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‘Poor, Deluded, Ignorant Masses’: A Study of the Poor Non-Slaveholding Whites of the Antebellum South

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‘Poor, Deluded, Ignorant Masses’: A Study of the Poor Non-Slaveholding Whites of the Antebellum South.[1]

[1] Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.11.

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Contents

Introduction

In 1860 Daniel Hundley, the antebellum South's most articulate contemporary observer and chronicler of the region's social groups, published his sociological study of Southern society, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*. Hundley rejected popular Northern stereotypes depicting the South as a three-class society made up only of planters, poor whites, and slaves. Although the main thrust of Hundley's defence of Southern slaveholding society was to argue the middle classes of the South constituted 'the greater proportion of her citizens' he further sub-divided Southern society into eight categories.[2] Organised hierarchically, each chapter of Hundley's book dealt with a different social class of his invention. The penultimate chapter titled 'Poor White Trash' asserted poor non-slaveholding whites were a class that, socially and culturally distinct from the rest of respectable society, belonged at the bottom of Southern social order, followed only by 'The Negro Slaves'. This view countered Northern abolitionists who argued poor non-slaveholding whites suffered tangible socio-economic consequences principally as a result of living in a slave society. Though Hundley's desire to distinguish between poor whites, who he argued were degraded only by their own laziness, stupidity, and illiteracy, and other more civilised classes of Southerners was undoubtedly informed by his position as a slave owner, his outdated definition of poor whites as 'the laziest two-legged animals that walk erect on the face of earth', has largely endured.[3]

Poor whites occupied a very unusual position under slavery. From a strictly economic perspective, they were peripheral to the plantation economy of the South. Of a total of eight million white people in the Southern states in the 1840s, less than fifty thousand were slave owners with twenty or more slaves, and more than seventy-five percent of whites owned no slaves at all.[4] Moreover, with the rising global demand for cotton, and thus slaves, in the 1840s and 1850s, a large underclass of surplus white labour was created, particularly in the Deep South.[5] These poor whites, without land or slaves, could not compete- for jobs or wages- with the profitability of slave labour. However, comprising the vast numerical majority of antebellum Southerners, they were essential to its social and political stability. In a society where the centrality of whiteness was seemingly enshrined, the existence of poor whites

[2] Daniel Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), p.77.
[3] Hundley, p.63.
[4] Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), p.48.
[5] Merritt, p.4.

presented a paradoxical situation. Hundley's interpretation of the most impoverished whites in society as 'a great social problem' reflected slaveholders' fears that whites with no stake in the peculiar institution threatened to upset the South's established order.[6] Poor whites, frequently cited by abolitionists and free-labour supporters as the regions 'poor, deluded, ignorant masses', endangered the primacy of race in a society predicated on the subjugation of black bodies.[7] Although the consequences of slavery were certainly far more severe and sustained for black Americans, slavery was also socio-economically detrimental for the South's poorest whites.

Historians have sought to explain the reasons poor whites accepted social inequality and planter hegemony. Why would poor whites accept and even fight and die in their thousands for a system that degraded them to a status of quasi-freedom comparable in material terms to that of enslaved blacks? William Du Bois' pioneering study *Black Reconstruction* noted the failure of white labour to create connections across racial lines in the antebellum period, claiming an alliance between poor whites and blacks was 'nullified by deep-rooted antagonism to the Negro'.[8] Other popular interpretations argue poor whites supported slaveholder policies in the hope they would one day own slaves themselves, or that a combination of kinship, communalism and paternalism tied poor whites to the slaveholding regime.[9] Leading antebellum historian Timothy Lockley recently observed that a crude sense of racial identity- 'whiteness'- tended not to be as important to Americans in the early national era as one might think, and that there exists considerable scope for new research on whiteness more generally in the Americas.[10] This is particularly true for the antebellum period, where poor whites have been stereotyped as 'unremitting racists'.[11] The contribution of this thesis is to address this historiographical lacuna and substantiate Lockley's argument by elucidating the lives of the non-slaveholding to challenge the notion that poor whites felt allied with slaveholders based on a shared whiteness.

[6] Hundley, p.262.
[7] Merritt, p.11.
[8] W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p.27.
[9] Stephen V. Ash, 'Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865', *The Journal of Southern History*, 57.1 (1991), 39-62 (p.42).
[10] Timothy Lockley, 'Race and Slavery' in *The Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas*, ed. by Mark M. Smith and Robert L. Paquette (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.14.
[11] David Brown, 'A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South', *The Journal of Southern History*, 79.4 (2013), 799-840 (p.805).

Historiographical Overview

A scholarly tendency to conflate the socio-economic categories of yeoman and common white has meant poor whites are well hidden in the social history of the antebellum South. Frank Owsley's seminal work *Plain Folk of the Old South* published in 1941 succeeded in pushing poor whites to the fringes by arguing that the vast majority of non-slaveholding whites were relatively prosperous farmers, not 'poor white trash'.[12] Although it is now widely held that poor whites constituted a far larger portion of the South's population than his thesis contended, Owsley's invalid reading of the sociology of the South has not been fully expelled from its broader historical narrative. Only a few serious efforts have been made to unearth the lives of the non-slaveholding from the margins of historical enquiry in the decades since then. Charles Bolton has led historians of the likes of Victoria E Bynum, Timothy Lockley and Jeff Forret by countering Owsley's breakdown of Southern society with the claim that poor whites, who he defined as landless and slaveless, made up 30 to 50 percent of the region's white population by 1860.[13] Forret and Lockley have both stressed the limitations of developing a strictly economic definition of poor whites, arguing poor whites were not merely quantitively poor but possessed deficiencies in moral character.[14] Determining a lucid and unambiguous definition of poor whites has evaded historians for generations. However, the study of class in the Old South has been 'chronically hampered', as David Brown put it, by the failure to adequately distinguish poor white from yeoman.[15] Yeomen, who Lacy K. Ford classifies as landholders owning up to five slaves, had a vested interest in maintaining the economic status quo – slavery.[16] Tied together by congruent economic interests, evangelical religion and kinship, yeomen and planter enjoyed a close relationship not extended to poor whites with no land or slaves. Discussions about white unity in the antebellum South often fall victim to transposing the support offered by propertied yeoman for the institution of slavery to a completely distinct class of less affluent whites. This thesis, therefore, defines 'poor whites' as landless and slaveless, in agreement with Merritt's contention that 'by 1860, at least one-third of the Deep South's white population consisted of the truly, cyclically poor'.[17]

[12] Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), pp.6-16.
[13] Charles Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), p.5.
[14] Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p.9.
[15] Brown, p.805.
[16] Lacy K. Ford, Jr. *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.278.
[17] Merritt, p.16.

