains of the Jim Crow system were reserved for the merchant-landlord class and New South

industrialists. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the percentage of farmers who were tenants grew from 59.9 percent to 65.4 percent. In the year that DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* was published, 3 million blacks and 5.5 million whites, one-quarter of all Southerners, were tenant farmers.[22]

DuBois's words about black workers, which appear further down the page of the often-cited white "wages" section, are just as disparaging. Commenting on the racist southern press and their effects on the Negro, DuBois writes, "He was a caged human being, driven into a curious mental provincialism. An inferiority complex dominated him. He did not believe himself a man like other men. He could not teach his children self-respect. The Negro as a group gradually lost his manners, his courtesy, his light-hearted kindliness. Large numbers sank into apathy and fatalism."[23] "The effect of caste on the moral integrity of the Negro race in America" he continues, "has been widely disastrous; servility and fawning, gross flattery of white folk and lying to appease and cajole them . . . inordinate admiration for the stigmata of success among white folk: wealth and arrogance, cunning dishonesty and assumptions of superiority; the exaltation of laziness and indifference as just as successful as the industry and striving which invites taxation and oppression . . ." These passages reflected DuBois's own bourgeois sensibility, and his third-person narration of the incapacitation of the black masses is a central justification for race leadership, the guiding role of representative men. If the same sentiments were voiced today, some anti-racist intellectuals might reject his characterizations as dangerous underclass myth making, why then should we think DuBois's accounting of white workers is any more reliable?

What *The Wages of Whiteness* offers is not so much historicity— that is, a clarifying sense of historical context, expressed motives, preoccupations and strategic choices that defined the lives and political actions of capital and workers— but ventriloquism. Felt needs and articulated interests that have been documented by a mountain of historical research are bypassed for a method of imparting meaning through retrospective psychoanalysis, attribution and vivid metaphor.

It would seem that the more fruitful question for a Marxist intellectual and political project is not merely, what passions or foibles drew mechanics, farmhands and stevedores to the antebellum black-faced minstrel stage, but what conclusions, if

any, we can or should make about their political choices and lives based on that particular act of mass consumption. This is not merely a problem in Roediger's work, the tendency to use consumer activity as a proxy for political interests, but it is one that pervades contemporary left academe and broader liberal American culture. This is a dangerous shortcut to generalization that does not require taking the time to examine the actual political commitments people make in their own contexts and limited choices while positing cultural consumption and verbal uncouthness as somehow directly akin to physical violence and the enactment of racist policy. Racism, we should note, is not even skin deep, its thin veneer of myth is routinely punctured by the daily interactions between black and white, its absurdity revealed by every walking and breathing example of black intellect, ability, insubordination, and humanity. Moreover, the fact of racist attitudes and distrust have never fully precluded the possibility of interracial communion and solidarity, a reality that seems lost in the reams of paper dedicated to the history of whiteness and white privilege.

In the closing pages of *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger turns to post-emancipation racial politics. "Black emancipation, battlefield heroism and citizenship" Roediger writes, "thus ensured that white workers could never again see African-Americans or themselves in just the same way." He then cautions, however, that "more than enough of the habit of whiteness and of the conditions producing it survived to ensure that white workers would be at best uncertain allies of Black freedom and would stop short of developing full new concepts of liberation for themselves as well."[24] If whites always and everywhere understand their interests in racially provincial terms, how then do we explain recurrent, pervasive moments of interracial collusion, solidarity and rebellion that define every decade of this country's existence?

The 1892 New Orleans General Strike is one such case that whiteness studies cannot account for, where black and white dockworkers achieved solidarity despite animosity, distrust and prevailing beliefs in black inferiority.[25] The 1892 strike was not exceptional, but was part of a decade-long cycle of national labor militancy from the Haymarket bombing to the 1894 Pullman strike. Likewise, the first half of the twentieth century was defined by intense periods of working-class insurgency, such as

the Appalachian Mine Wars, the Depression-era American Communist Party, as well as the CIO organizing campaigns of the late thirties and forties and the wartime March on Washington movement to desegregate the defense industries, episodes when racial cooperation and solidarity were forged and substantive gains won despite prejudice, animosity and suspicion. Whiteness studies is part of this longer lineage of left struggles, but its central motives and interpretative preoccupations took shape during the Cold War, an era of resurgent capitalist class power and popular retreat from working-class left politics.

The Affluent Society, Taproot of Whiteness Discourse

In Chapter 2, "Accounting for the Wages of Whiteness," and Chapter 3, "The White Intellectual Among Thinking Black Intellectuals" Roediger gives a deeper sense of the roots of whiteness discourse, and returns to the earliest explorations of "white skin privilege" offered by activists like Alexander Saxton, Noel Ignatiev (formerly Ignatin), Theodore Allen and George Rawick.[26] Taken together these chapters make clear that while whiteness studies as an academic sub-field was born in the late eighties, it was conceived in the sixties New Left, and the efforts of white activists, often veterans of union struggles and left sectarian tendencies, to remain relevant within the context of suburban middle-class conservatism and insurgent black struggles against Jim Crow. Central to their process of self-awakening was the problematic role ascribed to black intellectuals as authentic translators of the "black experience" and conduits of black political struggles.

Roediger profiles Alexander Saxton, a novelist and later the author of the 1990 book, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America*. Educated at Harvard and the University of Chicago, Saxton had been a union organizer in the railroad and construction industries, before serving as a publicist for the Committee on Maritime Unity, which was dedicated to increasing interracial solidarity in unions. "Saxton's labor activism" Roediger writes "frequently centered on race even in the uncommonly tough Jim Crow atmospheres of the railway brotherhoods and building trades."[27] Saxton subsequently explored the problem of interracial unionism in his 1971 book, *The Indispensible Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*. Roediger offers a brief intellectual biography of

Theodore Allen as well, the author of the two-volume study, *The Invention of the White Race*, published in 1994 and 1997. Although he was born into a middle class family and raised in Indianapolis and West Virginia, Allen was "proletarianized by the Great Depression." Allen joined the American Federation of Musicians as a teen and made his way into the Communist Party. He entered the Congress of Industrial Organizations through the United Mine Workers, which was, as Roediger notes, "a racially diverse organization and where the extent of interracial unity very much shaped the prospects of unionism."[28] In the sixties, Allen argued that workers' identification with the white race was the "Achilles heel" of the American Left. He advanced that position in a series of articles and pamphlets including "Can White Radicals Be Radicalized?" (1967), *Understanding and Fighting White Supremacy* (1967) and *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (1975).

Readers will be rewarded by Roediger's close, tender portrait of Rawick, his beloved friend and mentor. Roediger describes him as "arguably the most influential student of the US working class, although he is almost never counted among the founders of the 'new labor history' that emerged in that period."[29] Roediger credits Rawick's 1969 *Radical America* article, "Working Class Self-Activity" with popularizing that concept in the US labor studies, a position that he traces back through Rawick's left activism. Roediger unearths the political and intellectual development of Rawick from his upbringing in an observant Jewish household in Brooklyn to his adventures in the Communist Party and the Shachtmanite Independent Socialist League, and eventually his experience of the civil rights movement. Through his participation in black political struggles in Detroit, Rawick's ideas about race and class were greatly influenced by the Trinidadian Marxist and Pan-Africanist, C.L.R. James and his experiences in the Facing Reality collective alongside Martin Glaberman.

