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What *Hillbilly Elegy* Reveals about Race in 21st Century America

Lisa R. Pruitt

My initial response to the publication of *Hillbilly Elegy* and the media hubbub that ensued was something akin to pride.¹ I was pleased that so many readers were engaged by a tale of my people, a community so alien to the milieu in which I now live and work. Like Vance, I'm from hillbilly stock, albeit the Ozarks rather than Appalachia. Reading the early chapters, I laughed out loud — and sometimes cried — at the antics of Vance's grandparents, not least because they reminded me of my childhood and extended, working-class family back in Arkansas. Vance's recollections elicited vivid and poignant memories for me, just as Joe Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (2007) and Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997) had in prior decades.

I appreciated Vance's attention not only to place and culture, but to class and some of the cognitive and emotional complications of class migration. I'm a first generation college graduate, too, and elite academic settings and posh law firms have taken some getting used to. Vance's journey to an intellectual understanding of his family instability and his experience grappling with the resulting demons were familiar territory for me. In short, I empathize with Vance on many fronts.

Yet as I read deeper into *Hillbilly Elegy*, my early enthusiasm for it was seriously dampened by Vance's use of what was ostensibly a memoir to support ill-informed policy prescriptions. Once I got to the part where Vance harshly judges the food stamp recipients he observed while bagging groceries as a high school student, I was annoyed by his highly selective dalliances into the social sciences and public policy. A few more chapters in, Vance was

advocating against the regulation of payday lenders, and I began to realize that *Hillbilly Elegy* was a net loss for my people.

Indeed, because so many readers have made Vance authoritative vis-à-vis the white working class, I have come to grips with the fact that *Hillbilly Elegy* represents a regression in our understanding of white socioeconomic disadvantage. And that's saying a lot given the decades — even centuries — of disdain for those often referred to as “white trash.”² The attention that *Hillbilly Elegy* draws to low-income, low-education whites does not foster understanding or empathy for those Vance left behind; rather, it cultivates judgment.

Vance invites us not to see the white working class in their full complexity but instead to cast all the blame on them for their often dire circumstances. Never mind neoliberal trade policies and the decimation of unions; never mind the rise of Wal-Mart and contingent employment; never mind crummy public education and spatial inequalities with respect to a wide range of services and infrastructure. Never mind the demise of the safety net. According to Vance, “hillbillies” just need to pull themselves together, keep their families intact, go to church, work a little harder, and stop blaming the government for their woes.

In spite of this message—or perhaps because of it—*Hillbilly Elegy* has made J.D. Vance a very rich and famous man. Not only has the book spent dozens of weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list, Vance has leveraged its commercial success into a gig as a CNN commentator. National media treat him like a celebrity, providing updates on his career and family.³ The Brookings Institute even gave Vance a quasi-academic platform in late 2017, putting him into conversation with eminent Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson to opine about “race, class, and culture.”⁴

How is it that an unassuming and not especially artful memoir of white class migration—by definition anecdotal—has been elevated to the status of authoritative text? How has Vance parlayed three short decades of life into a small fortune and a career as America’s “favorite white trash-splainer,”⁵ “the voice of the Rust Belt,”⁶ and “the Ta-Nehisi Coates, if you will, of White Lives Matter”?⁷ How did Vance go from being just another “hillbilly” (albeit one with an Ivy League degree, two generations removed from the hills) to the man of the hour, his popularity compared to that of a boy band?⁸ How did this contemporary Horatio Alger come to be fodder for a forthcoming Ron Howard film?

The sales figures for *Hillbilly Elegy* suggest a wide audience. That the book has been greeted with near universal acclaim in elite media outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* suggests that many highly educated folks are among its readers,⁹ as does the fact that Bloomberg News and *The Economist* listed it as one of the most important books of the year.¹⁰ One commentator called the book “all the rage in DC” in the run up to the 2016 election¹¹ and Frank Rich has referred to the book’s “NPR-ish” readership,¹² implying that elected officials, policy makers, the professional class and the professoriate dominate Vance’s fawning audience. *Hillbilly Elegy* has become a must-read among those often referred to as the chattering classes, and many college campuses have been on Vance’s speaking circuit. Tickets to hear him at my institution, UC Davis, ranged in price from \$25 to \$55. Not a bad day’s work for a former hillbilly.

In this essay, I argue that elites and our nation more broadly have embraced *Hillbilly Elegy* and given Vance a national platform because, on some level, he confirms a story elites—and arguably Americans more broadly—tell ourselves, a story we want to believe is true. As Vance acknowledges, he is the American Dream personified. His tale—as he curates it—is one

of industry and (apparent) meritocracy, a tale that affirms our nation's core values and aspirations.

What Vance does not talk about is *his* privilege—male, white-ish (for I acknowledge that Appalachians are often at the fringe of whiteness¹³ and I return to this issue below) and urbanish—or at least not rural. He also does not talk about the role of the state as a positive force that facilitated his upward trajectory to the Ivy League and beyond. What also goes unacknowledged is that Vance is actually an outlier, the exception to the rule.¹⁴ Upward mobility in the United States has been declining for decades and, indeed, many previously “working class” by some standard or definition (demarcations of socioeconomic class categories are notoriously squishy) are now facing downward mobility,¹⁵ along with attendant despair.¹⁶ Vance is a good role model for the average “hillbilly” child, yes, but the data trends suggest that only the very rare one will be able to achieve a fraction of what Vance has. Further, those children's outcomes will be shaped not only by the presence or absence of lay-about parents and/or inspiring teachers; they will be shaped by the political economy of regions and of the nation, and by the opportunity structures engineered by government.

While the widespread fascination with Vance and his story in national public discourse—as well as the staying power of both—is a function of many phenomena, I highlight here three that shed light on race, race relations, and racial politics in 21st century America. First, the chattering classes “shock and awe” response to *Hillbilly Elegy*—(white) people actually live like that?!?—demonstrates apparent widespread ignorance of white socioeconomic disadvantage and the dysfunction it frequently spawns, a feedback loop which, in recent years, has taken on the character of a death spiral.

One reason for such ignorance is that the public face of poverty in America today is almost exclusively Black or Brown.¹⁷ Only in the aftermath of the 2016 election has the media renewed attention to white socioeconomic disadvantage.¹⁸ Second, the widespread praise of *Hillbilly Elegy* suggests that elites across the political spectrum are willing to make scape-goats of poor whites. Progressive folks (among whom I count myself) would vigorously protest Vance's tough-love stance if he were writing about poor people of color, calling them lazy and criticizing them for "bad choices." Most progressives seem unfazed, however, that Vance's assessments and policy proposals throw low-income whites under the proverbial bus. Third, and closely related to the second revelation about race, Vance's tale confirms the way in which white elites, including those on the left, see themselves—as products of a meritocracy which levels the playing field for all, or at least for those with white skin. *Hillbilly Elegy* also confirms the way elite and middle class whites typically see low-income, low education whites (when we see them): as defilements of whiteness.

I will return to expand on these points in the pages that follow. First, however, I provide an overview of what Vance says expressly about race, as well as what he arguably implies about it. I then illustrate how so many among the chattering classes have not only consumed Vance's story but also acquiesced uncritically to his regressive policy prescriptions.