The notion of racism uniting whites in the antebellum South across class lines is a recurrent and leading theme of its history. Whilst conceding that slavery may have impoverished whites in a limited, indirect way, W. J. Cash's seminal text published in 1941, *The Mind of the South*, argued the social status of even the poorest whites in society was elevated by slavery, and that all Southern whites, regardless of class, were united in a 'proto-Dorian bond'.[18] Cash's sentiments were articulated 30 years later by George Frederickson, who borrowing a term from sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe, postulated all classes of whites were unified in their participation in a 'herrenvolk democracy' that rested on the marginalisation of blacks.[19] Frederickson supported his interpretation of Southern society as 'democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups' by citing a quotation from South Carolinian John C. Calhoun that argued 'the two great divisions of society are not from the rich and poor, but white and black'.[20] The interpretation of Southern society made by Frederickson and his successors, notably that there was white solidarity over racism, was a by-product of the Civil Rights Movement, and a natural conclusion given the contemporary context. Still, historians continued to stress class consensus over conflict. Published in 1965, Eugene Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery* argued racial hegemony convinced poor whites at large to adopt the social ethos of the planter aristocracy.[21] Steven Hahn and Bill Cecil-Fronsman similarly noted the uncomfortable existence of poor whites in a planter republic, but posited it was conceivable to assert that slavery gave poor whites 'an exalted place in society because of their race' whilst simultaneously reducing their economic opportunities.[22] Except for Genovese, scholars failed to radically depart from the herrenvolk thesis. In the last twenty years, however, what Brown terms a 'revisionist' historiography of poor whites has developed. Notable works by Lockley, Bolton, Brown, and most recently Merritt have challenged the historical canon that argued whites were far more united by their racial identity than divided by their class differences. Merritt's *Masterless Men* constitutes the most recent and extended effort at challenging the idea of united antebellum South. Merritt argues that poor white Southerners both understood themselves as a class abused by the powerful landholding elites and, as the antebellum period wore on, were 'overtly resentful' of

[18] W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), pp.38-39.
[19] George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.61.
[20] Frederickson, p.61.
[21] Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), p.54.
[22] Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), p.24.

them.[23] Positioned as an advancement of Merritt's work, this dissertation will corroborate the argument that poor whites enjoyed nominal freedom and conclude that despite their whiteness, they were rendered powerless in the face of oppression.

Methodology

Perhaps unsurprisingly, little written record survives the poor whites of the antebellum South. No universal education system existed in the South on the eve of the Civil War, since a pro-slavery campaign of strategic censorship encouraged the illiteracy of all whites not directly involved in slavery. Much of the evidence that exists of poor whites beyond just numerical records is, as identified by Charles Bolton, situated in what is effectively a negative context- 'court records, ejectment proceedings, and records of insolvent debtors'.[24] This has undeniably lent credence to the school of thought imparted by Hundley and echoed by authors, polemicists and travellers in the nineteenth century, who collectively reaffirmed the basic traits of poor whites as lazy, corrupt and lawless. Although poor whites were unable to commit their thoughts to either personal diaries or letters, there does nonetheless exist some fragmented historical evidence about the region's non-slaveholders in the form of county and state records, newspapers, and census records. This dissertation is built around the use of a broad range of primary material sourced chiefly through the digitised database 'Documenting the American South'. This comprehensive database comprises sixteen thematic collections of primary sources for the study of Southern perspectives on American history and culture and provides critical insight into narratives of the antebellum South that represent a wide cross-section of socio-economic levels, political perspectives and life experiences. Ultimately, this source base has been selected as it offers the most expansive collection of primary material relating to the American South.

To ascribe a monolithic identity to any class in the antebellum South is to ignore the great variations in the region. As Lewis Killian remarked in the classic sociological text *White Southerners*, beyond the borders of the South does not lie 'one vast, undifferentiated region'.[25] As such, it is relevant to note the considerable scope for an investigation about poor whites concentrated on a specific geographic location. Such an approach, however, would not satisfy the aim of this thesis, which, without denying localised nuances, is to provide a more complete account of the lives of poor whites

[23] Merritt, p.5.
[24] Bolton, p.1.
[25] Lewis M. Killian, *White Southerners* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p.9.

in the antebellum South. In his pioneering study of the Southern planter class, *Masters Without Slaves*, James Roark employed this same logic. Using a distribution of sources from all eleven Confederate states, Roark argued that whilst there were differences and distinctions among planters, 'what they shared was so fundamental' that such a generalisation was the logical point of departure.[26] I propose that the same is true for the antebellum South's poor whites, who across the region shared a position at the bottom of the social strata. For this dissertation, the 'South' will refer to the south-eastern region as defined by American ecologist Howard Odum to correspond roughly to the Old South.[27]

This thesis is organised thematically and divided into two chapters. Chapter One begins by locating the origins of Southern backwardness in the institution of slavery. It demonstrates poor whites occupied a position at the bottom of the South's ordered, hierarchical society. This chapter will argue poor whites presented a threat to the established order of the South and were thought of by slaveholders, abolitionists, and slaves alike as a distinct subset of white society. Chapter Two focuses on the ways the slaveholding elite controlled poor whites through policing and punishment. It argues the Southern legal system was primarily structured around the incarceration of poor whites, and the use of corporal punishment for petty crime served to blur the line between slavery and freedom. In addition to this, it will show that biracial interactions were one way in which poor whites defied the social order of the South. Illicit white-slave relations however were not necessarily a break in the white consensus, but rather an indication that poor whites held their own views as to the importance of racial identity, and that these differed from the views of the slaveholding elite. Overall, the contribution of this dissertation is to examine the position of poor whites in the slaveholding South in the antebellum period and to elucidate that whiteness offered them no inherent privileges. Poor whites are an interesting and revealing class that can be used to illuminate underlying tensions related to race and class in this critical period of history.

[26]James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p.14.
[27] Killian, p.10.

