I have been teaching about Whiteness at the university level since 1997. As a veteran of antiracist education, I have become quite familiar with the highly predictable White responses to my (and others’) critique of White privilege. White responses typically contain racialized sayings or phrases that are common to White subjectivity. For example, when I talk with nonpoor Whites about White racism as a structural phenomenon that gives all Whites psychological and material advantages, their common refrain is “What about poor White people?” The first time I heard this from a nonpoor White person I was surprised. Growing up around poor Whites (see note 1), I had heard them raise this question with one another in discussions about race. But I did not expect nonpoor Whites to do the same, especially in a way that seemed to express concern for poor Whites. I was skeptical about their concern because in my own experience I had never known nonpoor Whites to show any serious commitment to ending poverty for poor Whites. Instead, experience told me that nonpoor Whites look down on poor Whites. So this sudden outpouring of concern for poor Whites was perplexing to me.

Out of all the different tactics that nonpoor Whites use to avoid responsibility for their White privilege, “What about poor White people?” is the one that I think about the most, maybe because I grew up as a poor White person, or maybe because I have long thought that it says more about the workings of race in the United States than most people realize. Time after time, nonpoor White education students interject “What about poor White people?” into the conversation when the subject of White privilege is on the table. Yet, they are otherwise curiously silent about the plight of poor Whites both before and after uttering this phrase. It is as though nonpoor Whites think that there is no need to talk about poor Whites unless Whiteness is the main topic of discussion. What this suggests to me is that nonpoor Whites’ evocation of poor Whites through the phrase “What about poor White people?” warrants further examination because it appears to be a type of self-interested racial tactic.

In my earlier years of antiracist teaching, I reacted to “What about poor White people?” as if it was just one more of those sayings, or “semantic moves” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006), that we White people use to avoid the spotlight of racial criticism. Even though the phrase really bothered me, I minimized my gut feeling and considered “What about poor White people?” to be functionally similar to other problematic racial sayings like “I don’t see color” or “Everyone gets an equal chance in America.” To me, they were all semantic moves that prevented Whites from having to deal with the realities of racial injustice in a system of White supremacy.

However, in more recent years I have come to believe that this one particular semantic move is categorically different from the others that nonpoor Whites employ in that its rhetoric is as much intraracial as interracial. In fact, it is one of the few semantic
moves nonpoor Whites use that contains overtly intraracial language. It enters into the conversation the notion of a different kind of Whiteness (i.e., poor Whites) in order to make a point about the alleged inadequacy of critical race analyses for identifying and understanding the social and economic differences between Whites and people of color. The implication is that privilege cannot be assigned to all members of a particular group because some members of that group, in this case poor Whites, are not privileged. Therefore, privilege must be considered at the level of the individual, not the group. Since nonpoor Whites are usually not really concerned about poor Whites, most nonpoor Whites who use this phrase are actually suggesting that they should be treated as individuals and not assigned White privilege simply because they are White. If these nonpoor Whites were more direct, they would ask instead, “How do you know me well enough to know that I am privileged?”

But they are not more direct because “What about poor White people?” does more than express a desire for an individualistic notion of racism. It also signifies that poor and nonpoor Whites share a close bond; nonpoor Whites stand up for poor Whites when poor Whites are not around to represent themselves. But do poor and nonpoor Whites actually interact with one another in a positive and unified way? Are nonpoor Whites really acting in the interest of poor Whites when they use “What about poor White people?” Do poor and nonpoor Whites share a hidden or normalized social bond that prevents us from better understanding the significance and ramifications of “What about poor White people?”

As I argue in this chapter, the signification of poor Whites by nonpoor Whites provides a window into the internal political organization of the White race, which has yet to be adequately theorized in race-based terms. Toward this end, my hope is to shed light on the internal machinations of the White race by looking at the hegemonic alliance that exists between poor and nonpoor Whites. Although this alliance has tremendous strength and is arguably the primary mortar holding together White supremacist structure, it has a number of cracks and crevices that need to be exposed and widened in the hope of bringing the whole structure crashing down. In other words, political alliances, such as the alliance that holds together what we know as the White race, can be undone in ways that work towards real social justice. Garvey and Ignatiev (1997) make an important critique when they say,

> The “social construction of race” has become something of a catchphrase in the academy, although few have taken the next step. Indeed, we might say that until now, philosophers have merely interpreted the white race; the point is to abolish it. (p. 346)

If a race can be made, then it can also be unmade. Understanding how the White race is held together is the first step toward the ultimate goal of breaking it apart so as to disassemble the political alliances that keep White supremacy in place. Thus, it is my belief that a critical examination of “What about poor White people?” can add a new dimension to the ongoing debate around the most accurate and strategic way to theorize the intersection between race and class in the United States.

I teach in the field of education. Most of my students are (future) teachers or aspiring education scholars. The majority of these students are White, much like the U.S. teacher workforce. Data gathered in 2001 by the National Center for Educational Statistics shows that 90% of all public school teachers in the United States are White (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). While I am most disturbed by and focused on the problematic beliefs that my White students hold about students of color,
am also highly troubled by the problematic beliefs that my nonpoor White students hold about poor Whites, which they will take with them to the classroom or research site. Therefore, another goal of this chapter is to look at the social justice implications of poor and nonpoor White relations for poor White students. For example, how does “What about poor White people?” perpetuate pedagogical approaches that see the poor White student as someone who does not have privilege relative to people of color or as someone who is more racist than nonpoor Whites? How does a lack of attention to the racialization of poor Whites work toward reproducing the racial order that encompasses us all? How does the racialization of poor Whites shape the politics of their schooling? And, how should an antiracist education for poor Whites be conceptualized? Drawing from my critique of what I am calling the White hegemonic alliance (which I describe later in this chapter), I will address these questions and outline a social and political context of schooling for poor Whites that takes into account the dynamics of the White hegemonic alliance.

Occasionally in this chapter, I will look at White Appalachians as my example of a poor White subgroup, mainly because as a group member I am more familiar with their history, experiences, and positionality.

The Racial Politics of “What About Poor White People?”

For those of us who see the education of Whites as a vital component of the larger antiracist project, we need to closely examine what may seem at first glance to be “critical” responses to “What about poor White people?” For example, one could argue from a class-based perspective that race critique has its limitations in that although it can show us the construction of power and difference between racial groups it cannot shed light on the construction of power and difference within racial groups. What we would need, or so the logic goes, are class-based or Marxist analyses to sort out intraracial class hierarchies such as the one between poor and nonpoor Whites. The problem with this approach is that it implies that the racialization of White people is monolithic and there are no political struggles within the White race that could be explained by different yet related racialization processes for poor and nonpoor Whites. It assumes that race-based analyses have little or nothing to contribute to understanding and disrupting intraracial stratification. It also naturalizes and minimizes the racial alliance between poor and nonpoor Whites in that it only pays attention to their class-based public tensions (e.g., the exploitation of coal miners by mining corporations) and not their tacit race-based agreements (e.g., remaining silent about the normativity of White privilege). The inherent, teleological assumption being made is that poor and nonpoor Whites should be aligned, and class conflicts divert attention from the racial agreements that hold them together.