What J.D. Vance Says—and Doesn't Say—about Race

For the most part, Vance does not highlight race in relation to his story or his politics. Some direct mentions of race in *Hillbilly Elegy* seem incidental, offered in passing. For example, at one point he expresses optimism about the prospects of cross-racial cooperation based on his

experience as a Marine, “where I saw that men and women of different social classes and races could work as a team and bond like family” (175).

Scratch the surface, however, and you find a book that is very much about race. First and foremost, Vance is clearly writing about white people—in particular a low-education, socially and economically precarious subset of whites. But Vance’s choice of the word “hillbilly”—the term he repeats frequently as shorthand for his “people,” including those who moved out of the hills, to metropolitan areas, a generation or two earlier—downplays race. “Hillbilly” gives whiteness a lower profile, though Vance is, in fact, talking about those many would refer to as “white working class,” if not the more pejorative, even damning moniker, “white trash”.¹⁹ Vance’s choice of “hillbilly” is therefore an apparent act of identity entrepreneurship,²⁰ not least because it was his grandparents who grew up in the hills of rural Kentucky, not Vance.

Reflecting the common practice of white default or transparency²¹ and in the fashion of Appalachian Studies, Vance elects merely to imply race.²² Even though that race is “white,” the use of the “hillbilly” label permits Vance to suggest a downtrodden minority.²³ This rhetorical maneuver downplays the white privilege enjoyed by those about whom he writes. Indeed, this is surely a core point of the book, and it is consistent with one of Vance’s few explicit mentions of race and his only mention of white privilege, which comes in the book’s preface:

There is an ethnic component lurking in the background of my story. In our race-conscious society, our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone’s skin— “black people,” “Asians,” “white privilege.” Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition—their ancestors were day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that, and machinists and mill workers during more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family (3).

Vance thus acknowledges the concept of “white privilege,” though it is unclear whether he credits its potency generally, in the manner associated with liberal elites and critical race theory.²⁴ What *is* clear is Vance’s quick dissociation of himself (or at least his hardscrabble upbringing -- he might acknowledge that now, post-Yale Law School, he enjoys at least some modicum of white privilege) from that which is arguably most privileged about “whiteness”: money, culture, status.²⁵ This dissociation is accomplished by virtue of cultural or “ethnic” references, e.g., the hillbilly link to the Scots-Irish,²⁶ but also to class. Indeed, it is consistent with Matt Wray’s understanding of white trash as “not quite white”:

The idea that *whiteness* is “about race” is simply not adequate to account for the case of *poor white trash*, a boundary term that speaks equivocally and ambivalently to the question of belonging and membership in the category *white*, and one that mobilizes a wide array of social differences to do so.²⁷

Oddly, this rhetorical diminution of his white privilege—a downplaying of the white-*skin* part—does not appear to have put off progressive readers.²⁸ Perhaps they did not notice it amidst the book’s memoir content because the tendency of progressive elites is to treat white skin as virtually omnipotent.²⁹ Critical race scholars in particular are prone to elevate the power of white skin and—as a complement to that elevation—diminish the significance of class disadvantage.³⁰ In this context, “class” signals “white working class” because African Americans and the Latinx community are presumptively “working class,” their socioeconomic disadvantage conflated with their racial status.³¹

Whether called “hillbilly,” “rednecks,” “crackers,” or “white trash,” Vance describes and theorizes about a group that elicits nearly uniform derision among elites, and even among the middle class on both the left and the right.³² Academics have observed, for example, that “faculty who would never utter a racial slur will casually refer to ‘trailer trash’ or ‘white trash’.”³³

Charles Blow, the *New York Times* columnist, summarized in 2010 the “way the left likes to see

the right: hollow, dim and mean.”³⁴ Blow made this comment in relation to the media obsession with Sarah Palin, who touted “Joe the Plumber,” a denizen of “Main Street,” an icon of the white working class. In the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton referred to the “deplorables” supporting Trump, though it was not clear that her reference was to low-status whites. Nevertheless, the suggestion was that these deplorables—whoever they were—were racist and homophobic, the characteristics we attribute to the white working class in the national imaginary.

George Packer, author of *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, has opined more recently on the paradox implicit in the term, “white working class,” as well as on the shifting, increasingly derogatory meaning of “working class”:

‘White working class’ mixes race and class into a volatile compound, privilege and disadvantage crammed into a single phrase.

‘Working class,’ meanwhile, has become a euphemism. It once suggested productivity and sturdiness. Now it means downwardly mobile, poor, even pathological. A significant part of the W.W.C. has succumbed to the ills that used to be associated with the black urban “underclass”: intergenerational poverty, welfare, debt, bankruptcy, out-of-wedlock births, trash entertainment, addiction, jail, social distrust, political cynicism, bad health, unhappiness, early death.³⁵

Though his shorthand for those about whom he writes is “hillbilly,” Vance also deploys the phrase “white working class” as an apparent synonym. One of those mentions comes in a discussion of political allegiances:

The white working class began to turn to Richard Nixon because of a perception that, as one man put it, government was ‘payin’ people who are on welfare today doin’ nothin’! They’re laughin’ at our society! And we’re all hardworkin’ people and we’re getting’ laughed at for our workin’ every day! (140)

The absence of an explicitly racialized “other” from this passage—the Black “welfare queen”—will not surprise progressives, who are quick to see “dog-whistle” references to race in any mention of welfare.³⁶ What progressives are less familiar with—and when they are familiar with it, they are resistant to—is the fact that many middle-to-low income whites are equally offended

by *all* who do not work, whatever their color.³⁷ Resentment toward those receiving public benefits is as likely to be directed at whites as at any other racial group—especially in overwhelmingly white communities like Middletown, Ohio, where the 2000 population was measured as 87 percent white.³⁸

Indeed, when struggling whites who are working observe first hand those who are not working—as opposed to merely imagining them based on a stereotype like the racialized welfare queen—the resentment is more likely directed at the offending “mooch” in front of one’s face than at the distant one. Indeed, this first-hand observation appears to be what annoyed Vance and what animates his conservative position on public benefits. Recall what Vance observed as a high school student bagging groceries in Middletown: food stamp recipients making bad food choices (“a lot of canned and frozen food”) compared to their more affluent—and in Vance’s self-described “amateur sociologist” assessment—hard-working counterparts, whose carts were “piled high with fresh produce” (all quotations from 138). One must wonder if Vance is aware that canned and frozen food is far less expensive than fresh produce and can be stored longer; it is also more easily and quickly prepared by working parents and the children they must often leave home alone.

Except for his frequent use of “white” to modify “working class” (about 50 times throughout the book), Vance writes as if race is not relevant to his analysis. He also downplays race in discussing why “his people”—hillbillies—tend not to like Barack Obama. Vance writes:

Many of my new friends blame racism for this perception of the president. But the president feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both. He is brilliant, wealthy, and speaks like a constitutional law professor—which, of course, he is. Nothing about him bears any resemblance to the people I admired growing up: His accent—clean, perfect, neutral—is foreign; his credentials are so impressive that they’re frightening; he made his life in Chicago,

a dense metropolis; and he conducts himself with a confidence that comes from knowing that the modern American meritocracy was built for him. Of course, Obama overcame adversity in his own right—adversity familiar to many of us—but that was long before any of us knew him.

President Obama came on the scene right as so many people in my community began to believe that the modern American meritocracy was not built for *them* (191).