Although these two chapters are helpful for understanding how whiteness studies originated, there are moments when Roediger may overreach in discussing the impact of James and Facing Reality. At one point, he claims that James was "the senior Black radical intellectual most admired by young Black Power advocates," and later he concludes "Facing Reality influenced far more young Black activists than it managed to recruit."[30] The

former claim is simply not true, and the latter is certainly not proven by Roediger in this chapter.[31] In his recollections of the period, Dan Georgakas says that the "person who made the strongest immediate impression on us, particularly among the Blacks who would become the nucleus of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, was James Boggs," who "had been through numerous rank-and-file movements and racial initiatives within our unions, and he spoke eloquently about his experiences."[32] On the other hand, Georgakas says the "influence of [C.L.R.] James was indirect. Some of his books were thrust at us and had quite an impact but there was little attempt to present his ideas in a systematic manner." In addition to James's actual distance in Britain at the time, Georgakas adds, a "complicating factor was that James seemed distant in style from the kind of informal give-and-take Detroiters preferred." James was surely respected by many black activists and students during the sixties as a Pan-Africanist forbearer, and for his history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, but few would claim that his writing was so decisive in shaping black power thinking to the extent that Roediger claims.

Rather than seeing James as an important interpreter and shaper of domestic U.S. black politics, it is safer to say that James's appreciation of black self-activity and the role that slavery played in the making of world history and the evolution of capitalism—consonant intellectual sensibilities that defined the work of other Caribbean left intellectuals in his orbit, such as Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, and later, Robert Hill and Stuart Hall—made a strong impression on Rawick and shaped his pursuit of a bottom-up accounting of slavery. James's intellectual influence on Rawick found full articulation in *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, his classic exploration of slave culture. Like James, however, the account of black culture offered by Rawick and Roediger, which celebrates black agency and resistance, falls short of providing the kind of Marxist analysis of black political life that might be helpful, one that actually lays bare the internal class interests and ideological positions that shape black politics in real time and space. Instead, Roediger writes about the "uncommon ability of Black communities to incorporate difference," and of the "openness of Black communities, movements and intellectuals," statements which seem overly romantic and rather superficial.

In reconstructing these deeper intellectual lineages and the social

milieu that gave shape to the earliest intellectual focus on white skin privilege, Roediger wishes to remind us of the role of worker struggles and socialist politics in the conception of whiteness studies, and to reiterate that it is an historical materialist project, rather than one deriving from academic postmodernism. His discussion is helpful in this regard, but perhaps inadvertently, it also reveals how a preoccupation with whiteness derived from the relative alienation of white leftists who stood between two colliding worlds during the sixties and seventies, the conformist white suburban middle class and the surging political militancy of the black movements that evolved within and against the affluent consumer society. In a 1974 *Radical America* article titled, "Black Workers, White Workers," Noel Ignatin wrote, "the key problem is not the racism of the employing class, but the racism of the white worker (after all, the boss's racism is natural to him because it serves his class interests)."[33] Across these two chapters, we can see the immediate political preoccupations that drove the turn to whiteness, as activists tried to make sense of the Cold War conservatism and anti-civil rights fervor that increasingly defined some white communities and political tendencies in the Deep South and beyond. Saxton, Allen, Ignatin and other activists working in formations like Facing Reality, Students for a Democratic Society and later the Sojourner Truth Organization scrambled against the tide to build progressive political consciousness in a world of movement demobilization, middle-class contentment, mass cultural distraction and Meany-era union conservatism. Was a focus on whiteness, however, the way forward— then or now?

Whiteness discourse misdiagnoses the Cold War disintegration of the Left, treating the symptoms as the disease itself. It is worth noting here that the focus on white skin privilege did not emerge within the context of the shop-floor insurgencies of the interwar period where workers out of necessity struggled through their distrust, ethnic rivalries, prejudices and internecine conflicts within the practical strategic context of the card check campaigns and strike actions, but rather the analytical turn to whiteness took place within the context of class decomposition, the Cold War taming of working-class militancy via Taft-Hartley, the rise of McCarthyite anti-communism, and the spatial transformation of American cities through suburbanization and urban renewal projects that produced rising living standards for many whites

while further segregating the black urban poor. The pioneers of whiteness discourse were well aware of the victories that interracial working-class organizations and mass movements had achieved in the Depression years because some had come of age amid those struggles. The source of their trouble, however, was the middle-class culture of conformity they endured in the post-war period. They developed arguments that saw white skin privilege as not only the cause of political conservatism in their times, but as the main barrier to developing a working-class consciousness and institutions that might advance socialism. As an amalgam of underlying, disparate class positions and interests, however, whiteness does not help us to understand the root causes of the growing conservatism during the years after World War II. What was needed then and now, is a Marxist class analysis that does not begin from the old Werner Sombart question, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" which sets up not so much useful historical comparisons but ahistorical benchmarks of what class society and class struggle should look like.[34] Instead, we need a historical-materialist analysis that begins with the careful examination of *society as it exists*, and that does not reduce complex motives and material interests to markers of identity.

The problem that Allen, Rawick and others faced— i.e., most whites were committed to country and capitalism on one hand, while many blacks were driven to militancy so that they might share in the most basic access to citizenship and opportunity on the other— was rooted in the victories and defeats of an earlier episode of class conflict spanning the Depression and World War II, where popular struggles and mass action were able to impose limits on the power of capital and achieve important victories for workers generally with the establishment of the Wagner Act and spread of unionization, but also to momentarily alter racial and gender exclusions through federally-managed public works projects and desegregation of the defense industries.[35] The conservative political terrain that many still discuss in terms of whiteness and white privilege was a product of the post-war era turn to commercial Keynesianism and real-estate driven growth as a national urban development policy, attempts to weaken and criminalize radical trade unionism, and the New Deal coalition's retreat from social democracy.

Post-war economic development improved the living conditions

of millions of Americans and elevated a new middle-class consumer identity as a dominant social and cultural aspiration. As early as the Woodrow Wilson administration's "Own Your Own Home" campaign, American politicians, commercial and real estate interests promoted homeownership as an antidote to left labor militancy.[36] The turn to housing and real estate development as an economic growth model and political maneuver against labor insurgency would gain ground amid the Depression. Beginning with the New Deal establishment of the Federal Housing Administration and expansion after World War II under the leadership of Harry Truman, the US embarked on a housing revolution, a process of mortgage lending, massive highway and infrastructure development, and new home construction that transformed millions into nominal property-holders and members of the new middle class. Suburban development and all manner of consumer activity propagated a new consumer-class identity, sweeping away old urban ethnic and proletarian affinities, and cementing the loyalty of more secure workers to the Cold War growth trajectory of defense spending, urban renewal and suburbanization. Woven into this same process of suburbanization were policies that resegregated the black urban poor through tower block public housing, freeway construction and practices like redlining, which combined to devalue and deter investment in central city neighborhoods.

Out of this post-World War II urban-spatial transformation, race emerged as the dominant symbolic language for understanding American inequality. The combination of home ownership, access to suburban school districts, police protection, tax-relief, and relative economic advantage formed the material basis for the conservative positions of many whites who came to support the New Right, but we know that not all whites embraced such conservatism. Relative urbanity, union-membership, civic organizations, religion, familial and community traditions of activism, and other idiosyncratic factors continued to matter in shaping political ideology and policy commitments even in suburbia. "White" became a synonym for middle class, suburban, law-abiding, virtuous, property-owning, hardworking, and self-governing, and "black" came to function as a euphemism for poor, urban, criminal, dysfunctional, dispossessed, lazy, and dependent. Whiteness discourse accepts and legitimizes these symbolic markers of post-war class structure, without

undertaking a more nuanced examination of actual material and political interests, how they are formed, articulated and contested within specific historical-local contexts.