In the class-based approach, it is as if somehow those people we know as “White” were not politically and historically constructed; they are allegedly natural biological allies. This perspective wrongly assumes that somehow the amalgamation of the White racial polity out of various groups with different status levels had nothing to do with the construction of the “White race,” its rise to power, and its persistence in domination. In other words, we must consider whether the initial and ongoing differences in power between subgroups that we now think of as White were and are essential to the life of the White racial polity. My assertion is that the White race requires an internal hierarchy in order for it to exist, meaning that those at the bottom of this hierarchy must be willing to submit to the authority of those on the top. I will come back to this point later in the chapter.

Coming from a Whiteness studies approach, another example of a seemingly critical response to “What about poor White people?” is that one could simply argue that all
Whites have more privilege than people of color, regardless of the White person’s class status. So, there is no need to waste time distinguishing between poor and nonpoor Whites. This position is also problematic. Recent critical studies of Whiteness have tended to lump all Whites into one group monolithically privileged by Whiteness (e.g., McIntosh, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 2003). I believe that this trend arose—justifiably so—as a reaction to the difficulty of keeping folks, especially White folks, engaged in a sustained, transformative dialogue on Whiteness. I have heard numerous antiracist educators say that Whites often try to shift the conversation away from race and toward class when the focus is on Whiteness. They also say, and I would agree, that it is difficult to prevent the shift to class, especially when semantic moves like “What about poor White people?” are made. So, I do understand why an antiracist educator might simply avoid discussing the differences in structural privilege between poor and nonpoor Whites. But avoiding the reality of poor Whites’ lower status relative to nonpoor Whites ultimately weakens the overall effort to create cross-racial solidarity and end White supremacy because an opportunity to expose and disrupt the troubling racial alliance between poor and nonpoor Whites is lost.

In the Whiteness studies approach, it is the avoidance of discussing poor Whites, both on the part of the educator and the students, that gives “What about poor White people?” much of its power. Although I agree that relative to people of color all Whites are privileged by a system of White supremacy, clearly White supremacy does not privilege all Whites equally (Heilman, 2004). And while class, culture, and language certainly operate to reproduce the multigenerational poverty of poor Whites, we are missing their racialization, which situates them in a different experiential realm and political position within the White group (Hartigan, 2004). Unless we unpack the racialization of poor Whites, we will fail to recognize that the power of the White group lies in the dominant subgroup’s (i.e., nonpoor Whites’) ability to maintain a tightly defended and seemingly natural allegiance among all group members. A critical understanding of the role of racialization in the formation of the White racial polity holds the key to opening the door to racial justice because it emphasizes the need to disrupt the unnatural solidarity of the White race so as to disband it.

To move beyond the limited analytical vision of undifferentiated-White-privilege versus Marxist-analysis-to-the-rescue, what I suggest is a critical race exegesis of “What about poor White people?” A critical race exegesis is an interpretation of a text or social phenomenon that is rooted in critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a relatively new way of making sense of the social world in explicitly racial terms (Allen, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). While its more recent growth can be traced to legal studies, its roots go back at least to the work of W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) and Franz Fanon (1925–1961). As it has grown, it has also branched out into disciplines beyond legal studies. Scholars in various social science disciplines have taken up CRT in ways that take from, add to, and go beyond the theorization of CRT by legal scholars. In education, there are now numerous authors who participate in CRT scholarship (e.g., Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Love, 2004; Lynn, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1999).

Limited space prevents me from giving an adequate overview of CRT. However, a brief explanation of two general CRT tenets is important for the inquiry at hand. First and foremost, White supremacy is an endemic and structurally determining social system in which we all live (Allen, 2001, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 1996, 2001). White supremacy is a system of oppression that both parallels and intersects with other systems of oppression, such as capitalism and patriarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, 2001). This means that White
supremacy is not subsumed within capitalism or patriarchy, but rather is a related yet distinct social system.

Second, CRT moves the definition of race beyond the older notion of a biologically defined group and the newer notion of a socially constructed group. Instead, CRT sees races as political constructions as opposed to the more passive, and politically neutral notion of a social construction (Mills, 1997). In this view, races are political groups, with particular political interests that derive in large part from their situatedness within White supremacist racial hierarchies (Mills, 1997). Race membership is based largely on racialized, and thus political, perceptions of the body, or what Fanon (1952/1967) referred to as “body schema.” Racial group members act, consciously or not, as political representatives of their racial polity (Mills, 1997). In other words, races are seen as forms of human organization mired in group conflict over status and power.

At the top of the White supremacist hierarchy, the White racial polity is invested in its dominant status and will only give political concessions to people of color when they are pressured from multiple sides to do so and, most importantly, stand to benefit the most from what appears to many as racial progress for people of color. Bell (1980, 1992) calls this White supremacist phenomenon the “interest convergence principle.” His primary example is the Brown decision in 1954. He argues that the Cold War with the Soviet Union and Black radicalism in the United States pressured White leaders to support ending formal segregation. On the international front, White America needed the support of “Third World” people of color in the fight against communism, but the U.S. system of racial apartheid scared away potential allies. On the domestic front, White America was feeling threatened by growing Black radical and communist movements (Bell, 1980). Although the Brown decision appeared to be a victory for people of color, White America gained a larger victory, ultimately, in achieving global domination and breaking apart the Soviet Union. Also, the Brown decision did little, if nothing, to disrupt the U.S. racial hierarchy. And once the Soviet Union broke apart, White America quickly turned against civil rights gains like affirmative action and bilingual education.

An exegesis of “What about poor White people?” that is rooted in CRT assumes that texts created by Whites must be scrutinized for their political race implications. As Leonardo (2002) argues, it is crucial that we “dismantle discourses of whiteness” by “disrupting…and unsettling their codes” (p. 31). Does a certain discursive text further the dominant status of Whites? Does it strengthen political alliances that maintain White power? Does it set the agenda, acting as a talking point for the White racial polity? When it comes to “What about poor White people?” I believe that the answer is “Yes” to all of these questions. Let me explain further.

On one level of analysis, it is fair to say that “What about poor Whites?” is less about nonpoor Whites’ concern for poor Whites and more about their discomfort with their own Whiteness. To avoid discomfort, they have learned that this semantic move can remove them from the spotlight of critique and accountability by shifting the discussion to a group that most “educated” folks have not spent much time thinking about: poor White people. Consequently, they avoid dealing in more positive ways with their pent up feelings of guilt and defensiveness (which nearly all Whites have, even those of us who think of ourselves as antiracist) emanating from their denial of the unearned privilege and status that a White supremacist social system affords them (Allen, 2004; Helms, 1993). Of course, this semantic move never leads to any serious discussion about why poor White people are poor because the speaker rarely has any serious interest in exploring the social, economic, and political situatedness of poor Whites. The speaker’s greater concern seems to be about silencing the conversation on Whiteness. Once that happens, it is as if they see the issue of poor Whites as resolved.
Before moving on, I want to point out that indeed there are nonpoor Whites who appear to express genuine concern for poor Whites. Unfortunately, much of their discourse about poor Whites is scripted by a fundamental lack of understanding of the race-based problem at hand. These folks tend to come from a class-based perspective and do not seem to understand the importance of analyzing in structural terms the racialization of poor Whites. So despite the fact that a few of those who ask “What about poor Whites?” may really be concerned about poor Whites, it is my contention that despite their good intentions they are still guided by, consciously or not, a White supremacist ideology that works to not only maintain White domination over people of color but also, ironically, the domination of nonpoor over poor Whites.\footnote{11}