Chapter 1

A Different Race of Men

> '[Slavery] has fashioned our modes of life, and determined all our habits of thought and feeling, and moulded the very type of our civilisation'.'[28]

These sentiments are an extract from a sermon entitled 'The South Her Peril and Her Duty', delivered by Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer in New Orleans shortly after the election of President Abraham Lincoln. Palmer linked religious principles to Southern patriotism in stating the duty of the South's inhabitants was plain, to 'perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery'.[29] For Palmer, a South Carolinian proponent of slavery and secession, the South possessed a superior character to the North that made its people 'truly historic'. Moreover, Palmer made clear it was slavery that imparted to the South this 'individuality of character', and he defended the institution as part of the South's social fabric and a matter of self-preservation. Given four short weeks before the secession of South Carolina from the Union, and printed into some 90,000 pamphlets to be distributed throughout the South, the timing of Palmer's sermon urging the South to 'save herself, the country, and the world' was certainly opportune.[30] Still, it was true that slavery had been securely fixed as an integral component of Southern identity long before the Civil War. This chapter will locate poor whites within the social order of the South and establish their role in the life of the peculiar institution. Firstly, it will explore the social context of the South, arguing that the region's attachment to slavery was the root of its backwardness. Second, it argues poor whites occupied a seemingly inescapable position at the bottom of Southern social order, and with no direct ties to slavery, threatened the maintenance of slavery. Throughout, it will argue that by the late antebellum period, the potency of whiteness was reduced for most poor whites. The threat of dissenting non-slaveholding whites as part of a 'three-front battleground' against slavery warrants more attention than historians have previously allowed for.[31]

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[28] Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The South, Her Peril, and Her Duty* (New Orleans: True Witness and Sentinel, 1860), p.8.
[29] Palmer, p.67.
[30] Palmer, p.77.
[31] Merritt, p.6.

The Origins of Southern Backwardness

From the early antebellum period, there existed a profound conviction- both North and South- that the South was an alien land. Foreign travellers depicted the South in the image of an anachronism from the medieval past. In 1835, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville travelled down the Ohio River, and pronounced the South a society 'gone to sleep'.[32] Tocqueville's portrait of the South as a land of 'decaying splendour' was, as argued by Susan-Mary Grant, typical by the 1840s.[33] Writing twenty years after Tocqueville, Northern journalist Frederick Law Olmsted lamented on the lack of urbanisation in the South, as well as the destitute condition of the region's poorest whites. For Olmsted, the South lacked the 'comforts and consolations of a civilised life'.[34] The inhabitants of the society depicted by Olmsted were the unchanged descendants of those described by Tocqueville twenty years earlier. By the decade of the nation's 50th birthday, Southern divergence was perceived to be so great that a writer for the *North American Review* described the sectional difference between the regions in racial terms, claiming that beyond the Potomac lived a 'different race of men'.[35] Northern print culture presented the South as the oppositional other situated within the nations physical borders.

Northerners traced the essential features of Southern backwardness to slavery. In Olmsted's view, 'the cotton monopoly in some way did them [the South] more harm than good'.[36] The great masses he observed, seemed to move 'awkwardly, slowly, and undecidedly'.[37] Tocqueville too had contended that the existence of slavery kept the South poor, and was a system 'favourable to the laziness of the Southerner'.[38] As Stephanie McCurry notes, visitors to the South frequently commented on the absence of a middle class, the decay of work ethic, and 'the backwardness of the slave South in the scale of development'.[39] Abolitionist and Senator William H. Seward was convinced by his visits to the South in 1835, 1846 and 1857 that, aside from any moral considerations, slavery was an intolerable hindrance to regional development. Upon reaching Virginia, he remarked:

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[32] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1838), p.35.
[33] Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: Kans, 2000), p.41.
[34] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy* (London: Dix and Edwards, 1856), p.225.
[35] In Cobb James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.21.
[36] Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p.8.
[37] Olmsted, p.11.
[38] Olmsted, p.19.
[39] Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.40.

> An exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly neglected roads, and, in every respect, an absence of enterprise and improvement, distinguish the region through which we have come, in contrast to that in which we live. Such has been the effect of slavery.[40]

Seward's journey reinforced his view of the South not merely as a subset of the American nation, but as a world behind as a direct consequence of its slave system. The indictment of Southern society by Olmsted, Tocqueville, and Seward spoke in the same language as Genovese, who considered the antebellum era to be a 'fundamental antagonism' between modern and pre-modern worlds.[41] As the nineteenth century wore on, the view of the South as a benign aberration from the rest of society had given way to one of a festering wound in the heart of American exceptionalism.

Southern Social Order

Reflected in the South's pre-modern culture were aristocratic values and the virtues of an ordered, hierarchical society.[42] As Genovese argued, slavery provided the basis for a regional social order in which the slave system dominated all others. Slavery as an economic system condemned poor whites to more than financial baseness, it committed them to social marginalisation. North Carolinian Hinton Helper fervently propagated the idea that ending slavery would be in non-slaveholders economic interests, arguing that a small and wealthy group of planters had coalesced into a powerful class at the apex of Southern social structure, controlling politics as well as dominating the economy.[43] According to Helper, five million poor Southern whites suffered 'a second degree of slavery' directly as a result of living in a slave society.[44] Contrary to the claims of the Southern elite, Helper identified slave ownership as the most important signifier of social status, thus classifying non-slaveholders as a distinct economic class. Helper compared the material lives of poor whites to enslaved blacks, stating:

> As a general rule, poor white persons are regarded with less esteem and attention than negroes, and though the condition of the latter is wretched beyond description, vast numbers of the former are infinitely worse off. A cunningly devised mockery of freedom is guarentied to them, and that is all.[45]

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[40] University of Rochester, 'William H. Seward to Thurlow Weed', 1846, as quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.71.
[41] Genovese, p.23.
[42] Foner, p.71.
[43] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), p.5.
[44] Helper, p.33.
[45] Helper, p.11.