In retrospect, whiteness studies emerged from the peculiar conjuncture of black political movement and white middle-class conservatism, and it inherits the same problematic assumptions of black surrogacy and the primacy of race politics that defined sixties left radicalism. Roediger scoffs at a criticism offered by the historian Sean Wilentz, who characterized whiteness studies as "black nationalism by other means."[37] In response, Roediger writes "in a broad sense the impact of African-American struggles and thought especially in the moment of Black Power shaped the critical study of whiteness decisively . . . there was a 'white left' named as such and even developing self awareness and self critique."[38] Wilentz's criticism, however, touches on a problem that merits attention, one that Roediger's defense does not adequately address, namely the way that black nationalists' essentialist thinking about race, often dressed up in the language of culture, becomes central to the discourse of whiteness from its origins in the New Left to its institutionalization as an academic sub-field.

Despite their deep personal roots in interracial unionism of the middle-twentieth century, by the sixties, the forbearers of whiteness studies, like so many others at the time, embraced the basic assumptions of black power militancy, that race was paramount and that blacks constituted an organic political constituency. This position certainly made sense at the time, especially when televisions broadcast images showing virulent white mobs heckling and assaulting neatly dressed black children who could only enter "whites-only" schools under heavily armed guard. By embracing black civil rights and the desire for black autonomy, intellectuals like Rawick, Ignatin and others were expressing their solidarity with black struggles and black humanity in the strongest possible register. The problem, however, is that this ethical position, which spoke to a unique historical conjuncture, takes on another life when it is offered as a way of approaching historiography and politics. Moreover, that position of white deference—rather than white opposition—freeze-frames black political life in a manner that loses sight of its dialectical, contradictory nature. When we review sepia images of civil rights protests, they are evocative and command

reverence from many on the Left today who appreciate the sacrifices made, but as the material of historical memory, those images do not capture the complex social relations, disagreements, exclusions, heterogeneity and contending interests that framed the Baton Rouge bus boycott, the Wichita Sit-ins, the Selma to Montgomery march, and scores of lesser-known campaigns. Whiteness studies is shaped by a particular manifestation of black politics, a moment when black nationalist thinking became dominant.

In the late fifties, the strongest criticisms against the civil rights movement offered by African Americans came from what many called the New Afro-American nationalism, or simply the new nationalism, a mostly northern and urban political tendency that was represented in the rhetoric of Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, organizations like the Group of Advanced Leadership in Detroit, the Afro-American Association in the Bay Area, the Organization of Young Men in New York, and the Freedom Now Party, as well as magazines like *Liberator* and *Soulbook*. Expressions of the new nationalist militancy defined the work of artists like the poet LeRoi Jones, saxophonist Archie Shepp, singer Abbey Lincoln and the drummer Max Roach, and the writings of the former communist and essayist Harold Cruse, among many others. Though their political and aesthetic choices were diverse, the new nationalists cohered around their skepticism of liberal integration as an historical possibility and effective solution to the problem of black inequality. They identified with the struggles for national liberation and socialism unfolding across the Third World, and were enamored by the aesthetics of armed struggle. Their demands for black autonomy and genuine revolution presaged the birth of the black power movement.[39]

Whiteness studies was conceived in the context of Black Power, at a moment when increasing numbers of black political activists and ordinary citizens had grown disillusioned with many openly questioning the utility of non-violent civil disobedience as a strategy, and when white suburbanization and post-war black urban migration had created the conditions for black political empowerment. Popular black publics embraced the criticisms and ideals of the new nationalists, and demanded black power and autonomy. Underneath the rhetoric of indigenous control and the black colony, however, black power in operational terms came to mean the pursuit of the established model of ethnic

political incorporation. Flowing from that logic, whites needed to get out of the way as blacks closed ranks and asserted themselves as a collective. Organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) proceeded to expel whites from their ranks—even if they would maintain relations with whites as financial benefactors and legal defense teams.[40]

Roediger discusses Rawick's expulsion from the Detroit chapter of CORE, "as the organization moved from being a mostly white group to advocating Black Power, [Rawick recalled] that he was most pleased with the transformation, right down to his own removal." Obviously Rawick, like many other leftists at the time, respected the desire for autonomy that many black activists asserted and was willing to step aside. That political moment, however, obscured the fundamental basis of political life, which is not shared complexion or ethnic affinity, but shared political interests, and instead legitimated identitarian leadership claims and specious notions of organic racial constituency. It should be noted as well, that the interracial purges marked the end of those organizations as effectual social forces, and in the case of CORE, the expulsions marked its turn towards the Right under the leadership of Roy Innis, who endorsed Richard Nixon for president. Roediger recalls that there were other incidents that caused Rawick considerable hurt, and that his relationship with the black historian Sterling Stuckey ran "afoul not only of past political differences but also of the US color line, which at times left [Rawick] hesitant to approach Black scholars."[41] Whiteness studies, then, inherits some of the core ideological flaws of black power thinking, namely the falsehood that *racial affinity is synonymous with political constituency*. These are not synonyms, and any close examination of black political life tells a much more complex story, one where class power and interests are always present and consequential.

When the Investor Class Goes Marching In: Multiracial Revanchist New Orleans

Roediger's effort to provide some useful historical materialist approach runs aground when he turns to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster. In Chapter 1, "The Retreat from Race and Class," he criticizes two 2005 articles penned by Adolph Reed, Jr., "Class-ifying the Hurricane," which appeared in the *Nation*, and "The Real Divide," which was published in the *Progressive*.

Writing in the months after the disaster, Roediger claimed that these articles were "the signature pieces so far of the retreat from race." In a fashion repeated elsewhere, his discussion relies on cherry-picked quotes of Reed's arguments and passing dismissals—e.g., "In one of the few bits of the article offering ostensible, if misguided, class analysis, exposing racism is said to serve 'the material interests of those who would be race relations technicians.'"[42] Rather than engaging in a serious, informed way, Roediger disregards Reed's argument. And judging from the lack of any mea culpa in the introduction, he does not seem to realize that Reed's formative assessment of the fundamental political forces at play in New Orleans has proven durable and prescient in the city's decade-plus rebirth, which has been characterized by renascent ruling class power, massive dispossession and rent-intensifying development. Roediger's insistence on a "race and class" framework largely misses the way that class was the most decisive force shaping the experience of the disaster, and how the city's multiracial governing elite mobilized anti-racism to advance a property owner-centered reconstruction process, which has produced new dislocations and hardships for the city's multiracial servant class.