Also, I want to make it clear that examining the poverty of White people, especially the entrenched, generational poverty of certain White subcultures, is critical because poor Whites are in a relational sense oppressed people who do face institutional and everyday forms of dehumanization. Ignoring their situation leaves behind many potential antiracist allies who are in a position to disrupt the seemingly natural solidarity between poor and nonpoor Whites. In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2003) says that in his study of White people’s racial beliefs working class White women were the ones most likely to exhibit signs of being racially progressive. In my experience as an antiracist educator, Whites who have grown up poor or working class have been much more likely than nonpoor Whites to embrace an antiracist agenda that places White supremacy at the center of critique. Though these examples do not qualify as definitive evidence, they do suggest that the commonsense notion that nonpoor Whites are more likely than poor Whites to be racially progressive may be erroneous and needs of further study.

One of the ways that poor Whites are dehumanized is through stereotypes. Many of the prevalent slurs used against them directly communicate their lower status in the White group. Yet, stereotypes of poor Whites are not the same as stereotypes of people of color. As Smith (2004) explains,

> Depictions of “rednecks” and “crackers” demean white (male) workers by endowing them with inherent brutality and ignorance; ironically, their sub-human state is also commonly signified by an irredeemably violent racism. This twisted racial logic does not mean, however, that white workers are actually victims of racism. Rather, their derogatory representation may be seen as a product of the disjunction between their racial privilege and class disadvantage, which it serves to explain and legitimate. As whites degraded by class exploitation, they can never be quite white enough. As working-class whites, they must not be good enough to be truly white, i.e., self-evidently (by virtue of color) superior and deservedly privileged. (p. 46)

Although I agree that poor Whites are not the victims of racism, I disagree with the notion that their denigration stems primarily from class exploitation. Notions of race and the internal racial politics of the White race are also to blame. The “White but not quite”\footnote{12} positionality of poor Whites is perpetuated not just by attitudes toward their economic status or alleged cultural dysfunction but also by beliefs about their biological inferiority. To this day, there are many nonpoor Whites who believe that the generational poverty of White Appalachians is due to the role inbreeding has played in creating their allegedly damaged gene pool\footnote{13} (Smith, 2004). Beliefs about genetic inferiority have made their way into the media. Comedic actors on TV often portray White Appalachians who marry or have sex with their siblings or cousins, creating children with exaggerated birth defects.

Moreover, stereotypes of poor Whites are often rooted in racial notions. For example, negative images of poor Southern Whites’ racism, backwardness, and biological corrup-
tion are often juxtaposed against images of the educated, genteel White Southerner who supposedly embodies civility and protects seemingly defenseless Blacks from the violent racism of poor Whites (Smith, 2004). In the 1996 film *A Time to Kill*, a trio of White lawyers, two Southern males and one Northern female, defend a Black man who killed the working-class Southern White men who raped his daughter. *A Time to Kill* conveys a common message that says educated White Southerners are the friends of people of color whereas uneducated poor White Southerners are their enemies. The film fails to depict any poor Whites in a positive light, as if somehow all poor White Southerners are incapable of antiracist thought and action. Consistent with the film’s message, the over-the-top ending shows a huge mob of crazed, racist poor Whites shooting up the courthouse in protest of the defendant’s acquittal. Meanwhile, the victorious lawyers are presented as the antiracist heroes, saving the South from poor Whites’ racism one court case at a time.

While some poor White Southerners do in fact live out the stereotype of the uneducated, virulent racist, the problem is that portrayals of poor White Southerners by seemingly antiracist filmmakers leave nonpoor White Southerners looking as though they are the only members of the White group who work for racial progress. These images communicate to an audience that “redneck hillbillies” or “White trash” are the racists that people should despise the most, not nonpoor White Southerners, or for that matter, nonpoor Whites in general. The fact that White politicians, business people, educators, and policymakers from mostly nonpoor backgrounds have been the primary perpetrators of institutional and structural racism gets obscured. Poor Whites are hated more, even though they do not have as much institutional and economic power as nonpoor Whites. The point is that nonpoor White Southerners require a distortion of the image of poor White Southerners in order to distort their own image. In other words, they need a White “Other” in order to justify their sense of superiority. I am suggesting that the same is true for all nonpoor Whites. They necessitate an image of the racist poor White to pass themselves off as nonracist.

Given that nonpoor Whites are the main group that distorts the image of poor Whites, one would think that poor Whites would harbor a lot of animosity toward nonpoor Whites. Such is not the case. It is as if poor Whites do not care if they are depicted as crazed racists. In fact, they may have internalized this image of themselves, believing that it is true. My suspicion is that most poor Whites think that they are more racist than nonpoor Whites. However, I am not sure that they would admit it publicly. In my experience as an antiracist educator, rarely do poor White students make comments that suggest that they think nonpoor Whites are more racist than poor Whites. Yet, they rarely express the belief that they are more racist than nonpoor Whites. This does not necessarily mean that poor Whites do not believe that they are more racist. They might be embarrassed to admit what they really think. Nonpoor White students do not exhibit any turmoil over expressing who is the most racist. Without hesitation, they usually say that they are less racist than poor Whites. They say it as though it is commonsense. But commonsense can often mask reality. In this case, it can mask the truer beliefs of poor Whites, and maybe even nonpoor Whites. It can also mask the objective reality: nonpoor Whites are more racist in the sense that their elevated status means that they are in positions of greater power, which they can use to perpetuate or disrupt White supremacy. Research needs to be conducted that examines poor Whites’ dispositions toward nonpoor Whites, and vice versa. In particular, researchers should look at how members of each group perceive their own level of racism as well as the other group’s level of racism.

Although nonpoor Whites’ depiction of poor Whites as virulent racists does not make poor Whites angry, nonpoor Whites’ economic exploitation of poor Whites has created
animosity. For example, many White Appalachians have a general distrust of wealthy White people due to centuries of economic exploitation by Northeastern corporations. I know that I was raised to distrust business people, especially if they were strangers or worked for a corporation. I have also seen how coalmining companies have exploited some of my relatives, tossing them aside when they contracted black lung. I internalized this animosity even though I grew up in a small town in northern Indiana. My father’s family had moved away from the mountains as part of the Appalachian migration to the Midwest after World War II (see note 2). I can only imagine the level of animosity that exists among White Appalachians that still reside in the mountains. Smith (2004) argues that nonpoor Whites sense White Appalachian’s animosity, causing them to fear that White Appalachians might someday retaliate.

What this means is that nonpoor White perceptions of and interactions with poor Whites, particularly with members of subgroups like White Appalachians, are largely guided by a combination of fear (of retaliation) and revulsion (toward their genetic inferiority). Also, poor Whites seem to care about how they have been economically exploited, but their anger does not cause them to want to break free of the White group. Instead, they want to be more respected White people, in the eyes of nonpoor Whites, as opposed to leaving the White group altogether.

