

## White plight?

*In working-class America, an elite-resenting identity politics has emerged in which whiteness spells dispossession*

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For many, the 2008 election of Barack Obama seemed as if it might be an “ending” of sorts. But of what? There was, in Obama’s manner of carrying himself, something that upended traditional status relations. An early sign of this came while Obama was on the campaign trail. At a meeting with wealthy Democratic donors, he described the plight of the white working class in Midwestern small towns, where “the jobs have been gone now for twenty-five years and nothing’s replaced them,” and remarked, “It’s not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” This certainly wasn’t the first time an authority figure had spoken patronizingly of the white working class. But now the authority figure was black, and had spoken with the confidence that the future belonged to people like him.

Obama, in essence, had given poor and working-class white people the language to think of themselves as outsiders. After all, they weren’t the kind of people who would

have been in the room with him that day. Within the more responsive spheres of media and entertainment, of course, Obama’s rise has helped us imagine how America will see itself once “white” and mainstream are no longer synonymous. One might point to



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cultural touchstones like Beyoncé, “Hamilton,” and “Scandal” as a preview of what this future will look like. In these somewhat rarefied realms, whiteness is, in ways big and small, constantly being treated as a problem, from this year’s #OscarsSoWhite outrage to calls to strip university buildings of the names of their more vexing white forefathers. Whiteness, among those with a title to it, is invoked only in a dance of disavowal. Away from these predominantly liberal arenas, however, white identity has found a

more potent form of salience. For poor and working-class whites, skin color no longer feels like an implicit guarantor of privilege. There is a sense that others, thanks to affirmative action or lax immigration policies, have nudged ahead of them on the ladder of social ascent. Their whiteness is, in fact, the very reason they suspect that they are under siege. Marginalized by a black President, as they imagine, and alienated by urbane élites of every hue, they have begun to understand themselves in terms of identity politics. It almost doesn't matter whether their suspicions are true in a strictly material sense. The accident of white skin still brings with it economic and social advantages, but resentment is a powerful engine, particularly when the view from below feels unprecedented.

There is certainly a kind of everyday snobbery toward "white trash" which has become routine and reflexive, a condescension that, for example, makes poor-white subcultures on reality television seem so exotic and fascinating. But does the fact that whiteness is no longer an unequivocal badge of privilege have any consequences for the systemic persistence of black disadvantage? These days, when we speak of white supremacy we are talking about more than hooded thugs terrorizing black America. It has become a rhetorical gesture used to link a universally deplored past with the structural advantages that white people continue to enjoy to this day, regardless of whether they harbor any feelings of racial animosity.

One of the ways in which white supremacy has sustained itself is by staying in the shadows and normalizing this structure of domination. As the scholar Carol Anderson argues in "White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide," there is a tendency to characterize moments of racial crisis as expressions of solely black anger. The issue,

she argued, was not just "black rage." What we are seeing is the direct consequence of "white rage," a rage that surfaces time and again in the face of black progress, eager to roll back those gains. "With so much attention focused on the flames, everyone had ignored the logs, the kindling," she writes.

Anderson's book is a breezy history of give-and-take, looking at how the advances of Reconstruction, school desegregation and busing, the civil-rights era, and Obama's election were all targeted and slowly dismantled by whites wary of black advancement. A backlash is always waiting; the main difference over time is that expressions of racism tend to grow subtler, cloaked in softer language and innocuous-seeming legislation, allowing all who are not "sheet-wearing goons" to keep their heads in "a cloud of racial innocence."

One way of thinking about how this works in practical terms is to turn to what's been called our "democracy of manners," in which voters are willing to acquiesce in a busted political system as long as it produces leaders who appear to be "no different from the rest of us." Anderson discusses the postwar rise of political dog-whistling, coded appeals to specific constituencies. Being able to reach Southern whites without running afoul of any racial trip wires was critical to the Republican Party's Southern Strategy throughout the seventies and eighties. By constantly making references to "law and order," "giveaway programs," or "states' rights," Republicans were able to key in on Southern-white hostilities toward a government they felt had overreached in order to uplift African-Americans. (Of course, both parties have indulged in such appeals.) In Anderson's view, Obama's election put new stress on our preëxisting racial frameworks, in that he represented "the ultimate advancement, and thus the ultimate affront." Obama disrupted the way politics *sounded*, as well as the

audiences his own coded messaging was intended to reach. The dog whistle began vibrating at mysterious frequencies. A dramatic example of this occurred early in Obama's first term, when the Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested at his own home. The police had been summoned by a neighbor, who mistook Gates for a burglar, and when he loudly maintained that this was a case of racial profiling he was taken into custody for disorderly conduct. Obama sided with Gates and suggested that the officer, who was white, had "acted stupidly." The comment drew controversy. To those who had recently felt victimized by Obama's "guns and religion" remark, the President and his Harvard friend appeared far more privileged than the officer. The professor and the officer were eventually invited to the White House for a "beer summit" with Obama and Vice-President Joe Biden. It was an attempt to salvage a nasty situation that had spun out of control, and to underscore the lingering possibility of reconciliation, even without the prospect of a poster.

In the absence of a political system run by people "no different from the rest of us," many working-class whites feel abandoned, realizing that the system has always thrived on inequality. One result was the Tea Party, which emerged in 2009. Another has been the rise of Donald Trump, who, though opposed by many Tea Party activists, has drawn on the same loose energies that sustained that movement. He has shown that "white rage" and the nostalgia that underwrites feelings of racial resentment are renewable resources, and a cross-applicable rationale for xenophobia. As whiteness becomes a badge of dispossession, earned or not, it's likely that future elections will only grow more hostile, each one a referendum on our constantly shifting triangulations of identity and power.

White people interested in exploring this refashioned identity are realizing what people with a legibly minority presence long ago discovered: that these categories are more often than not placeholders, spaces evacuated of meaning, where the expectations that come with being told who you are rub up against the aspiration of figuring out what you might become. The question is whether whiteness, having arisen from a set of privileges accrued and institutionalized over centuries, can ever truly become a minority category, even if white people become a numerical minority. Whiteness was once described as invisible, a conspiracy that could never be brought into focus. But we can now at least contemplate the possibility that white might become a color like all the rest. This is what it would mean to enter into history, rather than simply bending it to your will.