Helper's view of poor Southern whites' nominal freedom was not a new interpretation. Olmsted was shocked by the condition of the poor whites he had encountered in the South, and drew a vivid portrait of their ignorance, poverty, and desperateness in their position in a slave society. Convinced 'the poor white people' were 'worse off in almost all respects than the slaves', he described them as 'extremely ignorant and immoral' as well as 'indolent and unambitious'.[46] The poverty and degradation of the mass of Southern non-slaveholders was well articulated by anti-slavery supporters by the later antebellum period. Abolitionist newspaper *The North Star* wrote in 1848 that 'the effect of slavery is not beneficial to the poor freemen' and described the stratification of slave society in stark terms: 'The slaveholder knows wherein lies his power to enslave one class and trample upon another'.[47] The sentiments expressed in anti-slavery literature during the 1850s were generally aimed at working-class Northerners, as abolitionists implored them to empathise with their Southern counterparts, even if they did not care for the condition of the enslaved. Helper's position then, as a North Carolinian who wrote most of his book while living in his native state, was unusual. At the time of writing, Helper was one of few outspoken abolitionists native to the South. The coalescing of disparate sources attests to the validity of Helper's argument, that poor whites were 'cast into the dismal abodes of extreme ignorance, destitution, and misery' at the hands of the slaveholding elite.[48]

Social commentators in the antebellum period focused a great deal of attention on the conundrum of the poor white. Much as the South was 'othered' by the North as a deviant section, the 'poor white' was stigmatised by pro-slavery Southerners, anti-slavery abolitionists, and enslaved blacks, as a distinctly degenerate class of Southern society. These tandem processes of 'othering' served to promote the fundamental agreement that the South was a distinct place, and within it, no group was more destitute than the poor non-slaveholding whites. Frequently cited in pejorative terms, poor whites were a dangerous abnormality in a society where the racial superiority of all whites was legally codified. During the 1840s, this confluence of economic indigence and cultural backwardness prompted slaveholders to question poor Southern whites permanent and inherent inferiority on racial grounds.[49] They found the root of poor white degeneracy, not in the economic system of slavery, but 'tainted blood'.[50] This was the interpretation made by sociologist and staunch supporter of slavery Daniel Hundley, who located the 'natural [cause] of the existence in the south of a class of lazy

[46] Olmsted, p.44, 84.
[47] J. G. Palfrey, 'American Slavery- It's Effects upon the Non-slave-holding Population of the South,' *The North Star*, 10 March 1848, p.4.
[48] Helper, p.181.
[49] Brown, p.819.
[50] Wray, p.49.

vagabonds known as Poor Whites' in their 'unadulterated pauper blood'.[51] Hundley's interpretation served to minimise slavery's apparent effects upon the non-slaveholding population, by arguing white poverty was the result of voluntary choices made by people already beyond the help of respectable Southern society. This argument was motivated by the need to counter the anti-slavery view that slavery was the prime cause of poor whites' debased condition. Despite this, historians have continued to rely on classifications of poor whites that reflect the biases and prejudices of the time and by the people they were written. David Brown suggested the class 'poor white' be divided into 'two groups of rural propertyless white men', one with 'yeomen aspirations', the other committed to a 'culture of crime'.[52] Similarly, Jeff Forret distinguished between 'whites who were poor' and 'poor whites'- those who were not merely quantitively poor but had defects in moral character.[53] While Keri Merritt has already demonstrated many of the 'aspirational poor whites' of whom Brown spoke of were, in fact, younger sons from families of wealth and property, such a sub-division is further unhelpful as it reinforces a top-down narrative of the lives of poor whites and thus feeds into an understanding of the antebellum South as it was constructed by the slaveholding elite. This class of Southern whites frequently distinguished poor whites who were 'poor' and poor whites who were 'undeserving'. This upheld the argument slavery did not have degrading consequences for the non-slaveholding whites of the South, and rather, they only had their own actions to blame.[54] Such a categorisation, therefore, contributes to a historical understanding of poor whites that further sustains elite myths of white male equality.

Anti-slavery proponents also vied for interpretative authority when comprehending the existence of poor whites in the South. Treatises like John E. Cairnes's *The Slave Power* gained remarkable currency among abolitionists by reflecting the popular sentiment of a three-class Southern society:

> It resolves itself into three classes, broadly distinguished from each other, and connected by no common interest- the slave-holders who reap all its fruits, and an idle and lawless rabble who lived dispersed over vast plains in a condition little removed from absolute barbarism.[55]

The notion of a three-class society was a useful portrait of the South for abolitionists, who blamed slavery for all Southern poverty. This picture of the late antebellum South had become stereotyped by

[51] Hundley, p.274.
[52] Brown, p.806.
[53] Forret, p.9.
[54] James M. Denham, '"A Most Profligate Villain": Poor Whites as Depicted in Antebellum Wanted Proclamations' *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 101.4 (2017), 300-318 (p.304).
[55] J. E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power: Its Character, Career, and Probable Design* (New York: Carleton, 1862), p.60.

the time Cairnes was writing in 1862. Written ten years earlier, Harriett Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* dedicated an entire chapter to describing the South's 'Poor White Trash', who she regarded as a 'miserable class of whites' that made up a 'population as degraded and brutal as ever existed in any of the most crowded districts of Europe'.[56] Although like Helper, Stowe located the depravity of poor whites in the economic and political system of the slave South, the contemporary did not regard poor whites with sympathy, rather finding them to be 'a class of white people' who were by universal admission 'most heathenish, degraded and miserable'.[57] Featured in almost all commentators account was a heightened sense of moral repugnance and disgust. The wife of a wealthy Georgia plantation owner Frances Kemble detected a physical element to the undesirable traits of poor whites, who she described as 'yellow mud' in complexion, and found to be an 'entirely different race from the Negro population'.[58] Depictions such as Kemble's employed what David Brown calls the 'classic traits of racial othering', and served to diminish the potency of whiteness for poor whites in the late antebellum period.[59]

Slaves similarly sought to make sense of the social order in a society where the existence of poor whites challenged established ideas about hierarchies of race. Enslaved in South Carolina, Ella Kelly observed a three-tiered society not dissimilar from Cairnes, proposing that 'there are three kinds of people. Lowest down is a layer of white folks, then in the middle is a later of colored folks and on the top is the cream, a layer of good white folks'.[60] Kelly's identification of the Southern elite as the 'cream' of society- 'good white folks'- supports the argument made by Genovese, that poor whites were considered by blacks to be 'the laziest and most dissolute people on earth'.[61] Slaveholders tacitly encouraged such a view, shrewdly aware that any compassion between the two underclasses might lead to a potentially dangerous alliance. The South's most impoverished whites were, therefore, deemed 'poor white trash' by planters and slaves alike.[62] Slaveholders, abolitionists, and slaves all provided explanations for the conundrum of the poor white. Despite their diverging conclusions, all three groups classified poor whites based on the same assumptions: chiefly, that they were defined by their degeneracy, and they formed a class completely separate from any other group in Southern society. In every account, poor whites and slaveholders were depicted in binary terms, meaning the racial