Although poor Whites experience systemic dehumanization, they are as much oppressors as they are the oppressed. They are invested in Whiteness and receive the benefits of White privilege, even if their returns on their investments are not as great as the returns for nonpoor Whites. Returning to the example of White Appalachians, it may be a surprise to some, as it was for me, that the field of Appalachian Studies has often depicted Appalachia as a place of racial innocence (Billings, Pendarvis, & Thomas, 2004), which is nearly the complete opposite of the more common image in popular media of Appalachia as a place of extreme racism. Appalachia Studies scholars have studied the region as if only poor Whites and coalmines inhabit it. Rarely is Appalachia discussed as a multiracial place (Hayden, 2004). And even more rarely is the Whiteness of Appalachia considered an important arena of study (Smith, 2004). For example, critical studies of Whiteness in Appalachia are just beginning to systematically reveal why there are not more people of color living in Appalachia. In other words, Appalachia is mostly White for a reason. As Smith (2004) explains,

If whites are the only people left in many parts of the region, then there are no “race relations,” hence no enduring relevance to race. The contemporary predominance of whites in Appalachia becomes a benign demographic fact, rather than a product of active practices characterized in part by persistent white supremacy. Racial innocence is preserved. (p. 43)

The racial innocence narrative erases the fact that slavery existed in the mountain South. And after slavery ended, Kentucky created laws that made it difficult for Blacks to settle there (Smith, 2004). In the Tennessee cities of Knoxville and Chattanooga, laws “prohibited blacks from selling groceries and dry goods” (Smith, 2004, p. 43). These are two examples of the many ways that White supremacy created better opportunities for those raced as White by driving away competition from members of other racial groups, especially Blacks.

What I have discussed thus far is a pretext for understanding “What about poor White people?” Moving to a deeper level of critical race analysis, we need to look at how the racialization of poor Whites is part and parcel of their structural relationship with non-poor Whites. To study racialization is to analyze “the social relations in order to compre-
hend how [racial] groups of people see other [racial] groups in relation to themselves and to each other” (Hartigan, 2004, p. 61). In the case of poor and nonpoor White relations, we also need to look at how intraracial perceptions, interactions, and identity politics reproduce the larger racial order, that is, the racial hierarchy of the U.S. White supremacist social system (Allen, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 1996).

To better read “What about the poor Whites?” we need to consider the history of the formation of the U.S. White racial polity. After all, the White race has not always existed and its membership has changed over time. One fundamental question seems to guide much of the study of poor Whites and the making of the White race: Why have poor Whites seemingly gone against their own economic interests by siding with higher-status members of the White race and not people of color?

One answer is that nonpoor Whites wanted assistance in repressing the large numbers of Native and African people, groups that Whites considered to be not just as inferior people but also as political and economic adversaries who must be controlled. In the early 1800s, White leaders saw what happened to French colonialists and slaveholders in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and that drove them to seek out and bring in more Whites from Europe to act as a buffer against a similar slave revolt in the United States (DuBois, 1935). The Whites they brought in by the millions were most often members of lower-status European ethnic groups, such as the Irish, Slavs, Jews, and southern Europeans (DuBois, 1935; Jacobson, 1998). Since the history of White supremacy suggests that the White racial polity operates in a self-interested way, I am curious about why U.S. nonpoor Whites would have brought in groups that they saw as inferior. U.S. nonpoor Whites must have perceived a threat to the normative order of White supremacy, such as the possibility of a slave revolt, and were therefore willing to open up the ranks of the White racial polity in order to preserve White domination.

But what did poor Whites, whether they were new immigrants or historically marginalized subgroups, have to gain from a political organization where they were not the top group within their own race? What was available to them in the United States was a multiracial White supremacist society where they could receive what DuBois (1935) called “the public and psychological wages of whiteness.” In Europe, they were on the bottom of the social status ladder. In the United States, they were not. White supremacy created a White opportunity structure where the wages of Whiteness were doled out in both de jure and de facto ways (DuBois, 1935; Roediger, 1999). Nonpoor Whites gave these White immigrants—at least the males—certain voting and property rights not offered to others (Roediger, 1999). Also, poor Whites had the opportunity to rise up the economic and social status ladder in ways not open to people of color (Ignatiev, 1995; Jacobson, 1998; Sacks, 1994). And even though many of these Whites did not achieve the “American Dream” (i.e., middle-class status or higher), more poor Whites than people of color did “succeed,” which must have reinforced in poor Whites the value of the White opportunity structure in a multiracial society (DuBois, 1935).

Although many poor Whites were not completely happy with this arrangement, as evidenced by their complaints about the limited permeability of the opportunity structure and what they saw as the privileges (i.e., food and shelter) enslaved Blacks received from their masters (DuBois, 1935), they understood that they occupied a higher social status than people of color (Roediger, 1999). I believe that this White supremacist context taught them that they were superior to people of color. In what had to have been a harsh and dangerous society for Blacks enduring enslavement and Indigenous people suffering land loss and genocide, my assumption is that nonpoor Whites’ relative favoritism toward poor Whites must have solidified a hegemonic yet unequal alliance among poor and nonpoor Whites and made the stranglehold of the White racial polity over social and
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economic life in the United States that much greater. Both now and then, the politically interesting aspect of the hegemonic alliance between poor and nonpoor Whites is that while White privilege extends to all of those perceived as White some reap fewer benefits than others. Yet, the unequal rewards do not seem to deter those who get the least, that is, poor Whites, from being staunch defenders of a pro-White agenda.

In our contemporary context, I see “What about poor White people?” as a coded representation of the long-standing hierarchical and hegemonic alliance within the White racial polity. In this hegemonic alliance, poor Whites agree not to become race traitors and disrupt the normativity of a White supremacist system. In other words, they agree to support a skewed, racialized opportunity structure that gives them advantages over people of color (Mills, 1997). And, most importantly for the argument I am making here, they comply, whether actively or passively, with being used as the archetypal image of a racist, thus serving to deflect critical racial scrutiny away from those Whites who benefit the most from a White supremacist system, namely nonpoor Whites. Even those White Appalachians who are openly critical of and work against the consuming image of the “racist redneck” often do so in a way that does not name who the most institutionally powerful racists are, which if we follow this line of logic leaves us with the curious situation of having a racist social order but seemingly no racists. As I suggested earlier, too many poor Whites accept the notion that nonpoor Whites are less racist. In fact, I cannot recall a single time I have heard a poor White person say, “I wish those nonpoor Whites would not depict us as the poster-children of racism. They are the real racists, you know.” I am not suggesting that poor Whites are not racist. Poor Whites engage in both individual and systemic acts of racism against people of color and they rarely hold themselves accountable for their complicity with a White supremacist social system that most harms people of color. What I am suggesting is that when we say the phrase “racist” whose face is the first to pop-up in your head? And, why do I suspect that in the minds of most Whites, even poor Whites, it is not the face of a nonpoor White, such as a White soccer mom or White professor?