Many academics and commentators framed the Katrina crisis in terms of racial injustice, a sensibility perhaps best summarized in Kanye West's "Bush doesn't care about black people" quip during a telethon for Katrina victims.[43] The optics of the disaster certainly supported the view that racism was the culprit, as people around the world saw images of desperate black residents stranded on rooftops, wading through flood waters, and in the worst case scenario, dying due to lack of emergency services. The week after Katrina made landfall was also marred by horrific instances of police and vigilante violence against black New Orleanians, with some incidents not coming to public light until weeks and months later. When it comes to the racial frame, seeing is believing and experiential knowledge is irreproachable, but what we saw in televised newscasts only revealed part of the more intricate story on the ground. As Reed noted at the time, the contra-flow evacuation plan, where all lanes of the Interstate-10 highway are directed away from the city center, worked well for middle-class and working-class blacks with access to automobiles, as it had for similarly situated whites, Hondurans, Vietnamese and Isleños among others. The city's disaster preparation was predicated on the assumption of

personal responsibility and possession of adequate means to support individual or family evacuation. Those without automobiles, kinship or social networks beyond the city, credit card or savings account were unable, however, to make use of the evacuation process and seek refuge in a hotel or public shelter miles away from the city. Moreover, Mayor C. Ray Nagin's administration offered the Superdome as a hastily and ill-prepared "shelter of last resort" for the tens of thousands of residents who remained in the city. So yes, those who suffered most were black, but they were the most vulnerable black New Orleanians. Blackness and institutional racism were convenient, pedestrian explanations of what happened, but these frames are too imprecise to capture the grounded-dynamics shaping the scale and substantive toll of the disaster. Relative class position was the primary determinant of who lived and died during the disaster, and it would be, as Reed anticipated, the primary force shaping the character of the recovery and reconstruction.[44]

Roediger favors Mike Davis's interpretation of the Katrina disaster, but the usually adroit Davis was less apt in anticipating the ways that black political and civic leadership would help to authorize and advance mass layoffs of public workers, the shuttering of the city's Charity Hospital, which had provided health care to generations of New Orleans' poorest residents, the transformation of the city's school system into an all-charter school district, a process that entailed the mass firings of the city's public school teachers, the majority of whom were African American women, and the demolition of the last remaining public housing complexes.[45] The charge of "ethnic cleansing" made by Davis, Roediger and many others in the aftermath of the disaster had a certain virtue as protest rhetoric, but as an analytical frame it is simply not helpful. It is mystification that does not capture the central dynamics of who lived and who died, and who was empowered through state relief programs, non-profit and foundation-funded projects, which not only favored homeowners and large real estate holders to varying degrees, but were openly antagonistic towards public housing tenants, renters, itinerant and often undocumented construction laborers, unionized public workers and teachers, activists and for that matter, anyone who might stand in the way of the neoliberal reconstruction agenda orchestrated by the city's multiracial ruling elites.[46]

Black public figures like Nagin, former city council members Oliver Thomas and Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, jazz trumpeters Wynton Marsalis, Irvin Mayfield and Kermit Ruffins, the late restaurateur Leah Chase, bureaucrats like former HANO board chair Donald Babers, HUD secretary Alphonse Jackson, and one-time recovery czar Edward J. Blakely, mercenary education reformers like former local Teach for America director, Kira Orange Jones, as well as many black homeowners, landlords, private contractors and community activists have been crucial in projecting the image of a multiracial, inclusive recovery. Their motivations and views on recovery were not monolithic, but in most cases their approaches to reconstruction combined genuine sincerity for the welfare and future of the city, perspectives shaped by their specialized technical training and professional experiences, and specific career and material interests connected to the revitalization of the local tourist-entertainment-real estate complex. Most of these figures publically demanded a racially-inclusive recovery, asserted the centrality of the black presence to the city's unique culinary and musical traditions and defended the right of the return for all residents in the abstract, adding a sense of internal dynamism and a veneer of racial democratic inclusion to the neoliberal project. Many were also, however, silent in the fight to save public housing, while others were openly hostile towards public housing tenants and vocally supportive of demolition. Recall then councilman Thomas's underclass myth-making regarding public housing tenants when he proclaimed "We don't need soap opera watchers now. We're going to target people who are going to work. It's not that I'm fed up, but that at some point there has to be a whole new motivation, and people have got to stop blaming the government for something they ought to do."[47] In a few words, Thomas gave credence to prevailing notions of the urban black poor as underserving moochers, and in so doing, authorized an ideological position on who should be included in the next New Orleans, a position that had already been condemned as racist and as "ethnic cleansing" when it was offered by whites who cheered the mass exodus of the poor after the levee failures. This combination of racial justice overtures and neoliberal political commitments has been missed in many analyses of the post-Katrina milieu that do not appreciate the historical origins and power of black political leadership, and the role they have played in legitimating a pro-growth development trajectory in the Crescent City since the end

of Jim Crow. On this last note, Roediger's "race and class" framework comes up short in providing any useful analysis of black politics in New Orleans and beyond. He admits as much in his introduction to *Class, Race and Marxism*.

Roediger claims that when he wrote his 2005 "Retreat from Race and Class" essay "few would have predicted that an African American liberal would hold the most powerful political position in the world two years later."[48] He then goes on to say that along with "the growth of significant wealth at the top of the African-American community, this trend has given rise to exciting new scholarship on intra-racial class politics and on intra-racial economic inequality in the last five years."[49] Here Roediger repeats a number of canards that hobble any useful left analysis of black life, and by extension American society. His use of the phrase, "African American community" repeats the fiction that the black population, now numbering nearly 46 million and greater than the population of Canada, constitutes some organic, intimate political community, with widely-shared experiences and interests—even as African Americans are divided by region, class, familial and kinship networks, religion, political ideology and personal tastes, immigrant status, interests and strivings. Amazingly, he contends that class differentiation among blacks and analysis thereof are late-breaking phenomena, in the "last five years" no less, rather than a reality that black activists and intellectuals have contemplated since the nineteenth century, and that scholars like Stein, Fields, Reed and Arnesen— who have all been critical of Roediger— have illustrated through exhaustive studies since at least the early seventies.

Roediger's passing acknowledgement of an internal black class politics is too little and too late, and perhaps like the rest of his opening plea regarding tone, constitutes only a light revision of the same race-centric arguments. Even after acknowledging his own blind spots on the subject matter, Roediger writes "perhaps my 2006 critique was too harsh in examining the work that already was attempting to account for inequality in the Black community and the inadequacies of African-American liberal leadership, though in ways that I still think ended up being insufficiently attentive to either race or class." Inequality within the black population is not new, nor is the problem simply one of inadequate black liberal leadership as he claims. In the decades after the 1965 Voting Rights Act, black liberal politicians and civil

rights leaders continued to fight for the expansion of social democracy despite the internal turmoil, political retreat and weakening electoral and legislative power of the New Deal coalition. This same post-segregation black liberal leadership worked to protect voting rights and anti-discrimination laws, and with the dawn of the crack cocaine epidemic, many were instrumental in waging groundbreaking campaigns against racial profiling and the carceral build-up in the 1990s. A more daunting problem is that black liberalism, meaning those who favor the activist use of state power to address social inequality, has faded as neoliberalization has come to dominate the Democratic party and become the normative urban economic-development orientation across the country. Contrary to Roediger's surface reading, the problem besetting black political life is not black liberal politicians, but the hegemony of neoliberal politics. This is the central point of Lester Spence's book, *Knocking the Hustle*, a point that Roediger somehow misses even as he enlists that work to support his claims.[50]

At one point in his discussion of New Orleans, Roediger turns to an old stand-by, the nomadic interpretation of signs and symbols, in this case, a protest placard that pointed out the hypocrisy of the Bush administration's War on Terror and its lousy response to the misery and death experienced by residents in Louisiana's largest city. Recalling the black anti-Vietnam War quip, "No Vietcong Ever Called Me Nigger," the sign declared that "No Iraqi Has Ever Left Me to Die on a Roof," once again capturing the prioritization of American imperial interests abroad over reckoning with domestic injustices. Roediger concedes that "Poor whites, and indeed the large numbers of Vietnamese resettled in the Gulf region and abandoned in Katrina's considerable wake, could conceivably march under the 'NO IRAQI' sign." Again, Roediger moves from analysis of cherry-picked symbols towards speculation and voice throwing, rather than examining the actual positions white workers, different unions, Vietnamese organizations, politicians and homeowners took in relation to the recovery regime. Such a task that would have required more investigation into the actual balance of class forces on the ground in New Orleans, the complexities of racial, ethnic and other native-local affinities in the city and its hard hit surrounding parishes, and the political alliances that prefigured the Katrina disaster and shaped the process of its recovery. Roediger rejected Reed's formative assessment, but Reed offered the kind of

informed, grounded-historical account that not only gets New Orleans right, but is the only worthwhile interpretative approach for those of us who want to create a more just and egalitarian city, one the places the needs of working people over those of capital.