[56] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: Jewett, Proctor & Worthington, 1853), pp.184-185.
[57] Stowe, p.184.
[58] Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p.182.
[59] Brown, p.819.
[60] Merritt, p.125.
[61] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), p.22.
[62] Merritt, p.31.

supremacy of more respectable whites, the 'cream' that Kelly referred to, was rescued from all doubt.[63] Explanations offered by all parties served to construct an indelible portrait of poor whites in the American imagination that presented them as, in the words of Matt Wray, 'not quite white'.[64] For Southern whites in the antebellum period, class became a more important determiner of status than race, and thus, the privileges of whiteness were disbarred for the regions poor whites.

The Threat of Poor Whites

Southern legislation passed throughout the mid-1800s sought to redefine differences between whites and blacks. Timothy Lockley posited this was because, by the 1850s, it was no longer sufficient to state that poor whites were free while blacks were not.[65] The codification of whiteness in American law had a long history. The Naturalization Act of 1790 first limited American citizenship to 'free white person[s]…of good character', excluding American Indians, free and enslaved blacks, and notably, white indentured servants. The laws use of the phrase 'free white person' conveyed the fact that white skin was no guarantee of any inherent privileges. Several historians have demonstrated slaves and poor whites conducted a thriving illicit trade throughout the antebellum era, making natural economic allies as a result of their shared meagre material existence.[66] By the mid-1800s, as the racial hierarchy of the South proved more difficult to enforce, slaveholders became increasingly concerned about this trade of goods, liquor and ideas between poor whites and slaves. By the 1840s several states in the Deep South had enacted legal codes banning interracial trade without a license.[67] An 1834 South Carolina law banned all trade between slaves and poor whites, regardless of whether they had obtained permission from a master.[68] In 1846 a similar, though extra-legal system of control was implemented by Lowcountry planters in Georgia, in an attempt to combat 'the extensive and growing traffick unlawfully carried on with slaves by white persons and chiefly by Retailers of Spiritous Liquors'.[69] Masters typically blamed not their slaves, but poor whites for instigating the underground trade.[70] Slaveholder hysteria lay at the heart of efforts to sharpen racial boundaries between whites and blacks.

[63] Wray, p.63.
[64] Wray, pp.47-64.
[65] Lockley, p.12.
[66] Forret, p.786.
[67] Merritt, p.86.
[68] Forret, p.805.
[69] Timothy J. Lockley, 'Trading Encounters between Non-Elite Whites and African Americans in Savannah, 1790-1860', *The Journal of Southern History*, 66.1 (2001), 25-48 (p.36).
[70] Forret, p.805.

At the same time, a separate but similar process of racial delineation was underway. The creation of more than 600 antebellum benevolent societies in the slave states aimed to tackle the problems caused by extreme poverty. In Buncombe County, North Carolina the county court provided for the poor out of the local tax revenue, which rose substantially during the antebellum period.[71] In addition, rich Southerners would occasionally make private loans to poor ones.[72] As Merritt points out, the practise of money lending and extending lines of credit functioned to reinforce the paternalist relationship between rich and poor whites.[73] A second facet to antebellum poor relief was education. North Carolina led Southern states in providing free state-funded education for its citizens. Passed in 1839, the Common Schools Act devolved money from the state Literary Fund established in 1825 to the counties to spend on providing education to the state.[74] The slaveholding elite recognised the twin values in providing schooling to the poor whites of North Carolina. In the first instance, the provision of public schooling would contribute to the elimination of poverty. Equally, however, it would help create a 'decent, orderly, and respectable population', and re-establish segregation between poor whites and blacks in an increasingly racially ambiguous world.[75] All slave states except Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee had passed laws against teaching slaves to read and write in the 1830s. Efforts by slaveholders to redefine the differences between poor whites and blacks reflect the 'Janus-faced' nature of whiteness in the antebellum period. On the one hand, it was poor whites 'whiteness' that barred them from trading with slaves and resulted in their harsh punishments. Simultaneously, charity and welfare in the South were available exclusively to the South's white population, a reminder according to Lockley, 'that there were some privileges to which they [poor whites] were entitled merely because of their race'.[76] In both instances, poor whites were told not to overlook racial differences, and the hierarchy of the slave South was unquestionably reinforced.

Conclusion

This chapter has located poor whites in the context of the slaveholding South and established their position at the bottom of the social order. Although elite Southerners justified slavery as a social system that elevated all whites, it is clear the poor whites, classified by slaveholders, abolitionists and

[71] Timothy J. Lockley, 'The Purpose of Public Poor Relief in Buncombe County, North Carolina, 1792-1860', *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 80.1 (2003), 28-51, (p.28).
[72] Merritt, p.237.
[73] Merritt, p.50.
[74] Lockley, p.46.
[75] Lockley, p.46.
[76] Timothy J. Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), p.217.

slaves alike as a distinct race of white people, constituted a political and social problem to the ruling class of the South. The recodification in the mid-1800s of racial differences between blacks and whites reflects the diminishing potency of 'whiteness' as a determiner of status by the later antebellum period. There were some limited privileges poor whites enjoyed directly because of their race. However, such privileges served principally to fortify slaveholder's supremacy at the apex of Southern social structure and to provide poor whites with the necessary incentive to stay loyal to slavery. This revised interpretation has established poor whites physical and symbolic disconnectedness from slavery.