The benefit that dutiful poor Whites receive for playing the role of decoy is the current manifestation of the public and psychological wages of Whiteness. They receive race-based benefits that people of color do not receive (McIntosh, 1997; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997) for allowing themselves to be the distraction that is necessary for nonpoor Whites to evade a high level of scrutiny. Poor Whites would have to organize and publicly protest their depiction as the stereotype of the ultimate racist in order to change their current situation. They would have to join with people of color in denouncing White supremacy as a social system. In effect, they would have to be willing to commit “race suicide” in order to lose their White benefits and gain their humanity (Allen, 2004). But I do not believe that most poor Whites, at least at this juncture in history, are ready to even consider a commitment to end White supremacy; they are in a Weberian sense “rationally” invested in Whiteness (Bobo, 1983; Lipsitz, 1998). They can see how the game is stacked, and they have decided to play the mediocre hand they have been dealt rather than trying to change the game. Maybe poor Whites actually are acting in their economic interest, but selling their soul in the process.

What is the benefit of this hegemonic intraracial arrangement for nonpoor Whites? This question needs to be explored because why would higher-status Whites want to be aligned in any way with people they see as “backwards,” “rednecks,” “hillbillies,” and “trailer trash”? After all, nonpoor Whites have defined Whiteness however they have wanted in order to suit their own political and economic interests (Haney Lopez, 1997). And they have been able to keep those perceived as non-European out of the White group.
What About Poor White People?

So why would they not redefine “White” such that those “inferior” Whites are no longer considered White?

I think that the reason nonpoor Whites do not expel poor Whites from the White group is that the benefits of the White hegemonic alliance are even greater for those on the higher-status side. Extending DuBois’ (1935) framework for thinking critically about poor Whites and nonpoor Whites, my argument is that they gain a buffer group (i.e., poor Whites), a shield between themselves and people of color, and thus a divide and conquer victory. If we step outside of a monolithic view of the White group, we will see that nonpoor Whites need a political alliance with some large part of the population so as to protect their unearned wealth and status against the political force of those who wish to have a more equitable and humanizing situation (e.g., many people of color). They desperately want to avoid becoming equals, let alone subordinates, to people of color. In short, Whiteness itself, as a form of racialized property with high market value, has been offered to poor Whites throughout the history of the U.S. as a political quid pro quo (Harris, 1995; Roediger, 1999).

If there is one novel point I am making in this chapter it is this: higher-status, nonpoor Whites will never want all Whites to be economically equal because there would be no device left to divert attention away from the racism and White racial privilege of nonpoor Whites. To reiterate, nonpoor Whites need a White other who is at once a stereotype of the ultimate racist and a dutiful ally in the White hegemonic alliance. For poor Whites, “ultimate racist” and “dutiful White ally” have become two sides of the same coin, each side working in dialectical relation with the other side to create poor Whites’ social identity and political positionality. Together, the two sides of the coin work to elevate the intraracial status of nonpoor Whites. In other words, nonpoor Whites would no longer be able to say “What about poor White people?” if all Whites were nonpoor and considered equally nonracist; in other words, if there were no poor White people. Nonpoor Whites do not want to lose their White other because their White privilege would be too obvious. Although poor Whites would still be supporters of White supremacy in this scenario, people of color would have a more coherent target to organize against. Therefore, poor Whites will never achieve social justice as long as they are practicing members of the White racial alliance. Their investment in a unified White racial polity and unwillingness to meaningfully challenge the ultimate racist stereotype prevents cross-racial solidarity between themselves and people of color against the more absolute dominance of nonpoor Whites. Clearly, nonpoor Whites have much to gain by claiming that the situation of poor Whites is about class and not race.

Rather than having people of color do all of the antiracist work, we poor Whites need to be the ones who challenge nonpoor Whites during discussions about race when they ask, “What about poor White people?” I have seen too many poor Whites remain silent and let nonpoor Whites do the dirty work of the White hegemonic alliance, but sometimes we poor Whites join them in this semantic move and support more actively the White racial cause. And we do this because we think our interests are being served and to do otherwise, to speak out against the alliance, would be to commit a type of race treason that we seem to be unwilling to do because we fear losing our unearned and immoral benefits, even though the reward would be a more humanizing way of life. We need to break away from this White hegemonic alliance. In short, we need a divorce! (Not to mention, we need to find a healthier relationship!) I am not naïve about how difficult it would be to persuade poor Whites to speak out against the individual and collective racism of nonpoor Whites, take responsibility for their White privilege, and create meaningful, trusting, and powerful antiracist alliances with people of color. But, it is an antiracist strategy that deserves serious consideration.
What About Poor White Students?

The major educational implication of my critique of “What about poor White people?” is that social justice approaches to teaching and researching poor White students need to pay attention to their racialization within the White racial polity and in relation to other racial groups. Absent a curriculum that provides poor White students with an opportunity to unlearn their submission to nonpoor Whites, investment in Whiteness, and learned superiority relative to people of color, the future of poor Whites will most likely resemble their past since they will not be able to forge meaningful and transformative political alliances with people of color. A social justice approach would intervene in this cycle by empowering poor Whites to more forcefully challenge nonpoor Whites. But more importantly, they would first have to acknowledge and be accountable for their relative White privilege and investment in White supremacy. They would have to become solidarity in authentic ways with people of color by taking responsibility for their group privilege and gaining the trust of people of color (Allen, 2002, 2004). With poor Whites in alliance with people of color, the movement against nonpoor Whites’ investment in White supremacy would be powerful and unlike anything seen before in the United States.

Unfortunately, we are far from achieving this vision. The White hegemonic alliance overdetermines the educational experiences of poor White students. Likewise, their schooling covertly, and sometimes overtly, teaches poor Whites to be agents in the perpetuation of White dominance. We should expect schooling to play a key role in reproducing the White hegemonic alliance. Since nonpoor Whites need poor Whites as their racial other, we should not expect most nonpoor Whites to work toward making sure poor Whites get a well funded, transformative, and antiracist education. To keep the alliance alive, poor Whites need to learn political complacency and internalize a sense of inferiority relative to nonpoor Whites. And their schooling facilitates this lesson.

Complacency is taught in a number of ways. Given that nonpoor Whites typically see White Appalachians as culturally corrupt (i.e., “rednecks,” “trailer trash,” and “hillbillies) or biologically damaged (i.e., “inbred”), we should expect most nonpoor White teachers, as well as poor White teachers who act, consciously or not, as supporters of the White hegemonic alliance, to see White Appalachian students from a deficit model. Referring to her research on White Appalachian students in the Midwest, Heilman (2004) reports,

One elementary school principal, known for her support for progressive curriculum and multiculturalism quite unselfconsciously reported, “We have a big group of trailer trash in this school,” when orienting a new group of preservice teachers. Similarly, an urban Indianapolis teacher insidiously confided, “These city hillbilly kids are the real bottom of the barrel, if you know what I mean.” (p. 67)

Since stereotypes about poor White Appalachians abound, it is fair to assume that nonpoor White teachers internalize messages that say that the problems of poor White Appalachians are caused by dysfunctional families, violent neighborhoods, alcoholism, child abuse, teen pregnancy, virulent racism, welfare dependency, and so on.