In this passage, Vance seeks to diminish the significance of President Obama's Blackness in the white working class response to him. Vance presents that response as stemming as much or more from class differences as from racial ones, and I agree with Vance on this matter—up to a point. In the case of Obama—who is both Black and projects an upper class polish—working class white resentment is not all about race, as evinced by the many working class whites who voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012.³⁹ Bill Clinton could turn on his working class boy from Arkansas and George W Bush could feign “common man” ways if not roots, thus appealing to rural and working class whites because they were white and because of classed affectation. This was not an option available to Obama, whose Black skin made it difficult—if not impossible—to play the everyman card like his predecessors did, in spite of Obama's working-class upbringing.

But Vance notes that his “new friends” — presumably those he met at Yale Law School and since in the elite milieu where he now abides — are quick to assume the racism of working class whites. This is consistent not only with post-election 2016 thinking about the white working class, it has also long been a presumption about them. Indeed, white elites project racism onto the white working class.⁴⁰

Vance's point is nevertheless an important one: many working-class whites' resent the professional/managerial class—arguably an inferiority complex manifest as anger.⁴¹ This helps explain why many dislike Obama. Animus toward him is not solely (or, for some, perhaps even

primarily) about racism,⁴² just as animus toward Hillary Clinton is not solely about sexism.

Recall the fondness of many working class white voters in 2008 for another female candidate, Sarah Palin.⁴³ Class matters—a point often lost in the left’s understanding of politics in 21st century America.

Even though Vance does not express them as such, two of his messages about race might be summarized thusly: White people don’t equally enjoy the fruits of “white skin” or whiteness more generally, and not every bad thing that happens to a Black person is entirely racially motivated. I agree with these points, and they find some support in recent scholarship.⁴⁴ Camille Gear Rich, for example, has admonished:

[W]hen scholars talk about white privilege in the abstract, without discussing the host of competing identity variables that complicate white privilege, they risk increasing the salience of whiteness for less race-identified whites in a context that gives whites an incentive to cling to a white identity.⁴⁵

Fischer and Mattson observe that the socioeconomic status into which one is born is a better predictor than a child’s race of that child’s future. But the critical race community and progressive elites generally have not been receptive to scholars like these who would add nuance to America’s racial politics by calling attention to the role of class more specifically, to the potency of socioeconomic disadvantage as it afflicts whites.⁴⁶ Neither race alone nor class alone explains everything.

Two White Working Classes

Vance engages another concept that explains a great deal about what is happening amongst those whom outsiders see as a monolithic white working class. Specifically, he draws a line between two white working classes. On the one side of the line are the socially flawed and uncouth

but essentially virtuous folks like his grandparents. On the other are Vance's mother and, by his account, many of Vance's generation who have succumbed to various social ills, including familial instability, laziness and drug abuse. Vance depicts the latter as hapless at best, exemplars of sloth and dysfunction at worst.

Of the two white working classes, Vance writes:

Not all of the white working class struggles. I knew even as a child that there were two separate sets of mores and social pressures. My grandparents embodied one type: old-fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hardworking. My mother and, increasingly, the entire neighborhood embodied another: consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful.⁴⁷

There were (and remain) many who lived by my grandparents' code. Sometimes you saw it in the subtlest ways: the old neighbor who diligently tended her garden even as her neighbors let their homes rot from the inside out; the young woman who grew up with my mom, who returned to the neighborhood every day to help her mother navigate old age. I say this not to romanticize my grandparents' way of life—which, as I've observed, was rife with problems—but to note that many in our community may have struggled but did so successfully. There are many intact families, many dinners shared in peaceful homes, many children studying hard and believing they'll claim their own American Dream. Many of my friends have built successful lives and happy families in Middletown or nearby. They are not the problem, and if you believe the statistics, the children of these intact homes have plenty of reason for optimism.

I always straddled those two worlds (148-49).

Although this is a point on which Vance does not reference any academic literature, various scholars have observed and analyzed the dichotomy he articulates between these two subclasses within the white working class.⁴⁸ Indeed, this distinction is another point on which Vance and I agree, though I view the group whom he maligns and distances himself from with greater empathy and compassion.⁴⁹ Whether expressed as the divide between those who work and those who don't,⁵⁰ the "settled" versus the "hard-living",⁵¹ the worthy poor versus the unworthy poor,⁵² or rednecks (or hillbillies) versus white trash,⁵³ the dichotomy is nothing new. Joe Bageant

even mocked the distinction, quipping, “poor is poor, whether you have to work for poverty or not.”⁵⁴

Of course, Vance loves and is deeply loyal to and appreciative of his Mamaw and Papaw, as well as to his relatives who maintain stable family lives and who are, presumably, gainfully employed. But Vance doesn’t tell us much about the work or economic circumstances of that extended family (besides his grandparents), other than to say that one of them has a “beautiful house” (239) and several great uncles worked in construction, one with his own business, in Indiana (14, 29). What Vance repeatedly touts regarding several of his and his parents’ generations are their happy, intact families, what great parents they are. In short, if these extended family members and other “worthy” folks among Vance’s networks are still working class by any definition (that is, they may have migrated upward into the middle class), they are the “settled” variety. Vance himself would be among this group if he retained any claim to the working or even middle class, had he not hit the jackpot of admission to Yale Law School and been catapulted into wealth by virtue of the publishing sensation that is *Hillbilly Elogy*.

Academic literature shows that the “settled” harshly judge the “hard-living” and also that they find it very important to differentiate themselves from such ne’er do wells, lest they be mistaken for hoi polloi themselves. While racial difference might serve to draw this line in integrated communities, among whites, subtle non-racial markers—sometimes economic, but also cultural—take on enormous significance. It is not surprising, then, that Vance is so harshly judgmental of those among whom he was raised, those who—like his mother and some of his Middletown neighbors and peers—lead disorderly, precarious lives. After all, as Bourdieu points out, “Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against that which is closest, which represents the greatest threat.”⁵⁵

Vance's description of two white working classes resonates with me as both accurate and socially and politically significant. But I strongly disagree with his prescription for what ails the "hard living." I am not opposed to hard work, intact families or participation in faith communities. In fact I gladly and gratefully partake in all three. I do not, however, see these as the miraculous tonic that Vance does. We increasingly understand that phenomena such as the opioid and meth epidemics hit rural and working class communities first and hardest because these communities' economies had already been devastated.⁵⁶ We are beginning to see the "deaths of despair" phenomenon (high rates of suicide and overdose deaths) to be a predictable result of the downward mobility that has resulted from globalization and the neoliberal turn.⁵⁷ Intact families won't get us out of this mess any more than Narcan will.⁵⁸ People need economic opportunity.

Vance's response to the devastation he saw in his hometown and the region is thus to be expected, not least because he has safely eluded its clutches. As one who works hard, is "settled," worthy, and yet still claims the hillbilly mantle, he wishes to clearly distinguish himself from those who represent the other side of each of the dichotomies: lazy, hard-living, unworthy, "white trash." Yes, his Yale Law degree and elite employment should now do this differentiating for him, and presumably they do, for the most part.⁵⁹ Perhaps Vance documents what he does in *Hillbilly Elegy* not because he needs to do the differentiating so critical to low-status whites. Instead, perhaps he has written it to meet his own emotional needs, to distance himself from his childhood, because he is looking for peace of mind on several fronts. Maybe he wrote it to launch a political career or just to make some money.