Chapter 2

The Privileging of Whiteness

> 'The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to all the slaveholders collectively…Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers.'[77]

Referring to the contempt in which labour of any kind was held in the South, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass articulated the opinion that if slavery was principally a system of labour, then all those who laboured in a slave society were in some sense enslaved. The notion of dual enslavement did not refer solely to poor whites' inability to compete with the profitability of slave labour, but also to the fact that American slavery as a labour system was designed to control workers, preventing unity across racial lines. Indeed, as Genovese long argued, the planter elite's 'paternalist spirit' extended beyond master and slave to include the relationship of rich to poorer whites.[78] Bolton agreed with this analysis but additionally contended slaveholders employed overt and violent means to enforce the conformity of poor whites. Merritt has gone furthest, suggesting poor whites in the antebellum era 'were directly prevented from enjoying many of the privileges of whiteness' by the slaveholding elite. This chapter strengthens the argument put forward by Genovese, Bolton, and Merritt, contending elite-driven systems of oppression operated in the Deep South to disenfranchise poor whites. It provides a necessary advancement to the scholarship by forcefully dispelling elite myths of shared white equality. Firstly, it argues the suppression of poor whites ultimately served to blur the lines of white privilege in a society based on racial supremacy. Second, it draws upon examples of biracial interaction to demonstrate racial barriers were less rigid at the bottom of the social order. Despite proving the limitations of fixed racial boundaries in the daily lives of poor whites, it will not interpret biracial interactions as a decisive break in the white consensus. As Brown postulated, poor whites may have ignored racial barriers, but those barriers existed and were significant.[79] The primacy of race in the herrenvolk thesis is too simplistic, and scholars ought to stress the intersection of race and class in shaping the lives of the South's poor whites instead.

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[77] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), pp.62-63.
[78] Genovese, p.92.
[79] Brown, p.832.

Policing and Punishment

'Never was there a class of people' wrote Hinton Helper in 1859, 'so basely duped, so adroitly swindled, or so damnably outraged' as the South's 'white victims of slavery'.[80] Helper went on: 'the masses believe…whatever the slaveholders tell them'.[81] 'They are cajoled into the notion they are the freest, happiest and most intelligent people in the world' the contemporary concluded.[82] Helper's statement articulated a critical historical reality of the South; throughout the antebellum period, slave masters tried innumerable ways to control lower-class whites. Whilst historians have long argued the slave power was a controlling influence upon Southern white society, scholarship contending the elite actively strove to perpetuate poor whites' desperate situation is still in its relative infancy. This tendency stems in part from the misconception propagated by historians like Lockley, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Elizabeth Fortson Arroyo, who claimed poor whites formed an important component of slave patrols, and that these were a significant point of discord between themselves and enslaved blacks. Sally E. Hadden has since convincingly proven patrols were typically composed of yeoman farmers who shared an economic interest with planters in maintaining slavery.[83] As such, masters actually used slave patrols for constant surveillance of both blacks and poor whites, monitoring, as Hadden put it 'the shadowy underworld inhabited by poor whites who traded forbidden liquor and stolen farm goods with them'.[84] Patrols were the South's principal institutional manifestation of the belief that all whites in a slave society shouldered the responsibility for maintaining white dominance. Indeed, the 'Patrol Regulations' for the towns of Tarborough and Rowan County in North Carolina encouraged 'all white men' to 'participate in enforcement of these restrictions'.[85] In actual fact, the slave patrols directed their attention toward any group who dared defy the South's social hierarchy. In a Louisiana parish, planters complained 'there are many whites Persons and Negros running about…and we are daily Robbed of our goods and chattels'.[86] Implicit in planter protest about the illicit trade between poor whites and slaves was another, more serious concern. The fact slaveholders felt robbed of their personal property, 'chattel', reflected fears of a potential coalition between the two underclasses. Even when non-slaveholders did serve in the ranks of the patrol, they failed to concur with historians claims

[80] Helper, p.44.
[81] Helper, p.44.
[82] Helper, p.45.
[83] Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
[84] Hadden, p.104.
[85] *Patrol Regulations for the Town of Tarborough* (1802), < https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/tarboro/tarboro.html> [accessed 13 May 2021] (para. 1 of 3).
[86] Press Copies of Letters Sent by Provost Marshall, Louisiana, E-1480, RG 393, 1864, quoted in Stephen V. Ash, 'Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865', *Journal of Southern History*, 57.1 (1991), 39-62 (p.50).

that it offered them any sense of racial privilege. A native and resident of a town in western North Carolina wrote disdainfully in 1857:

> 'After I have finished my day's labor, I am compelled to walk the streets from nine in the evening til three in the morning, to restrain the roving propensities of other people's 'property' – n*ggers. Why should I thus be deprived of sleep that the slaveholder may slumber?'[87]

Clearly, poor whites took no pleasure in defending the slaveholder from his slaves, nor conceived of any personal stake in the institution. According to W. J. Cash, poor whites' hostility toward enslaved blacks through their involvement in mainstream Southern institutions left them 'glowing with the sense of participation in the common brotherhood of white men'.[88] Rather, the exclusion of poor whites from the patrol, and what is more, their contempt for it, suggest they were left with nothing of the sort.

It was perhaps in the legal sense that poor whites truly lived in a state of what Helper called 'nominal' freedom.[89] As Merritt hypothesised, 'one legal misstep, one wrong acquaintance, one unpaid debt' could result in an indefinite loss of liberty.[90] Class, as much as race, largely dictated a Southerner's criminal's sentence. By the 1840s, many of the South's larger cities used professional police forces to establish racial and social conformity, jailing citizens for minor breaches of the law.[91] As Bolton found in the central piedmont of North Carolina, corporal punishment was mandated for a variety of crimes ranging from petty theft to fighting.[92] In 1839, around sixty percent of the regions criminal convictions were for 'Assault and Battery', and a further fifteen percent were for 'Affray'- both a sort of brawling typical to lower-class whites.[93] In the Deep South, where areas contained a high percentage of slaves, crimes like theft were considered a graver threat to society than fighting, or even murder. In Georgia, for example, a conviction for voluntary manslaughter drew a sentence from just two to four years, whilst robbery placed the defendant in jeopardy for a term of five or seven years. Furthermore, the theft of a horse in the region could warrant a punishment of up to fourteen years.[94] Thieves served more punitive sentences than other criminals. As Jack Kenny Williams wrote, for poor whites in the South, property crime was not classified as a simple misdemeanour, but rather a direct violation of the

[87] Helper, p.375.
[88] Cash, p.42.
[89] Helper, p.43.
[90] Merritt, p.220.
[91] Merritt, p.227.
[92] Bolton, p.60.
[93] *Offenses Heard in North Carolina County Courts* (1839) < https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/johnson/chapter22.html#B25> [accessed 13 May 2021].
[94] David J. Bodenhamer, 'Criminal Sentencing in Antebellum America: A North-South Comparison', *Historical Social Research*, 15.4 (1991), 77-94 (p.81).