Looking for Solidarity in All the Wrong Places

In the concluding essay, Chapter 6 "Making Solidarity Uneasy: Cautions on a Keyword from Black Lives Matter to the Past," Roediger begins by revisiting political struggles and debates that emerged in the wake of the 2012 vigilante killing of unarmed black teen Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida and the 2014 police killing of unarmed, black 17-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. He criticizes the philosopher Steven D'Arcy who questions the utility of some of the emerging slogans of the "movement for black lives" and the ways that whites are cast as junior partners and "allies" in black-led protests against police violence. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" captured the commonsense view that police and vigilante killings are meted out against blacks more frequently than other groups, a view that was legitimated with every viral video of unarmed black citizens being shot, choked or bludgeoned by police—again, in the age of social media, seeing is believing. From that perspective of who bears the burden of police violence, whites are ordered to take a backseat, "check their privilege" and play a supportive role.

D'Arcy takes issue with an internet video titled "I Am Not Trayvon Martin," created by University of Kansas undergraduate Emma Halling in response to the "I Am Trayvon Martin" t-shirts worn by blacks in protest. In the video, Halling discusses her sense of white privilege, but D'Arcy contends that such identity-focused moves and apologetics undermine solidarity and mark a clear retreat from older and more useful political discourses of sixties social movements. He argues that in our times, the older sixties language of oppression has been replaced by talk of privilege, analysis of working-class exploitation has given way to "classism," and building alliances and solidarity through political action has dissolved into hierarchies of participation, where the terms of one's involvement in political work is conditioned by "positionality" and relative privilege.[51]

I agree with his criticisms of contemporary activist frames and

their limitations, but I am not persuaded by D'Arcy's contention that these are a wholesale departure from New Left vocabulary. If anything, we can find the roots of contemporary identitarian sensibilities in the sixties. Contemporary white self-flagellation over being a "good ally" is clearly descendant from the expulsion of whites from civil rights organizations discussed previously, and it inherits all of that moment's problems as political practice, imposing a social hierarchy on political life based on identity claims rather than demonstrated commitment, political acumen, organizing skills and capacity or other criteria that should matter. In both cases, the public performance of democracy takes precedence over the kind of deliberation and strategic thinking that is needed to build an organization or wage a successful activist campaign. I agree, however, with his overall criticism of contemporary thinking, where epistemic standpoint is the basis of political affinity and action, rather than shared interests and those political objectives individuals and groups are willing to fight together to achieve.

This problem of conflating identity and interests is especially acute in popular framing of the policing crisis, where many view prisons and criminal justice as problems that primarily, if not exclusively, affect blacks—a position that Roediger abides in his introduction. Closer analysis of arrest-related deaths, as well as who is arrested and convicted, however, reveals a class character to contemporary policing.[52] Ironically, although Roediger criticizes David Harvey who said he did not see "very much anti-capitalism" in the Ferguson protests, Roediger does not do much either to subject policing and mass incarceration to a useful Marxist class analysis, or to connect those discrete problems to an anti-capitalist politics. He seems content to merely express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter crowd, assert the righteousness of their cause and, as he does with the writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, defend them against any criticism from the Left that might reveal their limitations.

There is a truth to D'Arcy's criticism that Roediger misses, and had he taken the time to examine the actual demography of policing, which communities and populations are targeted, rather than deferring to hashtag sloganeering, he might have been able to offer an analysis of the contemporary carceral state, which functions as a means of managing surplus population during an age of technological unemployment and rollback of the social

wage.[53] Black and brown populations are overrepresented among those who are incarcerated and under court supervision, and black men are much more likely to be killed in arrest-related incidents. The common denominators among America's incarcerated at the time of their arrest and after their release, however, are poverty, underemployment and unemployment. Frames like "Black Lives Matter" and the "New Jim Crow" do not capture that reality and, as others have noted, such language actually circumscribes the potential for generating broad popular support for dismantling the carceral state and creating more just alternatives for securing public safety. Roediger owes us more than platitudes on this subject matter. He should do the work of offering class analysis of the actual historical dynamics at play, especially since whites continue to make up 58.4% of federal inmates, and 39% of all inmates in jails and prisons nationally. If the problems of policing and incarceration are widely felt across race and ethnicity, urban-rural geography and sectional divides, it would seem that there is potential to build a broader and deeper base of opposition to the carceral state, one that is capable of winning the legislative and congressional majorities needed for any meaningful reforms.

In response to critics like D'Arcy who call for broad solidarity, Roediger writes, "[I]t remains critical to make a case for embracing solidarity while simultaneously being uneasy about the assumptions it sometimes evokes." "The unease ought to make us wonder if solidarity is always a good thing, " Roediger continues "to recall what and whom solidarity leaves out, and how it is premised on those leavings out, to consider how solidarity works across differences in kind and degrees of oppressions, and to ask if the presence of solidarity is the logic of things or if for long periods it may be a treasured exception."[54] Roediger wants to trouble the view that solidarity springs forth from shared material conditions, but aside from a rather unfair evocation of the historical Marx's writings, we do not really get a clear sense of who actually abides by this notion nowadays. Also, are we to assume that within racially homogenous or women-only political formations, achieving political unity is somehow easier? No one who has spent any amount of time in black activist meetings or black church congregations would give quarter to such a notion. Roediger sees difference as a formidable challenge to the concept of solidarity, but his chosen method of taking up the subject, which focuses more on the

aesthetics of solidarity, e.g. T-shirt slogans, the origins of the song "John Brown's body," the limitations of hymns like "Solidarity Forever," and the "Black solidarity of the ring shout," rather than the historical conditions, social relations, organizational sub-cultures and practices, and leadership that give rise to solidarity in actual struggles.

I was disappointed reading a discussion of solidarity that fixated on Pepsy Kettavong's "Let's Have Tea" sculpture located near the Susan B. Anthony house in Rochester, New York. As much as I adore the Laotian-born Kettavong's depiction of the friendship between two of Rochester's most famous left progressives, Anthony and Frederick Douglass, that bronze representation has precious little to do with how solidarity is forged in real time and space, either in the 1850s or in this moment of Trumpism. Again, Roediger's focus on decontextualized art, as opposed to the character of unfolding social struggles simply leads to more wrong-headed conclusions, rather than thinking through the ways that people build social bonds, discover common interests, and make mutual sacrifices— in other words, the actual work of political practice. Kettavong's sculpture and Roediger's analysis tell us very little about the making of solidarity in contemporary Rochester—certainly not the city I experienced as a resident during the decade after the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks.