Whatever Vance's motivation for writing his memoir and grappling with this divide within the white working class, it is important to bear in mind that the significance of this admittedly broad and fuzzy line between two groups of low-status whites can hardly be

overstated. Yet it is a distinction so little known or understood by elites who look at all of Middletown, the Rust Belt or—in the aftermath of the 2016 election—all of Trumplandia, and paint the whole lot with the broad brush of unworthy whites, even “white trash.” Vance’s stance and that of the vast majority of his readers is consistent with the responses Matt Wray, a long-time scholar of low-status whites, tells us have always been associated with “white trash”: “moral outrage, disgust, anger, contempt, and fear”.⁶⁰ Indeed, Vance’s assumption that the failure of poor whites is essentially their own damned fault is another way in which *Hillbilly Elegy* serves to confirm the stories we tell ourselves, stories that implicate race as much as they do class—because whites “have race,” too.⁶¹ Such narratives affirm our desire to believe in a just world,⁶² one where people get that they deserve, where they reap what they sow.

Suspending Our Critical Faculties

As noted at the outset, Vance’s message is a conservative one, as evinced most notably in his harsh judgment of the low-education, low-income whites among whom he grew up. Vance places the responsibility for poor and working class whites’ failures—including their downward mobility—squarely at their own feet. A secondary culprit, though, is the government, for fostering what he views as a “culture” of laziness and dependency. Vance acknowledges the tough knocks people like his grandparents took in relation to globalization, but he generally downplays— even in relation to his beloved Mamaw’s food insecurity in her old age — the structural factors that led to the decline of the Rust Belt and the diminution of worker wages and protections. In short, *Hillbilly Elegy*—in the parlance of 21st century chattering classes—blames

the victims. The problem is that many readers don't see the ways in which the white working class are victims. Many view them only as culprits.⁶³

Given Vance's message, it is easy to see why Vance has become the right's latest poster child for its gospel of personal responsibility. If Vance can rise from family dysfunction in and around down-and-out Appalachia, the American Dream must still be accessible to all—at least to those with adequate grit and determination. Indeed, Vance's essential message is the same as that Kevin Williamson purveyed in much harsher terms in the March, 2016 issue of *National Review*:

The white middle class ... failed themselves.

If you spend time in hardscrabble, white upstate New York, or eastern Kentucky, or my own native West Texas, and you take an honest look at the welfare dependency, the drug and alcohol addiction, the family anarchy—which is to say, the whelping of human children with all the respect and wisdom of a stray dog—you will come to an awful realization.

* * *

Nothing happened to them. There wasn't some awful disaster. There wasn't a war or a famine or a plague or a foreign occupation. Even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little to explain the dysfunction and negligence — and the incomprehensible malice — of poor white America.

* * *

The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs ... The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles.⁶⁴

What Williamson states with unmitigated vitriol and disdain, Vance states in a folksy, aw-shucks way that one reviewer referred to as “tough love,”⁶⁵ another as a “bracing tonic.”⁶⁶ In short, Vance makes Williamson's core message more palatable, in part because of the overall tone of *Hillbilly Elegy* and in part because he is writing about his own people, including some about whom he still cares.

But not only have conservatives touted *Hillbilly Elegy*, so have progressives. The *New York Times* review, for example, called the book a “compassionate, discerning sociological analysis of the white underclass.”⁶⁷ What the reviewer fails to note is that Vance’s compassion is limited to certain members of his family and does not extend to many whom he left behind in the Rust Belt, not even to his mother.

Consistent with the book’s reviewers, the majority of my own highly educated acquaintances have praised *Hillbilly Elegy*. Friends and colleagues have marveled at the book, though I have been less certain whether they were gob-smacked by Vance’s tumultuous, even traumatic childhood or by his awed response to the hallowed halls of Yale Law School where he learned, for example, the utility of a butter knife and that “networking power is like the air we breathe.” (215). *Hillbilly Elegy* introduced many readers to an exotic world they had only imagined, if that.

To be clear, I am not mocking Vance’s “hillbilly” ignorance of these matters. I was simply later than he was to catching on to the importance of networking because I did not attend an elite law school and took a different path into the world of elites. As for table manners, I’m still working on those.

As a related matter, Vance’s depiction of himself as a rube is somewhat undermined by his account of how he chose Yale Law School and how he presented himself in his admissions application. Clearly, Vance understood the import of an elite legal education; by his own account he was willing to go \$200,000 into debt to get one (198). The same could not be said of many would-be class migrants.⁶⁸ Of his application to elite law schools, Vance suggests he used his working-class Appalachian narrative to catch admissions officers’ attention (204). I am not criticizing him for doing so, and I credit Yale Law School for seeing how he represented

diversity.⁶⁹ However, the fact he knew to write about his family story in his application suggests he was more savvy than he often depicts himself. As for his bragging about the ease of his first semester (200) and the suggestion that he basically hopped off the treadmill that would have led him to a Supreme Court clerkship, I assume they evince his insecurity.

On all of these matters, readers seem to have suspended their critical faculties, but where they seem most acutely to have done so regards those working class and impoverished whites Vance left behind in Middletown, throughout the Rust Belt and, in fact, across America. Perhaps because progressives are reading their first contemporary tale of white working class woe (*The Grapes of Wrath* is ancient history after all), they seem especially disinclined to approach it critically. Rather, they appear stunned into deference to Vance's supposed expertise, doled out on the basis of his first-hand observation, offered essentially as anecdote. It is a methodology that the Brookings Institute—citing *Hillbilly Elegy* in a policy paper—referred to as “n=1,” meaning the sample size is “1,” a single individual, Vance himself.⁷⁰ Of course, Vance does not hold his book out as scholarship, but his mere flirtation with scholarly literature and policy and the ways the book has often been received as authoritative do complicate what we are to make of this hybrid text.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's “culture of poverty” theory—articulated regarding inner-city Blacks—fell from favor decades ago.⁷¹ Yet academics and other elites appear to embrace Vance's rehabilitation of the concept vis-à-vis poor whites. Certainly I have heard few reject it, but then I also did not hear elites criticize Kevin Williamson's *National Review* essay. In the sections that follow, I outline how that very racial difference—liberal elites' different attitudes toward poor whites versus poor Blacks—looms large in their response to *Hillbilly Elegy*.

Ignorance of the White Working Class

Coming from hillbilly stock myself, Vance could say little to surprise me about what he calls hillbilly culture. My childhood saw plenty of gun-toting, blue-streak cursing, violence, and other sundry dysfunctions. Vance's is just another story from my 'hood, if you will. For me, then, reader reactions to *Hillbilly Elegy* have been far more interesting than the content of the book itself.

In the rarefied world I now inhabit, it seems very few knew anything of the "hillbilly" world before they read the book. Indeed, my colleagues and friends seemed hardly aware that his world exists beyond some "Rust Belt" abstraction or reality TV caricature, although it has become increasingly familiar (albeit at a safe distance) thanks to the media's "Trump country" tourism following the 2016 election. In my coastal ivory tower, however, Middletown, Ohio, and Breathitt County, Kentucky, remain essentially another planet, their denizens inexplicable aliens. In fact, while Vance's familial circumstances were no doubt traumatizing, his socioeconomic disadvantage was relatively mild in the greater scheme of things. His mother worked as a nurse. He was never homeless. His grandparents maintained two homes after their separation. But elites are generally ignorant of acute socioeconomic disadvantage and therefore not well situated to gauge how dire Vance's childhood was.