state's established order.[95] When poor whites were involved in disputes with other poor whites, there was rarely such an intervention from the criminal justice system.[96] Such a disparity between sentencing and punishment for property crimes and other offences confirms the importance of class among the Deep South's whites in the antebellum period. Non-conforming poor whites were undoubtedly targeted by the legal system, and the guardhouses and jails found in every Southern county, town, and city were built to deny them their freedom. Prisons were rapidly built in the 1820s and early 1830s, supported by wealthy Southern legislators who had a vested interest in maintaining the Southern hierarchy and regularly resorted to public spectacles of violence. Given that whipping was the typical sanction on slave plantations, the use of the 'lash' against prisoners in Southern penitentiaries suggested to poor whites they were the slaves of the state. While most scholars assert the whipping and auctioning of white men and women ended during the Jacksonian period, these customs continued until the Civil War in the Deep South.[97] The Court Minutes for Rutherford County in Tennessee recorded in the July term of 1831 that 'the State was still hanging its criminals from scaffolds erected on spots convenient for the assembling of multitudes'.[98] The following newspaper excerpt from the *Raleigh Register* testifies abundantly to the persistent brutality of Southern penitentiaries:

> We have, this day, witnessed the most humiliating scene that has ever been exhibited before us. Two white men were, by order of the court, led to the public whipping post, there stripped and fastened, and lashed with nine and thirty, until their skin was rough with whelks and blood.[99]

The stripping and subsequent flogging of the accused men was a behaviour historically associated with punishment on plantations. The author's identification of the ordeal as 'the most humiliating scene…exhibited before us' vindicates the argument that whipping was intended to degrade white convicts, both physically and psychologically, to the level of black slaves. As Forret noted, whipping reduced the white man to the level of a slave, temporarily 'suspending his membership in white society'.[100] Poor whites were subject to the injustices of the criminal system, and their punishment often blurred the line between slavery and freedom.

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[95] Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), p.134.
[96] Merritt, p.221.
[97] Merritt, p.217.
[98] *MS Rutherford County Court Minutes*, July 1831, < https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/johnson/chapter22.html> [accessed 13 May 2021].
[99] Phi, 'Poor White Punishment', *Raleigh Register*, 7 April 1846.
[100] Forret, p.815.

The Southern legal system was designed to incarcerate, punish, and even murder those who threatened its slave-based order. Slave patrols and penitentiaries were just two arms of law enforcement operating under the South's highly mobilised system of surveillance. By the time of the Civil War, poor whites inhabited what Merritt calls a 'police state'- with no economic standing, and virtually no civil rights, they were unable to challenge the established Southern hierarchy.[101] The findings in this chapter warrant a discussion about the suppression of poor whites more broadly in the South, although this remains beyond the scope of this dissertation. Brutal material conditions, the denial of education, and no voting rights, also coalesced to deny poor whites the basic vestiges of whiteness. Poor whites were constantly reminded they occupied a tenuous position at the bottom of the social order. Rising levels of imprisonment, long sentences for petty crime, and the exhibition of public corporal punishment forced poor white men to reflect upon their position as quasi-free white citizens within a racially-based society. As Merritt found, excluded from the privileges of whiteness, poor whites had few tangible reasons to consider themselves a part of the ruling race. The daily realities of life made class differences uncomfortably clear, and in the decade before the Civil War, cracks in the semblance of white solidarity had given way to deep fissures. Beneath the veneer of Southern white consensus lay persistent tensions and the potential for conflict. As one North Carolinian said to Helper in 1857, 'The more I think and see of slavery, the more I detest it'.[102]

The White Consensus

The nature of economic life in the antebellum South meant poor whites met and interacted with enslaved and free blacks on a level of familiarity not generally enjoyed by other portions of white society. Historians of the Old South traditionally reinforced the idea that poor white men had a personal hatred for blacks and affirmed their universal racist mentality.[103] J. Wayne Flynt, for example, argued poor whites were just as racist as other Southern whites and that they held a firm conviction that slavery was essential. Court records do reveal copious instances of poor white violence directed at free and enslaved blacks, which suggests poor whites shared in the hatred and viciousness that motivated the actions of other white Southerners. But other surviving records detail frequent incidences of interracial fraternisation, an indication that although racial hatred shaped contacts between poor whites and blacks in the antebellum period, at other times relations between the two

[101] Merritt, p.283.
[102] Helper, p.376.
[103] Paul H. Buck, 'The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South', *The American Historical Review*, 31.1 (1925), 41-54; Cash, pp.38-39.

groups tested the established boundaries of the slave order. Chapter One of this dissertation has already demonstrated poor whites and blacks interacted through their participation in illicit market trade. However such interactions were not limited to criminal relations and extended to gambling, drinking, and sex.[104] During his excursion to the Southern states, Olmsted was struck by the 'close co-habitation and association of black and white', recording that 'negro women are carrying black and white babies together in their arms' and that 'black and white faces are constantly thrust together'.[105] Racial barriers were clearly more flexible for poor Southerners. The autobiography of Edward Isham, a poor white from Georgia, provides a useful insight into poor white relations with blacks in the antebellum period. Isham's interactions with free and enslaved blacks reveal a range of behaviour common to poor whites in the South. The contemporary recalled numerous instances of fighting with enslaved and free blacks, having gotten into difficulty with one 'negro about a fishing pole' and later having 'a fight with Wash Smith, a free negro, who choked me very severely'.[106] On other occasions, however, Isham would socialise with blacks, 'drinking, hunting and gambling'.[107] The poor white reported to have had got 'too intimate with a free girl', and at one point, was even hired as a labourer by a free black man.[108] Isham's biography reveals poor whites fought, socialised, and worked with free and enslaved blacks. It is wise to mention that the biography, written by Isham's court-appointed lawyer whilst he awaited murder trial, was recorded precisely because his behaviour was unusual. Still, despite the atypical nature of Isham's account, his biography remains a useful source for looking at the social relations of poor whites and blacks in the antebellum South. Race relations at the bottom end of the social scale were less rigid and far more complex than the orthodox position suggests. Although there was a near universal consensus in the South that racism was right, poor whites did not establish a pattern of brutality and overt racism in their daily interactions with blacks.

