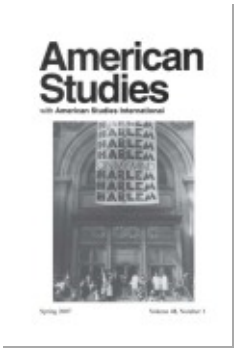
Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness (review)



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era" (118) seems a gloss. After all, the leader credited with first crying for BP is also infamous for another statement about women's role in SNCC, and one would be hard pressed to fashion a womanist reading of Cleaver's depiction of rape in *Soul on Ice*.

Still, as a scholarly undertaking and a political project, *The Black Power Movement* is both refreshing and vital. Dividing the 1960s into the good and the bad is a familiar tactic of political demonology used to blunt other forms of radicalism that developed during the era. More recently, criticism has focused on the alleged *ressentiment* of the oppressed, not unequivocal assertions of power. In stunning contrast to Cornel West's condemnation of "black nihilism" and Wendy Brown's censure of "wounded attachments," these authors affirm the political propriety of anger and the possibility, or even necessity, of a language of identity. Their more expansive view of BP makes evident that claims about suffering and anger at injustice are attempts to enact democratic citizenship. Anger may be reactive but it is politically energizing and, as Audre Lorde observed, creative.

In 1969, Amiri Baraka issued a warning that BP would change African Americans and thereby transform America. This anthology thoughtfully records that (r)evolution. The authors also share a forward-looking concern: namely, current attacks on affirmative action, welfare, and racial politics—all of which they attribute to the demise of black radicalism. Manning Marable once described the field of Black Studies as simultaneously descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive; *The Black Power Movement* certainly satisfies this tripartite mission.

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NOT QUITE WHITE: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness. By Matt Wray. Durham: Duke University Press. 2007.

As Matt Wray's survey of thinking about poor whites in America makes clear, the category that will become white trash has a long and convoluted history. Lubbers, crackers, and human rubbish, pine rats, hill folk, and dirt-eaters—the terms as well as the exact nature of the characteristics that differentiate these colonists and later Americans from others vary widely. "Crackers, a name they got from being great boasters," a colonial administrator wrote in 1766, "are a lawless set of rascals on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who often change their places of abode. They steal horses in the southern provinces and sell them in the northern and those from the Northern they sell in the southern" (35-36). The problem then was one of law enforcement. A Midwestern minister in 1888 saw the difference of a family of thieves, prostitutes, and nomads he described as a "pauper ganglion" dating back to 1840 in much harsher terms. "What can we do," he asked. "First, we must close up official out-door relief. Second, we must check private and indiscriminate benevolence, or charity, falsely called. Third, we must get hold of the children" (77). People this deviant cannot be helped, he argued. They must be stopped. In 1912, the journalist Walter Hines Page had a much more charitable view. "The southern white people are of almost pure English stock," he wrote in the *World's Work*. "It has been hard to explain their backwardness, for they are descended from capable ancestors and inhabit a rich land. Now, for the first time, the main cause of their backwardness is explained and it is a removable cause," hookworm. Poor whites could be cured. "I predict that within five years the whole face of this country will be changed and one will see here a new people and a new earth."

Wray divides his ambitious study into roughly four overlapping periods. From the 1720s through the 1830s, elites' vision of poor people descended from European immigrants changes. In the colonial era, poor whites are described as lazy because they refuse

to work. They live outside society because of their immoral rejection of the work ethic. By the revolutionary era, however, elites see these poor Americans as a dangerous class of criminals, threatening the political and economic order with their thieving and squatting and general refusal to obey the law. In the antebellum period, both pro and anti-slavery supporters describe poor whites in the South as different, a group apart from other free white people. Abolitionists, however, believe the monstrous system of slavery causes their depravity. Pro-slavery Southerners believe that difference is innate, the result of biological inferiority. From Reconstruction through the 1920s, these once sectional and political ideas about the physical differences between middle-class and poor whites grew and spread with the rise of scientific thought and social Darwinism. Eugenicists, in particular, tried to make the case that poor whites were genetically and thus racially distinct. From the early 1900s through 1915, however, a group of medical reformers countered these ideas by arguing that the differences in the bodies and especially the skin of poor whites were the result of disease, especially hookworm, and not inherent biological difference.

Wray, a sociologist, provides neither the texture and detail of social history nor the close readings of texts and visual images of cultural studies scholars. Much of the historical work here, with the exception of the chapter on the hookworm crusade, is a survey of work down by previous scholars. Wray's desire instead is to make a theoretical contribution, to provide an example of the usefulness of boundary theory for whiteness studies. White, he argues, is a social, not a racial category. His study of the contradictions of the category white trash, he suggests, provide some guidelines for constructing a "unified theory of social differentiation—a way of bringing together class, race, gender, and sex analysis into a single frame" (143).

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CRACKING UP: American Humor in a Time of Conflict. By Paul Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2006.

In *Cracking Up*, Paul Lewis attempts to characterize American humor in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this respect, the work resembles Joseph Boskin's 1997 work *Rebellious Laughter*. Boskin's work, however, presented a more historical perspective. Lewis's book is focused on particular issues which are laid out in the book's four major chapters. The first of these is "Killing Jokes"—jokes that "invite us to be amused by images of bodily mutilation, vulnerability, and victimization" (24). The archetypical examples are those made by Freddy Kruger in *The Nightmare on Elm Street* series of films. The second chapter deals with the "positive humor movement"—the antithesis of killing jokes—that promotes laughter and comedy as a means of physical and spiritual healing as well as a benefit in everyday workplace interaction. The third chapter examines joking in public culture and addresses the issue of humor and political correctness. The fourth chapter is concerned with humor in political discourse, and the extent to which humor is capable of establishing, enhancing, or subverting a serious political message.

Cracking Up is written in a lively style, and Lewis leads readers to a consideration of some topics not previously examined by humor scholars (e.g., horror films developed as a comic genre; the change in George W. Bush jokes after 9/11). Nevertheless, Lewis begins with the question of whether humor is good or bad, and proceeds to investigate each of the above topics with an eye for humor's destructive, or at least negative, potential. Lewis sees the killing jokes of Freddy Kruger and Batman's Joker as emerging from nihilistic defeatism and ontological insecurity (40, 47). The jokes allow audiences to distance themselves from humanity and to reduce their anxieties about the future.