Had the narrating classes who have made Vance the toast of the town even a passing familiarity with the milieu from whence he comes and about which he writes, they would not have been so taken with Vance's tale—and they surely would not have been taken in by his policy prescriptions. Were America not so polarized, so geographically segregated along class lines as well as race lines,⁷² *Hillbilly Elegy* would have revealed remarkably little to upper crust readers.

As it happens, though, Vance's story has taken elites by storm, in part because it has taken them by surprise.

To be clear, elites are generally also unfamiliar with the lives of poor non-whites. Nevertheless, white elites are more aware of at least the existence of these communities because poverty and dysfunction are widely depicted as Black and Brown.⁷³ Such communities are centerpieces of left-leaning policy and law reform agendas, and progressives are highly aware of racial discrimination and racial disadvantage. But poor whites have been rendered largely invisible, absent from the national consciousness.⁷⁴ Indeed, “forgotten,” “hidden,” and “invisible” are adjectives used frequently in the wake of the 2016 election to describe rural and/or white working class constituencies.⁷⁵ Hidden from and invisible to whom, we might ask?

We in academia and similarly elite settings may know people inching up the social hierarchy, people who attended non-elite colleges, who now perhaps even have graduate degrees or are trying to position their children for the Ivy League. But how many in the chattering classes know first-hand anyone like J.D. Vance—someone who grew up hardscrabble, perhaps traumatized by an addicted parent—who has made a massive class migration in a single generation?⁷⁶ Further, when people like Vance and I claw our way into privileged social spaces, the pressure to class pass is enormous, meaning others won't always identify us as class migrants.⁷⁷ Alternatively, when we are so identified, the collective embarrassment and stigma around class squelches any explicit recognition or dialogue about it.⁷⁸

In short, elites (white elites, anyway) are at least as insular regarding class as they are regarding race. With respect to race, however, progressives articulate a desire to understand racial difference and racial disadvantage, as well as to ameliorate the latter. Not so with respect to low-income, low-education aspiring class migrants who are white.⁷⁹ Regarding this population, the

liberal presumption that these folks are unenlightened at best, racist at worst, prompts us to keep them at arm's length.⁸⁰

My "ignorance" thesis is supported by the fact that the few progressive reviewers whose musings about *Hillbilly Elegy* are neutral-ish or outright critical fall into one of two categories: they grew up in the region from whence Vance came and/or they are white class migrants themselves.⁸¹ Indeed, the first time I found myself among a critical mass of *Hillbilly Elegy* detractors was at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, a gathering of folks who know a thing or two about rural poverty, structural disadvantage, and spatial inequality. Similarly, Appalachian Studies listserves and conferences have met the book with hostility. These groups are not buying what Vance is selling; they literally know better.

Contempt for the White Working Class

Progressives' widespread ignorance of the lived experiences of white working-class America, somewhat paradoxically, leads to my second argument: white elites are contemptuous of low-education, low-income whites. The left has offered no groundswell of offense at Vance's condemnation of his white Appalachian, Rust Belt and broader American compatriots because of their disdain for this demographic sector, a response that is facilitated by their ignorance. A few have offered a feeble, piecemeal rebuttal at best.⁸²

Progressives would undoubtedly protest the attribution of laziness and "bad choices" to Black and Brown people as reasons for their failures. Liberal elites would express the need for greater cultural understanding of the context in which people of color live, work, and make choices. Progressives ridicule Black conservatives such as Justice Clarence Thomas and Ben

Carson for not seeing themselves as outliers who are the exceptions that prove the rule of structural racism and the persistence of racial animus. Yet left-leaning elites offer no such protestations regarding Vance's presentation of himself as the product of his own industry, nor any renunciation of his attendant disdain for those who have not pulled off such a Houdini-like escape from the stickiness of the working class.

In the same vein, progressives take structural disadvantage very seriously when it afflicts racial minorities and thus manifests as structural or institutional racism.⁸³ But they fail to see similar patterns—or when they do see them, to downplay them—when the victims are white.⁸⁴ This attitude is reflected in an expression oft heard in the academy, “you’re white, you’ll be alright,” or that which is suggested by the sarcastic quip, “white people’s problems.” As I have written elsewhere,

Poverty is not endemic to whiteness and, indeed, is anathema to it. Whites are (supposed to be) invulnerable, autonomous, independent and self-reliant. Because the world loves and embraces whites, it not only expects but also facilitates their success. Whites who are poor thus have only themselves to blame. ... Their shortcomings are thus rendered all the more glaring juxtaposed against the advantage of white skin.⁸⁵

As Matt Wray has observed, these people have white skin but they are not quite white. They do not enjoy the benefits—at least not all of the benefits—of whiteness.

The deaths of despair phenomenon has been widely associated with low-income, low-education whites.⁸⁶ The brother of one such victim focused on whiteness as a factor:

There is an expectation for [white people] to keep it together. People think, ‘Hey, you are white. You are privileged. So why do you have so many problems? Maybe you are the problem. ... There isn’t a lot of space for them to be vulnerable.’⁸⁷

This is the flip side of our conflation of our poverty problem with our racism problem—the presumption that Blacks are poor and poor people are Black.⁸⁸ That conflation has given us

an excuse for being ignorant of white poverty, but it is surely not the only reason that we continue to overlook the phenomenon of white economic distress. A key reason we look past white poverty is because it defiles whiteness, causing us to flinch and avert our gaze.⁸⁹ Recall Packer's deconstruction of the phrase "white working class," quoted above, which in 21st century America has been increasingly conflated with "white trash," with "alienation from the 'founding virtues' of civic life."⁹⁰

This is where Vance's policy-infused memoir comes in. Vance does what most of us—consciously or not—wish to do: he distances himself from white losers. In Vance's case, that requires a distinct rejection of his own mother.

To further illustrate my point, consider for a moment an alternative scenario in which Vance was an African-American man writing about low-income, low-education African Americans who have not shared in his success. Or if Vance were Latina writing about the low-income, low-education slice of the Latinx community from whence she came. In those alternative scenarios, progressives would have met Vance's highly judgmental message with widespread denunciation and criticism. Such a scenario would be tantamount to Barack Obama, in his memoir *Dreams from my Father*, condemning those he worked among as a community organizer in Chicago, even while basking in his own success as the obvious fruits of his own labor. Or imagine Justice Sonia Sotomayor, in her best-selling memoir *My Beloved World*, taking complete credit for her class migration from the Bronx's Puerto Rican-American community to a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, all while saying the Latinx youth and young adults left behind simply lacked the grit and discipline to achieve similarly lofty goals.

Progressives might have read such alternative books, but only to be better equipped to condemn them. They would not have let these accounts persist undisputed, as somehow

authoritative on the character of low-income African Americans or Latino/as. Left-leaning folks would have disputed the implication that the life trajectories of these minority populations are all down to personal responsibility and might well have called out Obama and Sotomayor not only as outliers, but also as race traitors.⁹¹ Not so with Vance and *Hillbilly Elogy*. Instead, liberal elites can feel a bit of an affinity for J.D. Vance, even “like” him, because he has “cleaned up well,” because he aspires to be elite, too, because his Yale Law degree has conferred that status on him. But we have always been suspicious of the white working class, uncouth and presumptively racist as they are.⁹² *Hillbilly Elogy* confirms aspects of this long-standing narrative, and so we fall for it, hook, line and sinker.