During the aughts, in a time of pervasive anxiety and jingoism, it was not difficult to find racism and xenophobia in Rochester. Despite those conditions, activists there mounted a successful interracial effort to address the problem of lead poisoning. In 2006, nearly four percent of the 14,500 children under the age of 6 who were tested in Monroe county had elevated blood lead levels, meeting the Center for Disease Control's "level of concern."[55] Many of those children lived in the so-called "Fatal Crescent," a majority black, Latino and poor area stretching across the northeast, northwest and southwest quadrants of the city, named so because of the frequency and concentration of homicides and other violent crimes. The Rochester Lead Free Coalition (now referred to as the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning) waged a successful fight to pass a lead-paint abatement ordinance, one of the most stringent in the nation at the time, which would apply to all housing stock built before 1978. Under the 2006 law, property owners would be subjected to lead inspections, and when elevated levels were detected,

compelled under penalty of law to make repairs and bring their property up to code. Since that time, there have been documented reductions in the rate of lead poisoning in the city.

I bring up the fight against lead-paint poisoning in Rochester, not because it is some unique development, but precisely because it is so mundane. It represents the place where solidarity is forged most often, through struggles that bring people together not because of corporeal identity, but because of their shared sense of what problems deserve their attention and how they might work together to create solutions. The Rochester Lead Free Coalition united public school teachers and administrators, many of whom witnessed the cognitive effects of lead poisoning on a day-to-day basis, the parents of children who had been affected, and community activists in neighborhoods with older and deteriorating housing stock. The coalition was also comprised of activists from left organizations like Metro Justice and the Green Party, congregations and clergy, perhaps foremost among them being Reverend Marlowe Washington of Baber African Methodist Episcopal Church, professors, students, social workers, and health care professionals. For every person who attended a rally, planning meeting or city council session, there were probably as many different motivations for their getting involved. Some may have had personal reasons, a loved one or acquaintance who was lead-exposed, but for others, their motivation may have been more overtly political, seeing this issue as an expression of class power and how landlords place profits over the welfare and safety of their tenants. It should be noted too, that those who opposed the lead paint abatement ordinance were also diverse, a mix of landlords who lived in the suburbs and the city, and who were black, brown and white. And even among the majority-minority city council, some politicians were concerned about the welfare of young children, but were also wary of imposing a "tax on doing business" and the potential negative effects new regulations and strict enforcement might have on future investments. They came around to supporting the measure through the concerted and sustained pressure of activists. With blacks, whites and Latinos on both sides, where are the "white interests" in this particular political fight? Neither whiteness nor white privilege would have been a helpful way of framing this problem, or a means of winning reform. The same is true for the battle to save public housing after Katrina, or the struggle for better wages and hours during the 1892 New Orleans General

Strike.

Whiteness studies has produced a form of anti-racist politics focused on public therapy rather than public policy, a politics that actually detracts from building social bonds and solidarity in the context of actual organizing campaigns, everyday life, and purposive political action. This political problem is not strictly Roediger's, but is one that besets the contemporary left more generally and is derived from the cultural turn within Western academe and the U.S. Left since the sixties, the rejection of modernist political projects as irredeemably tarnished by histories of racism and imperialism, and a resulting deep, pervasive suspicion of constituted power. Whiteness studies, as Roediger illustrates, had its origins in the distinctive needs, challenges and aspirations of white New Leftists, who sought to bridge their own alienation within the affluent society and their social justice commitments with the shifting black nationalist sensibilities that transformed black political life from a focus on defeating Jim Crow and securing full citizenship towards demands for self-determination from the middle-sixties onwards. The problems of white middle-class conservatism and quiescence that New Leftists ran up against during the Cold War were conjunctural. The petit-bourgeois politics analogized as "whiteness" were the result of the institutionalization of trade union victories and defeats during the middle decades of the twentieth century and concomitant transformations in state-market relations, urban space and residential settlement that accompanied the postwar housing revolution. These historical processes had the combined effect of reorienting popular sentiment towards an acceptance of capitalist class interests as those of Americans writ large.

The interpretive problems and faulty political assumptions of whiteness studies have become entrenched through the emergence of a therapeutic industry dedicated to rehabilitating interpersonal racism and addressing white privilege through acts of contrition, and have grown more dangerous as they have been amplified and degraded via social media. There is not much evidence that the expansion of this mode of anti-racist trainings over the last few decades has produced a different politics, a willingness to take risk, to sacrifice one's privileged position to make substantive changes in society, or even altered day-to-day behavior. In 2017, after a suburban Chicago teen posted a Snapchat photo of himself in blackface, causing a furor at his

high school, his mother defended the integrity and tolerance of their household saying she had just read Carol Anderson's *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, and that Coates's *Between the World and Me* had been on her son's "reading shelf forever."[56] If anything, whiteness deprogramming provides a ready means of egress, a way to demonstrate sympathy without making more difficult, sustained political commitments that might entail contesting institutionalized power. Neither does it require shedding or sharing the actual trappings of middle class privilege, i.e. better salaries, savings and assets, high performing schools, the capacity to travel, social networks, etc., which are codified in popular speech as white privilege, even though these same goods may be shared by other middle class and wealthy ethnics. Whiteness training encourages sharing one's origin story, failings and sense of torment, but beyond charitable giving, it does not necessitate sharing resources at the level of redistributive public policy, i.e. through expansion of the universal social wage, commuter taxes, consolidation of urban-suburban school districts, revenue sharing across metropolitan divides, federally-managed public works projects etc. There is also a millenarian and liberal individualist dimension to the kind of anti-racist politics embodied in whiteness studies, notions of white privilege and the like. We are told individuals must correct their flaws before they can participate with others, a view that runs counter to what should be conventional wisdom about human behavior and social movement dynamics. The assumption that the therapeutic work needs to happen first is simply wrong, and there are plenty of examples throughout history and in our own times where we can find imperfect people working to realize and advance their common concerns.

The work of building solidarity lies elsewhere, not in therapy aimed at self-actualization, but in lived social relations and sustained political work that transforms participants' social consciousness and collective sense of historical possibility. Those everyday social relations and the context of political work are always defined by the presence of differences, whether those are differences of background, perspective, maturity, knowledge, insight, power, capacity, and passions, and none of these are calibrated strictly in concert with racial, ethnic, gender or other corporeal identities. Although Roediger and others condemn "class reductionism," their work too often succumbs to a reductionist view of black political life that does not comprehend

different material interests and ideological positions among African Americans. What is lost in the din of whiteness discourse, and certainly in the reparations hustle that Roediger defends, are the strategic choices made by black people who have sought working-class solidarity and action, despite the fact of political disenfranchisement, segregation, and repression. It would seem that latter-day historians, activists and bloggers are more preoccupied with difference than those black teamsters who joined the 1892 general strike in New Orleans, or those African American and Puerto Rican parents who fought alongside white teachers, social workers and community organizers to end lead poisoning in Rochester. We should be able to talk about situated-class experiences, i.e., ascriptive gender and racial hierarchies, sectoral and regional variations in working lives, unique occupational subcultures, idiosyncratic worker concerns and daily issues, without losing sight of the fundamental capitalist class relation of exploitation, and the dependency on wage labor endured by the vast majority of the U.S. population. Moreover, when we discuss what are often treated as discrete identity-based issues, i.e. matters of hyperpolicing, health disparities, urban unemployment, environmental racism, the gender gap in wages, affordable housing crises and gentrification, we should be clear that those problems originate from the tremendous power capital wields over all of our lives, and contesting that power is essential to addressing those specific concerns and creating a more just state of affairs.