With a deficit view firmly entrenched, it is hard to imagine that nonpoor White educators see White Appalachian students as possessing particular forms of knowledge, experience, and wisdom that are insightful and valuable. Moreover, it is doubtful that nonpoor White teachers see themselves as members of the group most responsible for creating the negative learning conditions for poor Whites and people of color. We should not expect then that nonpoor White teachers are teaching poor Whites ways of gaining a positive
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sense of self through learning how to challenge the White hegemonic alliance. This would go against the normative role that nonpoor White social actors are taught to play. Instead, we should expect nonpoor Whites to be teaching White Appalachian students as if they are just like all other White people, and we should expect them to chastise White Appalachians for not living up to the model of the “nonpoor White.”

Of course, some White Appalachians, such as myself, will be seen as successful exceptions to the rule and used as examples to put down the others. Without a critical discourse to reveal the myth of the achievement ideology, a good many White Appalachians will experience self-hate and blame themselves or others of their group for their predicament. As a relative of mine once told me, “I tell my kids that if they study hard like Ricky then they will be successful.” The reality is that I did not study hard in high school, mainly because I did not have to. Additionally, I seriously doubt that the quality and quantity of study habits explains why less than 10% of my nearly all White high school class went on to a four-year college. I think a better explanation is that we were taught relative to the norm of nonpoor Whites as the model of humanity and success. We were never engaged in discussions of what it meant to be poor Whites or Appalachian Whites. We were never taught about White privilege or how systemic racism affected people of color. Consequently I am sure that many of my classmates did not critically understand that they were being educated to fill their prescribed role in the White hegemonic alliance.

Despite the educational woes of poor Whites, it would be a mistake to suggest that poor Whites, such as White Appalachians, are in the same social and educational situation as students of color. This is not the case. Although poor White students are racialized, they are not “racial minorities.” Since race operates as a castelike system, White Appalachians can pass into the middle-class, much as I have, in ways that people of color cannot because our bodies are perceived as White. Also, to say that White Appalachians are racial minorities is to grossly underestimate the current horrendous state of systemic and institutional racism in the United States and its consequences for people of color (Smith, 2004). Sometimes White educational scholars use the notion of White Appalachians as a racial minority in order to make the case that their oppression is equal to that of people of color. For example, Heilman (2004) discusses how White Appalachians are prone to joining overt White supremacist organizations. To keep them from joining groups like the KKK, she says that they should learn about processes of marginalization and injustice for various oppressed groups, not just White Appalachians. While I agree that they should learn about other oppressed groups, she goes too far when she says, “This understanding would instead promote solidarity and social action among different marginalized ‘races’” (p. 77). The implication is that White Appalachians are one of the “marginalized races.” While White Appalachians are surely marginalized, they do not constitute a separate race because they are seen as White regardless of their lower status within the White polity. With the exception of a few melungeons (see note 14), I do not know of any White Appalachians who have been asked, “What is your race?” In other words, actual social practice does not suggest that White Appalachians are seen as a separate race, or even a race within a race.

Sometimes, it seems to me that White scholars think that they have to show that poor Whites experience oppression that is close, if not equal, to that which people of color face in order for others to pay attention to their plight. But painting a false or overstated picture of reality can have the opposite effect by demonstrating a lack of accountability for White privilege, creating doubt about whether poor Whites are trustworthy in the minds of antiracist people of color. Ultimately this distances poor Whites from the antiracist imagination. As Smith (2004) states,
The argument for hillbillies-as-an-oppressed-minority-whose-disparagement-exceeds-that-of-other-racial-groups pulls up the drawbridge even further, and guards Appalachian distinctiveness against the possibility that hillbilly stereotypes largely represent the ugly ideology of racism turned against poor and working class whites. (p. 51)

The benefits of being White and Appalachian are highly evident when looking at educational attainment. According to the 2000 Census, White Appalachians have significantly higher graduation rates than Appalachians of color. For White Appalachians, 77.5% have high school diplomas and 17.9% have college degrees. For Black Appalachians, 69.9% have high school diplomas and 12.2% have college degrees. For Hispanic Appalachians, 51.4% have high school diplomas and 13.0% have college graduation degrees (Shaw, DeYoung, & Rademacher, 2004). Assuming U.S. patterns hold for Appalachia, we could further speculate that the economic return for the degrees that Appalachians earn vary by race (and gender), meaning educational attainment disparities have an amplified material effect in the job market that makes the real benefits of White privilege that much greater (Fine, 1991).

I agree with Heilman’s (2004) contention that educational researchers have overlooked the struggles of White Appalachian students. However, we need to be careful about how we explain this omission. Although groups like Blacks and Latinos are now often the object (for better or worse) of educational research, they used to be overlooked, too. The attention given to students of color is a recent historical phenomenon. It is not, as some may believe, a natural state of affairs but rather a contemporary construction that is in large part the result of organized social justice efforts to pressure researchers, educators, and policymakers to pay greater attention to students of color. If the educational struggles of people of color are “noticed” and not “hidden,” it is because they have made themselves noticed, risking the wrath of White supremacy in an attempt to better their schooling experiences. And the risk is real. One could argue that Whites have in fact retaliated against people of color by creating a public discourse that depicts the problems of students of color as the result of their alleged cultural deficits, which in turn leaves White students looking superior.

The point is that if the struggles of poor Whites are hidden then it is due to their situatedness within the White hegemonic alliance. Poor Whites seem unwilling to create an organized social movement to bring to the public’s attention the problems that poor White students face. I think that a major reason that they have not organized is that they do not want to anger nonpoor Whites and risk losing White benefits. Given the current racial climate, the only way that they might be willing to organize is if they claim that “reverse racism” is the reason that poor Whites have been overlooked. In other words, educational scholars’ inattention to poor White groups such as White Appalachians is seen through a White supremacist ideology as a form of discrimination against White people. The reverse racism approach would perpetuate a pro-White politics and thus appease nonpoor Whites, but ultimately nonpoor Whites would undermine any gains for poor Whites that may derive from this strategy because they do not want to lose their White other. A more likely scenario is that groups like White Appalachians will continue with the status quo, meaning that their educational struggles will continue to be overlooked.

Poor Whites’ learned sense of inferiority relative to nonpoor Whites is only half of the story. For the other half, we need to think about the benefits that poor Whites receive for not engaging in an antiracist social movement to change the dehumanizing education that they are offered. Through the hidden curriculum of Whiteness, poor Whites
are taught a sense of superiority relative to people of color. Yet, they do not receive all of the benefits that nonpoor Whites get. Plus, nonpoor Whites often interact negatively with poor Whites. One would think that this would be enough to cause poor Whites to protest. But this has not happened on a broad, organized level. I do not believe that it is a natural characteristic of any group to silently accept mistreatment. There has to be coercion, persuasion, or some combination of the two to create a condition of complicity and complacency. My argument is that nonpoor Whites offer poor Whites an educational concession in order to keep the peace and maintain the White hegemonic alliance. While the education of poor Whites is denigrating, it cannot be so denigrating as to make poor Whites think that they would be better off if they were students of color. Currently, poor Whites do not believe that they are worse off than people of color. Sure, there are poor Whites who will say that they think affirmative action gives people of color an unfair advantage. But my sense is that these same folks do not really believe that they, as a group, are worse off than people of color, as a group. Just try asking a group of poor Whites if they would want to trade places as a racial group (not as individuals) with any other racial group, that is, White people would take on the racial situation of, say, Blacks. I doubt there would be any takers. I have never found any when I ask them this question. To be educated into the White hegemonic alliance, poor White students need to exit schooling believing that although they may have had it bad at least they have had it better than most Blacks and Latinos. And, my guess is that schooling is “successful” at instilling this belief in poor Whites, although an empirical study of this hypothesis is necessary and would be quite interesting.