The Myth of Meritocracy

An alternative explanation—or perhaps more accurately, a complementary one—for progressives’ embrace of *Hillbilly Elogy* is that liberal elites are not so much clueless about the white working class and/or disdainful of them as they are politically motivated to deny their struggles. Progressive elites may be complicit in not disputing Vance’s tough-love policy prescription for an implicitly unworthy white underclass because to do so would call into question their own merit. In short, to recognize Vance as the exception to the rule of stagnation or downward mobility for socioeconomically disadvantaged whites would reveal “meritocracy” to be the myth that it, in fact, is.⁹³ Needless to say, elites do not want to go there. As long as the American Dream is alive and well—as Vance’s story arguably establishes it to be—elites can (somewhat ironically) also see themselves as products of that dream, that meritocracy, even if they are in fact trust fund babies, born with proverbial silver spoons in their mouths. Never mind

that the American Dream has become a pipe dream for the vast majority of working class whites, just as it is for the vast majority of working class people of color.

This narrative is not undermined by what we know about structural racism, nor about racism's other forms. Progressives see and acknowledge that racial and ethnic minorities are not playing on a level playing field with whites. The left is well aware that the "meritocracy" does not work for people of color, to whom different rules and another reality apply.

Yet progressives resist the potency of class disadvantage for those with white skin. Most academics refuse to see how structural disadvantage, as well as contempt-driven discrimination, can thwart the life prospects and upward mobility of low-status whites.⁹⁴ Just as Vance presents himself as enjoying the fruits of his sheer native ability, hard work, discipline, and grit (oh, and don't forget the dash of good luck), so successful whites wish to see ourselves. In short, even the liberal response to *Hillbilly Elegy*—and not only the conservative one—is confirmation bias at work.

Conclusion

One very poignant vignette in *Hillbilly Elegy* comes in the book's conclusion. Vance holds up 15-year-old Brian, whom Vance is mentoring, as an illustration for what our country—and "hillbillies"—are getting and doing wrong. Vance writes of taking Brian to a fast food restaurant and noticing "little quirks that few others would,"⁹⁵ such as the fact that Brian didn't want to share his milkshake and that the young man

finished his food quickly and then looked nervously from person to person. I could tell that he wanted to ask a question, so I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and asked if he needed anything. 'Y-Yeah,' he started, refusing to make eye contact. And then, almost in a whisper: 'I wonder if I could get a few more

french fries?’ He was hungry. In 2014, in the richest country on earth, he wanted a little extra to eat but felt uncomfortable asking. Lord help us (253).

Vance’s outrage is palpable, and justifiably so. I share that outrage, though I am skeptical that so few would have seen the boy’s “quirks”, e.g., not wanting to share his food. I have often wondered what people who fail to support food programs (e.g., SNAP/food stamps, free and reduced price school lunches) think they are accomplishing by keeping kids hungry. I tend to conclude that this stance is explained by a desire to visit the sins of the parents (perceived or real) on their children. Never mind that hungry kids don’t perform well in school, are more likely to have disciplinary problems and—as a result—further aggravate parental stress. Never mind that when kids go hungry, their potential is thwarted, and their future—as well as that of our nation—is put at risk. Childhood hunger is a pipeline to adult dysfunction.

Yet Vance is apparently among those who see no role for food programs that could alleviate Brian’s hunger. His solution to hungry kids like Brian is for their parents to get and stay married and go to church. His solution is for Brian’s parents not to be white trash. But marriage and church don’t feed the kids, regardless of the kids’ skin color. Why, then, is the left not outraged at Vance’s policy prescription for a hungry white teenager in Appalachian Kentucky? Progressives would be apoplectic if Vance were saying this about a hungry black teenager in Detroit?

In a similar vein, Vance holds up the French as more successful than U.S. parents because children in that country are less likely than U.S. children to be exposed to numerous parental partners (228). At the same time, Vance completely overlooks the more comprehensive French welfare state, one where subsidies and stipends prevent children from being hungry or homeless. These are the very fundamentals of social welfare policy, yet most readers of *Hillbilly*

Elegy seem not to have noticed Vance's sleight of hand, his decision to focus on family structure to the complete neglect of the safety net.

Where is the indignation, the progressive groundswell of outrage by middle- and upper-class whites in response to *Hillbilly Elegy*? The book has elicited no mainstream protestation of support or defense of poor or working-class whites. What we are left with, then, is an apparent endorsement of Vance's condemnation of those who—unlike him, now comfortably ensconced among “the haves”—are unable to escape the place or livelihood that once guaranteed them a decent working-class living, one that allowed them to aspire to middle class standards and stability, but which now leaves them essentially among the working poor.

This acceptance of Vance's message by elite whites across the political spectrum is bad news for people of color as well as for poor whites because it is one more way in which affluent whites prevent cross-racial coalition building among the socioeconomically disadvantaged.⁹⁶ Indeed, it reminds me of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed about white elites during Reconstruction, about the genesis of the Jim Crow era: that elite whites used Jim Crow to segregate the races, to thwart coalition building, to prevent poor whites from seeing what they had in common with blacks.⁹⁷

Elite whites are still driving wedges between poor whites and Blacks, though I would like to think progressive elites are doing so unwittingly. But vilifying poor whites while expressing concern for the interests of poor Blacks only drives deeper that wedge between two constituencies who desperately need to be in coalition with each other. The acceptance of *Hillbilly Elegy*'s politics—a politics inflected with race as much as with class—is yet more evidence of that unfortunate phenomenon.⁹⁸

¹ J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

² Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (Carlton North, Vic: Scribe Publications, 2007); John Hartigan, Jr., "Unpopular Culture: The Case of 'White Trash'," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (May 1997): 316; Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2016); Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

³ Molly Ball, "Hillbilly Elogy Writer Won't Seek Office," *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/09/hillbilly-elygy-writer-wont-see-office/539949/>; James Hohmann, "The Daily 202: Why The Author Of 'Hillbilly Elogy' Is Moving Home To Ohio," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/21/daily-202-why-the-author-of-hillbilly-elygy-is-moving-home-to-ohio/5859da6ee9b69b36fcfeaf48/?utm_term=.1ae48f2230a0.

⁴ Elanor Krause and Richard Reeves, "Rural Dreams: Upward Mobility in America's Countryside," *Brookings*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/rural-dreams-upward-mobility-in-americas-countryside/>.

⁵ Sarah Jones, "J.D. Vance: The False Prophet of Blue America," *New Republic*, November 17, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138717/jd-vance-false-prophet-blue-america>.

⁶ Karen Heller, "'Hillbilly Elogy' Made J.D. Vance the Voice of the Rust Belt. But Does He Want that Job?" *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hillbilly-elygy-made-jd-vance-the-voice-of-the-rust-belt-but-does-he-want-that-job/2017/02/06/fa6cd63c-e882-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html?utm_term=.d848b73b94ab.

⁷ Frank Rich, "No Sympathy for the Hillbilly," *New York Magazine*, March 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/03/frank-rich-no-sympathy-for-the-hillbilly.html>.

⁸ Mark Ferenchik, "J.D. Vance Draws Crowds, and Questions about Political Future," *The Columbus Dispatch*, July 31, 2017, <http://www.dispatch.com/news/20170731/jd-vance-draws-crowds-and-questions-about-political-future>.

⁹ Amanda Erickson, "A Hillbilly's Plea to the White Working Class," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-hillbilys-plea-to-the-white-working-class/2016/08/04/5c1a7a56-51ca-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html?utm_term=.c60ef2dbf4d9; Jennifer Senior, "Review: In 'Hillbilly Elogy,' a Tough Love Analysis of the Poor Who Back Trump," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2jAuPgc>.