As it took formal shape during the Reagan-Bush years, whiteness studies set out to counter the myth that working-class solidarity springs organically from shared oppression, and to show that such solidarity is always contingent. In the process, however, whiteness studies has painted working-class solidarity into a corner analytically, treating solidarity as always and everywhere hemmed in by racial difference. From the most cynical view, the pursuit of a working-class, anti-capitalist politics is always elusive and impotent. Working-class solidarity, however, like all other forms of alliance and common cause, is forged through politics, an imperfect and unwieldy process of discovering and advancing common interests through debate, conflict, bonding, experimentation, sustained work, failures and victories. Such solidarity is not given, nor permanent. Its value is not intrinsic, but rather its worth should be measured by the degree to which anti-capitalist solidarity alters the balance of class forces in a

progressive way, and imposes more just, non-alienated, non-exploitative modes of working and living. Differences of opinion and passion are preconditions of political life. We should not be uneasy about these social realities, or unnerved by the difficult work of building counterpower. The only ones who should be uneasy about solidarity are the bosses.

NOTES

1. Donna Brazile, *Hacks: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns that Put Donald Trump in the White House* (New York and Boston: Hachette Books, 2017).

2. Jeremy Fassler, "Joy Reid Nails the Problem with the Democratic Party," *The Daily Banter* 1 September 2017, https://thedailybanter.com/2017/09/joy-ann-reid-nails-the-problem-with-the-democratic-party/.

3. Connor Kilpatrick, "Burying the White Working Class," *Jacobin* (May 13, 2016).

4. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Richard J. Hernstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

5. Ronald Walters, "White Racial Nationalism in the United States," *Without Prejudice*, EAFORD paper no. 43 (Washington, DC: The International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1987); Ronald W. Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests: Conservative Public Policy and the Black Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003).

6. David R. Roediger, *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1994), David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); David Roediger, How *Race Survived U.S. History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (London: Verso, 2010).

7. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1996); George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

8. Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working Class History* 6 (Fall 2001): 9.

9. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 12.

10. Barbara Fields, "Whiteness, Racism and Identity," *International Labor and Working Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 48.

11. Fields, "Whiteness, Racism and Identity," 48-49.

12. Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 48.

13. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Atheneum, 1935), 700-1.

14. Roediger, *Wages*, 13.

15. Historian Walter Johnson's 2016 essay "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism and Justice," only mentions Roediger in passing but he evokes the "wages of whiteness." Unlike Roediger who pays keen attention to the interplay of cultural, social and economic developments, and the evolution of whiteness as a meaningful symbol of relative class position, Johnson relies instead on sweeping historical generalizations that lose sight of any real political interests and class power in historical time and space, which should be the focus of any serious left critical analysis of capitalism. His account treats the "white working class" as cohesive, always conservative, and amazingly always complicit in the oppression of black and brown workers: "The history of white working-

class struggle, for example, cannot be understood separate from the privileges of whiteness, to which the white working classes of Britain and the United States laid claim in their demands for equal political rights. And it was the ever-expanding frontier of imperialism and racial capitalism that pacified the white working class with the threat of replacement and promise of a share of the spoils." See Walter Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism and Justice," *Boston Review* (October 26, 2016), http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world (accessed January 23, 2018).

16. Abram Harris, "Reconstruction and the Negro," in Abram Harris, *Race, Radicalism and Reform: Selected Papers*, ed. William Darity, Jr. (New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction, 1989), 209.

17. Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker* [1931] (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

18. "Letter from George Streator to W.E.B. DuBois, July 7, 1935," in *The Correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois, Volume II: Selections 1934-1944*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1997), 101-2.

19. "Streator to DuBois," 102.

20. "Streator to DuBois," 102.

21. Jack Bloom, *Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1987), 56.

22. T.J. Woofer, Jr. *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, Research Monograph 5 (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1936), xxi.

23. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, 701-2.

24. Roediger, *Wages*, 177.

25. Compare Daniel Rosenberg's textured description of neighborhood life of New Orleans's multiracial laboring classes in the decades after the great 1892 strike to the standard fare offered by whiteness studies, and the even more cynical view of history traded by today's anti-racist commentariat:

> Despite laws, many thousands of Blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhoods. Evidence indicates a persistence in 1900 of the housing patterns of an earlier period: in many communities, white and Black lived next door, across the street, down the block, or near each other... but recurrent or continuous proximity did not necessarily produce friendships or harmony. On several occasions, whites protested 'interminable "ragtime" selections' by 'discordant' brass bands at neighborhood picnics attended by Blacks. White petitioners protested the 'execrable' music at next door lawn parties in one uptown neighborhood. But interracial lawn parties, featuring the same 'execrable' music and 'interminable ragtime,' also took place, attended in the main by Irish and Black dockworkers (usually on Monday nights). Whites and Blacks may have walked to work in the same direction, perhaps even together, left work together, seen each other on days off, and their children may have played together. And, at the same time, whites and Blacks (particularly dockworkers) came into contact on the job. Nevertheless, segregation proceeded apace in the early twentieth century. Separation of white and Black on streetcars became standard and was enforced. Whenever the white section of a streetcar filled up, the separating screen was moved back to make

> room for more whites. (Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor and Unionism, 1892-1923* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988], 18.)

See also Eric Arnesen, "The Peculiar Waterfront: The Crescent City and the Rewriting of the History of Race and Labor in the United States," in *Working in the Big Easy: The History and Politics of Labor in New Orleans*, ed. Thomas J. Adams and Steve Striffler (Lafayette: University of Louisiana, 2014), 1-32; Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers in New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Eric Arnesen, "Biracial Waterfront Unionism in the Age of Segregation," in *Waterfront Workers: New Essays on Race and Class*, ed. Cal Winslow (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[26.] Chapter 2's title reference to "thinking black intellectuals" is drawn from that of a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* where Roediger's piece first appeared, but the phrasing is regrettable and revealing. Roediger details how black intellectuals like James Baldwin and C.L.R. James helped to awaken and influence Rawick's and other whites intellectuals' direction. Of his relationship with Rawick, Roediger recalls, "we shared, often unspoken, a sense of great good fortune that thinking Black intellectuals had helped us find voices" (Roediger, "A White Intellectual among Thinking Black Intellectuals," 226). The use of the qualifier "thinking" when referring to black intellectuals, but not to whites, is off-putting. Even if what is meant here is that blacks were the ones doing the most path-breaking, revolutionary thinking on the Left, a finer descriptor would have helped avoid what reads like a variation of the "articulate blacks" trope.

[27.] Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 52.

[28.] Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 53.

[29.] Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 76.

[30.] Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 74, 89.