It is also important for the maintenance of White supremacy that poor Whites leave school believing that their worldviews and knowledge systems are superior to those of people of color (Mills, 1997). Indeed, they must leave believing, at some level of consciousness, that they are better people than people of color. Although, as mentioned above, some White Appalachians feel victimized by affirmative action programs and other forms of so-called “reverse racism,” it would be a mistake to think that their feelings of victimization have a positive correlation to feelings of inferiority relative to people of color. If there were a positive correlation, they would not feel so angry about “reverse racism” because they would have internalized that they belong in a lower status than people of color and taken a more complacent role, as they have relative to nonpoor Whites. Instead, what they are more likely to feel is that they are being cheated out of opportunities that should be rightfully theirs as faithful, superior White people. Anger is more likely to result from this psychosocial condition. Thus, poor Whites are more likely to blame people of color because they perceive people of color as inferior people who will allegedly squander scarce opportunities. Also, poor Whites are less likely to blame nonpoor Whites because they are perceived as a natural ally, even though poor Whites harbor conflicted feelings about nonpoor Whites’ deceptiveness and superiority.

Although White Appalachians and other poor Whites are taught to feel superior to people of color through the hidden curriculum of Whiteness, educating against the White hegemonic alliance means that we need to stop seeing poor Whites as little more than racists in the making. Rather, they need to be seen as racialized subjects situated within both intraracial and interracial hierarchies. It is important to understand and create pedagogy around their racialization so as to maximize their social justice potential. They need to be seen as possible antiracist allies who, with the proper education, can transform their complicity with the White hegemonic alliance so as to not only better their own lot but also to better the lot of those who have even less social power.

We also need to avoid class-based approaches that see race as an empty ideology (Leonardo, 2005) and stop imagining poor Whites primarily, if not solely, as victims of
capitalist exploitation. These class-based approaches do not take into account that White supremacy itself is an opportunity structure that Whites are invested in and are not going to give up easily because there are serious psychological and material benefits to being White, even to being a poor White. Class-based approaches say nothing about how the White hegemonic alliance operates through social institutions, such as schools, to maintain the U.S. racial order.

In “Walking the Dance: Teaching and Cross-Cultural Encounter,” Gilbert Valadez (2004), a self-identified gay Latino, offers a powerful narrative about how he taught White Appalachians in a teacher education course. He writes candidly about how he had internalized the stereotype of the “racist hillbilly.” The positive interactions he had with the students, which were partly fostered through the transformative pedagogy he brought to the classroom, changed his perception of White Appalachians. Reflecting upon the course, he says,

I gained many insights into the lives of White Appalachians. Indeed, many of them live with injustice, prejudice, poverty, and pain. As time passed, the differences between us mattered less than did the process of coming to mutual understandings. Mostly, my students were able to conceptualize the notions of white identity and white privilege. They also were more able to articulate central issues surrounding inequity and inequality in education. (p. 163)

Valadez taught these students as people who occupy an in-between social status, that is, as both oppressor and oppressed. As White Appalachians, they occupied a lower social status than nonpoor Whites. Many had experienced material hardship and psychological trauma that needed to be shared, contextualized, and debated. They also occupied a higher social status than people of color. Valadez engaged them in critical dialogues about their White privilege and asked them to think about ways in which they contributed to a system of White racism. In other words, he did not see them solely as racist oppressors or solely as economic victims. Instead, what he offered was a humanizing pedagogy that reflected some of the complex realities of their social location.

That said, I do have a criticism of his approach. It can leave poor Whites with the misunderstanding that their oppressor position as Whites and their oppressed position as poor Whites are unrelated, or at least, vaguely related. If they are taught to believe that their oppression as poor Whites is due to their class status, as seemed to be the case in Valadez’s classroom, then they have a less likely chance of understanding how their alliance with nonpoor Whites oppresses and dehumanizes not only people of color but also themselves. They may still believe that their membership in the White race is a natural and permanent condition. Poor White students need to learn about how the White hegemonic alliance functions, what their role in it has been, and what they can do to end it.

A critical race pedagogy of the White hegemonic alliance must be directly and explicitly taught. Indirect attempts to teach about it are likely to fail. Poor Whites need to see how nonpoor Whites are not just the main beneficiaries of a capitalist system but also of a White supremacist system. Although they certainly need to learn how to unlearn their investment in White domination, they also need to be able to differentiate between how they participate in a White supremacist system versus how nonpoor Whites participate in a White supremacist system. They need to talk with one another about how to break away from nonpoor Whites and how to form solidarity relations with people of color. They need to figure out how to muster the courage to confront both the racism and classism of nonpoor Whites. Their loyalty to Whiteness is a dehumanizing condition that requires intervention. As Garvey and Ignatiev (1997) say, “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to
humanity.” A critical race pedagogy of the White hegemonic alliance should help poor Whites gain their humanity by learning how to be disloyal to the White race and loyal to the antiracist project, and thus, to humanity itself. In short, I am saying that poor Whites should be taught to be effective race traitors.

Conclusion

Nowadays, I react differently when a nonpoor White person asks, “What about poor White people?” I spend a lot of time talking about the workings of the White hegemonic alliance, and I believe that I have become a more effective antiracist educator as a result. I am now able to disarm “What about poor White people?” and turn it into a teachable moment. My hope is that the unveiling of the White hegemonic alliance becomes a focus of the field of social justice education. For social justice education to play an effective role in abolishing White supremacy, it needs to be able to transform poor Whites into race traitors. It needs to be bold enough to seek to dismantle the White race. Some may argue that we can retain the races so long as there are no power differences between them. But as I have argued, races are politically constructed groups. The White race cannot be salvaged because the real problem is how it is constructed. The only real way to abolish White supremacy is to dismantle the coalition of subgroups that comprise the White race. Although Whites’ investment in White power and privilege is a serious concern that deserves the attention of social justice educators, the deeper issue is Whites’ investment in the White hegemonic alliance.

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Notes

1. Racism is an ideology that works to perpetuate a social system of racial domination, which in the United States means domination by those raced as White (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). The racialized social system endemic to the United States is White supremacy. Although White people are most responsible for White supremacy, people of color may also support White supremacy through internalized racism (i.e., a learned sense of inferiority about one’s own racial identity or racial group) and interethnic racism (i.e., a learned sense of superiority relative to another non-White race). The term antiracist refers to those efforts that seek to undo White supremacy by transforming White racism, internalized racism, and interethnic racism.