¹⁰ William R. Easterly, "Stereotypes Are Poisoning American Politics," *Bloomberg News*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-12-16/stereotypes-are-poisoning-american-politics>; "Why Donald Trump Speaks To So Many Americans," *The Economist*, August 11, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21704774-why-donald-trump-speaks-so-many-americans-promises-promises?fsrc=scn%2Ftw%2Fte%2Fpe%2Fed%2Fpromisespromises>.

¹¹ James Hohmann, "The Daily 202: Want to Know Why Trump's Winning Ohio? Drink A Beer With 'The Deplorables' In Boehner's Old District," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/10/04/daily-202->

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¹² Rich, “No Sympathy for the Hillbilly.”

¹³ Lisa R. Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent? A Book Review of Carbado & Gulati’s *Acting White? Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America*,” *Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 18 (2015): 159; Jill Fraley, “Invisible Histories & the Failure of the Protected Classes,” *Harvard Journal on Racial & Ethnic Justice* 29 (2013): 95.

¹⁴ J.D. Vance and William Julius Wilson, “Race, Class, and Culture: A Conversation with William Julius Wilson and J.D. Vance,” Interview by Camille Busette, *The Brookings Institution*, September 5, 2017. Wilson told Vance that he was outlier—that they were both outliers given where they are now in relation to their childhood circumstances.

¹⁵ Jonathan Davis and Bhash Mazumder, 2017, “The Decline in Intergenerational Mobility After 1980,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago*.

¹⁶ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2017.

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000); Trina Jones, “Race, Economic Class, and Employment Opportunity,” *Journal of Law and Contemporary Problems* 72 (2009): 52; Lisa Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 25 (2016): 289.

¹⁸ Sam Harnett, “What We Talk About When We Talk About the ‘White Working Class’,” *KQED*, November 7, 2017, <https://ww2.kqed.org/news/2017/11/07/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-the-white-working-class/>.

¹⁹ Isenberg, *White Trash*; Lisa Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 25 (2016): 289; Wray, *Not Quite White*.

²⁰ Nancy Leong, “Identity Entrepreneurs,” *California Law Review* 104 (2016): 1333.

²¹ Barbara J. Flagg, “Fashioning a Title VII Remedy for Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking,” *Yale Law Journal* 104, no. 8 (1994): 2009, 2035. Transparency in this context means the “tendency for whiteness to vanish from whites’ self-perception.”

²² Barbara Ellen Smith, “De-Gradations of Whiteness: Appalachia and the Complexities of Race,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10 (2004): 38.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in “Post-Racial” America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-91; Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July & Aug. 1989, 10-12; Camille Gear Rich, “Marginal Whiteness,” *California Law Review* 98 (2010): 1497. Vance and Wilson, “Race, Class, and Culture: A Conversation.” In a September, 2017 conversation on “race, class, and culture” sponsored by the Brookings Institute, Vance made the point that working-class whites resent being told they are the beneficiaries of white privilege. The transcript from that exchange includes the following:

When I talk to folks back home, very conservative people ... What I find no openness about is when somebody who they don't know, and who they think judges them, points at them and says you need to apologize for your white privilege.

²⁵ Ruth Frankenberg defines whiteness as the cumulative way that race shapes the lives of white people. See Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

²⁶ Vance suggests the Scots-Irish are culturally distinct, focusing on their ethnicity rather than their skin-color is similar to Jim Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2004). As Ignatiev has observed in considering “the Irish,” a loss of focus on ethnicity, e.g., the Irish, the Scots-Irish, Italian-Americans, leads to a merging of these distinct ethnic groups into a collective “whiteness,” which serves only to oppress non-whites. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995). See also Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1999).

²⁷ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 139.

²⁸ I say “oddly” here because many progressives seem to revel in the “self-flagellation” implicit in white privilege. See Cedric Johnson, “An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Liberals Who Love Him,” *Jacobin Magazine*, February 2, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-case-for-reparations-bernie-sanders-racism/>.

²⁹ Carbado and Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in “Post-Racial” America*; McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

³⁰ Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent? A Book Review,” 159.

³¹ Harnett, “What We Talk About When We Talk About the ‘White Working Class’”; Jones, “Race, Economic Class, and Employment Opportunity”; Cheryl Harris, “Keynote: Cheryl I. Harris,” filmed September 2014, YouTube video, 1:16:27, Posted [Dec 2016], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRV14I7e0R0>.

³² Elizabeth A. Fay and Michelle M. Tokarczyk, *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (Boston, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Chris Offutt, “In The Hollow,” *Harper's Magazine*, November 2016, <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/11/in-the-hollow-2/>; Lisa R. Pruitt, “The Geography of the Class Culture Wars,” *Seattle University Law Review* 34 (2011): 767; Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³³ Michelle M. Tokarczyk, “Promises to Keep: Working Class Students and Higher Education,” in *What’s Class Got To Do With It? American Society in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Zweig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 166.

³⁴ Charles M. Blow, “She Who Must Not Be Named,” *The New York Times*. December 4, 2010, <https://nyti.ms/2J0bkqW>.

³⁵ George Packer, “Hillary Clinton and the Populist Revolt,” *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/31/hillary-clinton-and-the-populist-revolt>. Joan Williams and Charles Murray have also documented this shift in thinking about the working class. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York, NY: Cox and Murray, 2012); Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*. The *Wall Street Journal* similarly expressed this white working class decline by comparison to the “inner city” in a 2017 feature, but it framed the comparison as rural vs. urban rather than explicitly black vs. white. Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, “Rural America is the

New 'Inner City',” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008>.

³⁶ Ian Haney-Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁷ Alec MacGillis, “Who Turned My Blue State Red?” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2k4RPRt>; Terrence, McCoy, “How Disability Benefits Divided This Rural Community Between Those Who Work and Those Who Don’t,” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2017, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2017/07/21/how-disability-benefits-divided-this-rural-community-between-those-who-work-and-those-who-dont/?utm_term=.99b92e4e68cf; Pruitt, “The Geography of the Class Culture Wars,” 767; Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

³⁸ “QuickFacts: Middletown City, Ohio; United States. Census 2000,” United States Census Bureau, accessed December 4, 2017, <http://censusviewer.com/city/OH/Middletown>.

³⁹ Sean McElwee, Jesse H. Rhodes, Brian F. Schaffner and Bernard L. Fraga, “The Missing Obama Millions,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2Gdurxm> (reporting that 9% of those who voted for Obama in 2012 voted for Trump in 2016).

⁴⁰ Martha Mahoney, “Segregation, Whiteness and Transformation,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143 (1995): 1667.

⁴¹ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972).

⁴² Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent? A Book Review.”

⁴³ Pruitt, “The Geography of the Class Culture Wars.”

⁴⁴ Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent? A Book Review; Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants? On Denial, Discrediting and Disdain (and Toward a Richer Conception of Diversity),” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 31 (2015): 196; Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” 289.

⁴⁵ Rich, “Marginal Whiteness,” 1565.

⁴⁶ Claude Fischer and Greggor Mattson, “Is America Fragmenting?,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 442. To be clear, while Fischer and Mattson’s data point speaks to upward mobility it does not take into account the types of discrimination and abuse experienced by virtue of skin color.