[31.] Left intellectuals love citing the following "vitality and validity" quote from James's 1948 speech, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States," and they often do so to reassert why we should not apply too rigorous a class analysis to black political life. In response to socialists who argued that the Negro struggle should be integrated with and led by organized labor and a left political party, James offered "We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of American and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is travelling with great speed and vigor. We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organised labour movement or the Marxist party." See *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question,"* ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 138-147. This passage is not only routinely decontextualized from the speech itself, but it is rarely appreciated as a rather time-bound contribution to late Jim Crow debates among Trotskyist and CP tendencies, debates which were undoubtedly shaped by both capitalist reaction to labor militancy—recall the pro-management Taft-Hartley Act was passed into law the year before the text cited here—and the political stirrings of returning black soldiers and civil rights activists in different parts of the country. Instead, James's words are usually taken up as an authoritative, and transhistorical thesis on black political autonomy. His claims reflect a commonsensical view of black organicism, which may have had some political utility at the time since the vast majority of blacks were subjected to de facto segregation in the North and second-class citizenship in the South, but black political life was also fraught with different

ideological tendencies and class interests, which could not be reduced to the "independent Negro struggle" rhetoric that rang out from James's lectern. Perhaps most important of all, contemporary efforts to enlist James in defense of liberal anti-racism forget that he was always clear and consistent about his Marxist interpretative and political commitments. "Economic relations produce certain types of people," he said in a mid-seventies interview, "and it is the class struggle of those people that makes history move. In my work previous to *Notes* [*on Dialectics*] I didn't make that clear enough, although I was always working on that basis—the class struggle." See "Interview with C.L.R. James," *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Scheer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 271.

32. Dan Georgakas, "Young Detroit Radicals: 1955-1965," in *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, ed. Paul Buhle (London: Allison and Busby, 1986).

33. Quoted in Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 58.

34. In a 2001 symposium dedicated to critical perspectives on whiteness studies, both Arnesen and Reed examine the place of Sombart's query in shaping DuBois's study of Federal Reconstruction and the subsequent discourse of whiteness. See, Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," 10; and Adolph Reed, Jr. "Response to Eric Arnesen," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 69-80.

35. Thomas Jessen Adams, "The Theater of Inequality," *nonsite* 12 (August 2014), https://nonsite.org/feature/the-theater-of-inequality (accessed June 28, 2017); Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 2008); Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York: Bantam, 2009); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990); Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America* (Oakland: University of California, 2016); Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South during World War II* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

36. See, Paul C. Luken and Suzanne Vaughn, "' . . .Be a Genuine Homemaker in Your Own Home": Gender and Familial Relations in State Housing Practices, 1917-1922," *Social Forces* 83:4 (June 2005): 1603-1625; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1985); Lizabeth Cohen, A *Consumer Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996); See also Andrew Hartman, "The Rise and Fall of Whiteness Studies," *Race & Class* 46:2 (2004): 22-38.

37. It is also noteworthy that the birth of whiteness studies, as an academic subject, coincides with the notoriety of Afrocentrism, a black nationalist intellectual tendency popular within and beyond academe during the late Reagan-Bush years. As Wilentz suggests, there is more consonance between black nationalism and whiteness studies than some might be willing to concede, and most of that common ground is unstable. The connections between Afrocentric thinking and the birth of whiteness studies have been under-examined. Indeed, long before "white supremacy" became an accepted category of analysis and theory of history in the liberal regions of area studies and the humanities, Afrocentrists used the concept as a central means of understanding U.S. and world history. Both intellectual tendencies are suspicious of class-centered politics, and in the case of Afrocentricism, openly hostile to Marxist class analyses. Moreover, both whiteness studies and Afrocentric black nationalism treat race as transhistorical, and for some, primordial. This is true of the psychobabble and race essentialism of France Cress Welsing's *The Isis Papers*, but also of those equally problematic forms of racialist thinking that guide the problematic use of genetic-testing to do genealogical research, e.g. paid

services like Family Tree DNA, Ancestry.com, 23 and Me, and Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates's PBS television series *Finding Your Roots.* Ahistorical and essentialist treatments of race are not limited to overtly biological claims, but culturalist approaches to race share the same problems. Marimba Ani's 1994 book, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Thought and Behavior* illustrates how talk of "race as culture" remains essentialist in substance. Ani, formerly Dona Richards and once a SNCC field secretary, sets out to demonstrate that European culture in total is pathological, prone to conquest and domination. Even Cedric J. Robinson's celebrated *Black Marxism* treats racial ideology as originating in antiquity, an argument we can trace back to the rhetoric of New Negro nationalist soapbox orators and bibliophiles. See his Chapter 4, "The Process and Consequences of Africa's Transmutation" in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983), 107-114. Perhaps the most well-known and influential text during the Afrocentric period was Chancellor Williams's *The Destruction of Black Civilization.* A 1930 graduate of Howard University, Williams later earned a Ph.D. in sociology after writing a thesis on the social impact of black storefront churches in the 1920s. During the Black Power era, he penned what would become his most well-known book, which Chicago-based Third World Press reissued in an expanded version in 1987. A host of other works by Cheikh Anta Diop, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Ivan Van Sertima, and many lesser-known authors, were published by Africa World Press, Black Classics Press, founded by Ta-Nehisi Coates's father, Paul Coates, and other black-owned, independent publishing houses. Such works advanced a metanarrative of white supremacy, holding that racism as we know it did not evolve out of modern exploration, conquest and chattel slavery, but was central to the fall of Nile valley civilizations, and other feudal societies on the African continent. Within this intellectual context of Afrocentricism, the dawning of whiteness studies was often viewed as a belated academic recognition of the arguments that black nationalists had been making for decades. I first came across volume one of Theodore Allen's *Invention of the White Race*, not in any university bookstore or academic conference discussion, but in the various black-owned bookstores like Everyone's Place and Pyramid Books I frequented in the Baltimore-Washington region and elsewhere along the eastern seaboard. The works of Allen and later Roediger made their way into these store inventories precisely because they were read as authorizing the black nationalist position that race was endemic and therefore black economic autonomy was the only viable path forward for African American liberation.

38. Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*, 60.

39. Christopher M. Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2017); Stephen Ward, *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2016); Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Matthew Birkhold, "Theory and Practice: Organic Intellectuals and Revolutionary Ideas in Detroit's Black Power Movement, 1954-1972," doctoral dissertation, Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2016; Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

40. SNCC activist Dorothy Zellner recalls the purging of whites from the organization and the rife contradictions of that development:

> We were in SNCC, we were in a black-led organization, a black-led movement. But this is my point: What SNCC needed– what they wanted– was for the whites to go and work in the white community. And the reason for this was, one, of course they would get allies. Even though people were very realistic about this; these allies weren't apples hanging off the tree, ready to be plucked. It was hard work in the south. But the second reason was to neutralize the white community, if

> we failed to get allies. And there were many hardy [sic.] souls who attempted to do this with little or no success. The reason for this was the extreme danger in the white community and the extreme hostility. White people who opposed segregation publicly were shut down or arrested or threatened and so forth.
>
> And since then, in the back of my mind, I have always felt that this was something we needed to do that we didn't do . . . White students in the Southern Student Organizing Committee worked alongside SNCC, trying to establish a beachhead in the white community and build these kinds of coalitions. Because a lot of us felt that were it not for racism, there would have been natural coalitions between black and white working class people. But most of these efforts in U.S. history have failed– from populism on. That doesn't mean they will always fail, but racism has been used very effectively. That's a shibboleth of American political science.
>
> But politically speaking, we couldn't do what a lot of black people thought was a mandate: to go work where people really needed to be talked to. ("From Mississippi to Gaza: Dorothy Zellner Reflects on Fifty Years of Struggle," *Mondoweiss.net* [June 24, 2014], http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/mississippi-reflects-struggle#sthash.Q6KIPACm.dpuf, accessed 9/ 26/15).

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