2. It would take a whole chapter to sort through the debates around how to define “poor” and “nonpoor” Whites, not to mention my reasons for using “poor” and “nonpoor” versus “working class,” “middle class,” and “upper class.” Instead, I offer here a brief description of my position. By using “nonpoor” in a U.S. context, I am primarily referring to upper-, middle-, and even some working class Whites who were raised in nonpoor families. A key point is that not all working class Whites are poor, or are imagined as poor. One reason that I am using the term poor is that it is the word contained in the phrase that I am critiquing. I think that the use of the term poor is purposeful. My assumption is that when people use the phrase “What about poor White people?” they are referring to all of those Whites who are poor and not necessarily all of those who are working class. So, the term poor for me is more contextually precise, even though it may be difficult, if not impossible, to define an exact dividing line between who is or is not poor. That said, it is important not to be paralyzed by debates over the imprecision of the term. My preference is to proceed with a definition that
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may in fact be dichotomous and incomplete, but it at least provides a starting point to begin the larger discussion of the relations between poor and nonpoor Whites that perpetuate White supremacy. Moving to a working definition, nonpoor White families have little or no experience with multigenerational poverty. They or their families have wealth levels closer to the norm for most Whites. The more difficult subgroups to categorize are White immigrant families, such as those from the former Soviet Union, who might experience a lack of wealth and income for the first generation or two, but ultimately they may become mostly nonpoor as they assimilate into a U.S. construct of Whiteness, as was the case previously for many Jews, Irish, and Slavs. In other words, for some White immigrants we do not yet have any evidence that their condition persists over time, meaning that they may or may not experience on a group level a condition of multigenerational poverty, making it unclear whether they fit the definition of nonpoor. Conversely, “poor” Whites are those people who come from families and communities that have experienced entrenched, multigenerational poverty, such as that experienced by many White Appalachians.

3. Bonilla-Silva (2003) describes semantic moves as the “linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies,” or more simply as the “race talk,” of a racial ideology. Semantic moves are stylistic maneuvers used during dialogical moments of ideological conflict in an attempt to gain legitimacy for the racial ideology supported by the speaker. They are ideological performances that, if considered effective, are repeated time and time again by multiple actors as they are passed from one ideological subscriber to another.

4. “Intraracial” refers to social phenomena that occur between individuals or subgroups within a particular race whereas “interracial” refers to social phenomena that occur between different racial groups or between individuals of different racial groups.

5. “Political organization” refers to the way in which power and status are created within a social identity group, in this case the White race. Through a complex web of conflicts and alliances between subgroups, the whole group achieves cohesion and social power, even as power and status are hierarchically arranged on an internal (or in this case, intraracial) level.

6. “Hegemonic” is an adjective used to describe those phenomena that contribute to a system of hegemony. Allen (2002) defines hegemony as “a social condition in which relationships of domination and subordination are not overtly imposed from above, but are part of consensual cultural and institutional practices of both the dominant and the subordinate” (p. 106). A hegemonic alliance is a political bond formed between dominant and subordinate groups. Consciously or not, the subordinate group participates in the perpetuation of its own lower status by going along with beliefs and behaviors that maintain the hegemonic system and thus the higher status of the dominant group. Hegemony works more on the level of ideological control than repressive force.

7. “Social justice” refers to a societal condition that is egalitarian and humanizing because it is free from oppressive structures such as White supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and capitalism. Also, the term implies that such a society does not currently exist and efforts must be made to work toward a socially just society.

8. I think of myself as both an insider and outsider to the White Appalachian group. I feel like an outsider in that I did not grow up in Appalachia. Instead, I grew up in a small town in northern Indiana called Medaryville. My father is from Appalachia, and like many others his family moved to Indiana during the mid-1900s to look for better job opportunities. I also have come to feel like an insider as I learn more and more about how my Appalachian heritage has shaped my views and experiences. In the town where I am from, there were many families that had moved there from Appalachia. The non-Appalachian kids looked down on us because we spoke differently and did not have much money. They called us the “Grits.”


10. Whereas White supremacy is a social system that perpetuates White domination, Whiteness is a social identity that shapes and is shaped by White supremacy. As a social identity, Whiteness is a form of individual and collective self-presentation. It is the meaning made from the
experience of being a White person and a member of a White group as well as a particular way of being in the world. Like Blackness or Asianness, Whiteness is not a monolithic form of expression and being, though definite patterns of subjectivity and behavior exist. Many Whites are ashamed of their Whiteness because they have learned to be defensive or guilty about White privilege. They have not yet learned how to model their Whiteness after antiracist Whites who offer a more socially and politically positive way of being White in a White supremacist system (Helms, 1993; Tatum, 2003), though this is an intermediate stage since, as I argue in this chapter, the ultimate goal is to disband the White race altogether.

11. From recent work in sociology we know that race is critical for understanding wealth and class in the United States since the average White household has nearly ten times the net financial assets as the average Black household (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). In fact, even working-class Whites have, on average, more accumulated wealth than middle-class Blacks (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). In other words, terms like working class are deceptive in that they more accurately signify income, job status, and educational attainment rather than the more crucial aspect of wealth. Thus, there are large wealth gaps between, say, the White working class and the Black working class that get erased when the two are referred to as being of the same “class.”

12. I think phrases like “never be White enough,” “not quite White,” “not fully White,” or “not truly White” are problematic in that they do not make it clear that poor Whites are in fact Whites who receive White benefits. Using phrases that depict their White status as only partial can create a slippery slope to where they are constructed by some as non-White since they are “not fully White.” But by saying “White but not quite,” as I am suggesting, their status as Whites is indexed from the beginning because “White” is the first word. Then “but not quite” references their lower social status within the White group. There is also the problem of confusion with terminology used to describe individuals or groups of color who really do lie on the borderline between being seen as White or as a person of color (e.g., light-skinned Latinos or some multiracials with White heritage). Some may refer to these folks as “not quite White” or “not fully White” because they are perceived as having non-European heritage or features that negate their claim to Whiteness.

13. Alleged genetic inferiority is depicted differently for poor Whites and people of color. For poor Whites, their genetic inferiority is depicted as the result of “good genes gone bad” due to inbreeding and isolation in the mountains. In other words, this type of racist logic assumes that their genetic stock was originally good because it was European but dysfunction and corruption ruined it. For people of color, their genetic makeup is depicted as inherently inferior because they have been perceived historically by Whites as less evolved subpersons. In other words, their genetic makeup was never good, or so the racist “logic” goes.

14. Blacks, Indigenous peoples, Hispanics/Latinos, and mixed-race or “melungeon” folks also inhabit Appalachia. Overall, people of color makeup 11.2% of the Appalachian population (Hayden, 2004). Although race relations in Appalachia have not received enough academic attention, the recent interest in interracialism promises to make race relations a more vital area of interest in Appalachian Studies. The history of race mixture in Appalachia is not widely known. The mixed-race people of Appalachia are often referred to as “melungeons.” Melungeons typically have Black, Indigenous, and European ancestry. Many melungeons are accepted as White, although those with darker pigmentation are more likely to be subject to racist ridicule and seen as having a lower status. My own family, on my father’s side, is melungeon. Our ancestry includes people who were African, Indigenous, and European. With a couple of exceptions, most of us look White, identify as White, and are treated as White. The existence of melungeons calls into question notions of White racial purity in Appalachia. Also, it would be interesting to look into how Whiteness became constructed in Appalachia given the historical presence of race mixture.

15. “Solidary” is a state of being in solidarity with others. Those who are solidary share common political interests and goals and take part in communal responsibilities.

16. The concept of “reverse racism” against Whites is highly problematic since it is not supported by data (James, 1995).
References