⁴⁷ Vance’s focus on consumerism, isolation, anger and distrust is consistent with the observations of Joe Bageant who a decade earlier used similar adjectives to describe liberals’ view of working class whites: “angry, warmongering bigots.” Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus*, 13. But Bageant’s overall view of working class whites is far more compassionate than Vance’s, and Bageant offers a sympathetic perspective on working class consumerism, an issue Vance returns to with a vengeance in his book’s conclusion. There he sharply criticizes poor families for spending on their children at Christmas, suggesting they should instead buy their children books as gifts, as his wife’s family did. See Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus*.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*; Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*.

⁴⁹ Pruitt, “The Geography of the Class Culture Wars.”

⁵⁰ Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*.

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- ⁵¹ Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*.
- ⁵² Timothy Egan, "Good Poor, Bad Poor," *The New York Times*, Dec. 19, 2013, <https://nyti.ms/2mfqOzX>; Noah D. Zatz, Noah D, "Poverty Unmodified?: Critical Reflections on the Deserving/Undeserving Distinction," *University of California Los Angeles Law Review* 59 (2012): 550.
- ⁵³ Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus*.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, at 9.
- ⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1984), 479.
- ⁵⁶ Shannon M. Monnat, "Deaths of Despair and Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Pennsylvania State University Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education Research Brief*, December 4, 2016.
- ⁵⁷ Case and Deaton, "Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century"; Joel Achenbach and Dan Keating, "A New Divide in American Death," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2016, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/04/10/a-new-divide-in-american-death/?utm_term=.79882723584d.
- ⁵⁸ Monnat, "Deaths of Despair and Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election."
- ⁵⁹ Class migration is, in fact, rife with complications, as Vance's story suggests. Rarely is it easy or seamless. I would be curious to know the extent to which Vance is truly an insider now, among elites, simply because of his Yale Law degree, or whether his familial pedigree means he will in some ways remain a persistent outsider.
- ⁶⁰ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 8.
- ⁶¹ Flagg, "Fashioning a Title VII Remedy for Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking," 2037; Pruitt, "Acting White? Or Acting Affluent?," 159; Pruitt, "Welfare Queens and White Trash," 289.
- ⁶² Melvin Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media, 1980).
- ⁶³ Mahoney, "Segregation, Whiteness and Transformation,"; Lisa R. Pruitt, "The False Choice between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths," *Buffalo Law Review* 63 (2015): 988.
- ⁶⁴ Kevin D. Williamson, "The Father-Führer," *National Review*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/432569/father-f-hrer>. Although Williamson refers to the "white middle class," the milieu he describes seems more consistent with what Vance and others call the white working class.
- ⁶⁵ Senior, "Review: In 'Hillbilly Elegy,' a Tough Love Analysis."
- ⁶⁶ The Economist, "Why Donald Trump Speaks To So Many Americans."
- ⁶⁷ Senior, "Review: In 'Hillbilly Elegy,' a Tough Love Analysis."
- ⁶⁸ Pruitt, "Who's Afraid of White Class Migrants?"
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ Krause & Reeves, "Rural Dreams: Upward Mobility in America's Countryside".
- ⁷¹ Patricia Cohen, "Culture of Poverty Makes a Comeback," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2010, <https://nyti.ms/2kqyPx9>; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," *U.S. Department of Labor*, March 1965.
- ⁷² Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Sheryll Cashin, *Place, Not Race: A New Vision of*

Opportunity in America (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014); Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*; Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2015).

⁷³ hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*; Jones, “Race, Economic Class, and Employment Opportunity”; Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” 289.

⁷⁴ hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*; Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” 289; “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent?,” 159.

⁷⁵ Lisa R. Pruitt, “The Women Feminism Forgot: Rural and White Working Class Women in the Era of Trump,” *Toledo Law Review*, forthcoming (2018).

⁷⁶ Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants?,” 196.

⁷⁷ Lisa R. Pruitt, “How You Gonna’ Keep Her Down on the Farm...,” *University of Missouri Kansas City Law Review* 78 (2010): 1085; Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent?,” 159; Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants?,” 196.

⁷⁸ Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants?,” 196.

⁷⁹ Pruitt, “The False Choice between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” 981; Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants?,” 196.

⁸⁰ Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of White Class Migrants?,” 196.

⁸¹ Jones, “J.D. Vance: The False Prophet of Blue America”; Jedediah Purdy, “Red-State Blues,” *New Republic*, September 14, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/136328/red-state-blues>; Betsy Rader, “I Was Born In Poverty in Appalachia. ‘Hillbilly Elegy’ Doesn’t Speak For Me,” *The Washington Post*, September 1, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-grew-up-in-poverty-in-appalachia-jd-vances-hillbilly-elegy-doesnt-speak-for-me/2017/08/30/734abb38-891d-11e7-961d-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-grew-up-in-poverty-in-appalachia-jd-vances-hillbilly-elegy-doesnt-speak-for-me/2017/08/30/734abb38-891d-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.38e16bda3f65&wpisrc=nl_popns&wpmm=1)

[2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.38e16bda3f65&wpisrc=nl_popns&wpmm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-grew-up-in-poverty-in-appalachia-jd-vances-hillbilly-elegy-doesnt-speak-for-me/2017/08/30/734abb38-891d-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.38e16bda3f65&wpisrc=nl_popns&wpmm=1).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-715; Johnson, “An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Liberals Who Love Him”.

⁸⁴ Cf. Priscilla A. Ocen, “Birthing Injustice: Pregnancy as a Status Offense,” *George Washington Law Review* 85 (2017): 1163. Ocen’s commentary in this piece defies this general rule.

⁸⁵ Pruitt, *Welfare Queens and White Trash*, 303.

⁸⁶ Case and Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century.”

⁸⁷ Kimberly Kindy and Dan Keating, “Opioids and Anti-Anxiety Medication Are Killing White American Women,” *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2016, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/08/31/opioids-and-anti-anxiety-medication-are-killing-white-american-women/?utm_term=.6ce399e647da.

⁸⁸ hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*; Jones, “Race, Economic Class, and Employment Opportunity”; Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” 289.

⁸⁹ Pruitt, “Welfare Queens and White Trash,” 289; Wray, *Not Quite White*.

⁹⁰ Nicholas Confessore, “Tramps Like Them,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2012, <https://nyti.ms/2kzWgb0>; Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*.

⁹¹ Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, *Race Traitor* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

⁹² Mahoney, “Segregation, Whiteness and Transformation,” 1667.

⁹³ Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015); Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); David A. Leonhardt, “Welcome

College Diversity Push,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2AYsXa9>; Eli Wald, “Success, Merit and Capital in America,” *Marquette Law Review* 101 (2017): 2.

⁹⁴ Pruitt, “Acting White? Or Acting Affluent?,” 159.

⁹⁵ I find this self-congratulatory assertion bizarre. Certainly the vast majority of people who are parents would pick up on what Vance thinks he is extraordinary in seeing.

⁹⁶ James Gray Pope, “Why is there No Socialism in the United States? Law and the Racial Divide in the American Working Class,” *Texas Law Review* 94 (2016): 1555.

⁹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “How Long, Not Long.” (speech, Selma to Montgomery March, Selma, March 25, 1965).

⁹⁸ Thanks to Ann Eisenberg, Christopher Chavis, Jasmine Harris, Emily Prifogle, and Amanda Kool for comments on earlier drafts and to Anujan Jeevaprakash for research assistance. Liliana Moore managed the manuscript capably, patiently and with good cheer.