Relationships between blacks and whites of the lower class existed in defiance of the racial caste of the antebellum South. By the 1850s, masters obsessively sought to establish segregation between the two underclasses, placing increasingly strict regulations on biracial sex, trading, and socialising in an attempt to keep them separated. State legislatures in North Carolina punished anyone who 'shall deal,

[104] Elizabeth Fortson Arroyo, 'Poor Whites, Slaves, and Free Blacks in Tennessee, 1796-1861', *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 55.1 (1996), 56-65 (p.57).
[105] Olmsted, p.19.
[106] Charles C. Bolton, 'Edward Isham and Poor White Labor in the Old South', in *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South*, ed. by Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), p.2.
[107] Bolton, p.5.
[108] Bolton, p.13.

trade or traffic with any negro slave' without a license. South Carolina similarly banned all trade with slaves, whether or not they possessed a permit from the master. Forret found despite tightening laws, the number of indictments for unlawful trading with slaves increased each decade from the 1820s to the outbreak of the Civil War.[109] More than a hundred cases of illegal trading between slaves and poor whites appear in court records from North Carolina and South Carolina between 1845 and 1860 alone.[110] This rising trend suggests poor whites held their own views as to what constituted proper contact with blacks and that these departed radically from the views of the slaveholding elite. Although not generally recognised as an act of resistance, poor whites' participation in biracial trade was one way in which they subverted their subordination as lower-class members of white society. Economic encounters between poor whites and slaves empowered and enriched both parties.[111] As E. P. Thompson noted, although the dominant landing class was able to establish hegemony over the lower orders, whatever this hegemony may have been, it did not prevent the poor from 'defining their own modes of work and leisure… and their own satisfactions and view of life.'[112] Despite this, one should refrain from interpreting biracial interactions as a break in the white consensus. There may have been a plastic quality to racial barriers in the antebellum period, but nonetheless, those barriers existed, were acknowledged, and significant. Illicit trade, for example, was motivated by economic self-interest, rather than interracial solidarity.[113] Olmsted commented on poor whites' ability to prioritise biracial alliances of convenience when it suited them, observing that 'When the negro is definitely a slave, it would seem that the alleged natural antipathy of the white race to associate with him is lost'.[114] Slavery guaranteed a natural order in which all whites were superior to blacks, even if their material realities were not all that different.

Conclusion

Poor whites were both policed and privileged in whiteness. At best, therefore, the tenets of a herrenvolk democracy applied very loosely to poor whites by the outbreak of the Civil War. A sophisticated system of punishment and incarceration allowed masters to imprison those who challenged the slave-based hierarchy of the South. Poor white punishment blurred the lines between slavery and freedom. Racial boundaries were further broken down by frequent and multiple kinds of

[109] Forret, p.805.
[110] Forret, p.793.
[111] Lockley, p.48.
[112] E P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?', *Social History*, 3.2 (1978), 133-165 (p.163).
[113] Lockley, p.34.
[114] Olmsted, p.18.

biracial interactions at the lowest levels of Southern society. This was one way in which poor whites subverted the closed ranks that more affluent white Southerners presented to the world. Yet despite deepening levels of social and economic inequality, overwhelming numbers of white Southerners simply regarded slavery as a natural and essential part of their world. As Helper remarked later in his career, 'I learned, as, by force of habit, almost every Southerner learned, to look upon negroes and negro slavery as absolutely essential constituents of the general plan'.[115] Class and race were both crucial components of Southern identity in the antebellum period.

[115] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Land of Gold* (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1855), pp.221-22.

Conclusion

The South was never altogether unified along racial lines. Propagated by the Southern elite, the notion of racial unity conceals as much as it reveals about white society in the antebellum period. Contemporary studies of white society in the South have focused on landholding (and sometimes slaveholding) yeoman farmers, asserting the middling classes made up the masses of white Southerners. This tendency likely stems from pro-slavery arguments, wherein the slaveholding elite often denied the existence of white poverty altogether. The views put forward by the likes of Owsley have persisted to the extent that most of the South's history has been interpreted through studies on slaves, planters, or yeomen. Poor whites remain chronically understudied in the historiography of the South. As a result, historians have over-emphasised the extent to which whiteness united Southern men and muted class divisions. To date, few scholars have broken decisively with the herrenvolk thesis to argue Southerners were more divided by class than united by their shared whiteness. Chapter One of this study has conclusively proven that poor whites occupied a position at the bottom of the social order, only one rung removed from slavery. Although white skin granted them some conditional freedoms, the privileges of whiteness were mostly removed for poor whites by the outbreak of the Civil War. Chapter Two demonstrated the slaveholding elite controlled poor whites through a legal system primarily structured around the surveillance and incarceration of poor whites. Beneath the white consensus of Southern society lay deep class tensions and unrest. Although biracial interactions were one way in which poor whites resisted the racial caste of the antebellum South, this is not to say racial boundaries were unknown at the lowest social levels. Rather, race was no more important than class in shaping the daily lives of poor whites. The conclusions made throughout this dissertation show poor whites were disconnected from slavery and understood it as not in their interest.

Whilst wider issues have been touched on, this research has raised further questions which were not relevant for discussion in this dissertation. Further research is warranted from the discussion of the Souths legal system in Chapter Two. How did the denial of public education, Southern voting rights, and an extra-legal system of vigilante violence coalesce with policing and punishment to keep poor whites in the prisms of poverty and oppression? Such an examination would strengthen the argument offered in this dissertation, that the slaveholding elite devised a system so complete and vicious that poor whites were rendered powerless in the face of persecution. Furthermore, it would also be valuable to scholarship to assess how far gender fostered a sense of egalitarianism between male heads of

household, both slaveholding and not. McCurry has suggested social consensus between yeoman and planter was generated through common feelings of patriarchal domination, but it is so far unclear if poor whites fit this model as well.[116] Scholars need to incorporate race, class, and gender into studies of the South if they are to ever fully understand its broader social consensus.

The paradigm of the poor white as racist was an ahistoricism propagated by the elite in the postbellum period when slavery no longer provided the institutional division between black and white. Racial barriers became more important to poor whites in the Jim Crow South, as emancipated slaves took their place at the bottom of 'free' society. The findings of this study clearly show that poor whites, excluded from so many of the privileges of whiteness, had few reasons to consider themselves part of the ruling class by the outbreak of the Civil War. Throughout this research project, the wider fields of race and class have been explored in conjunction with one another. This research adds to existing historiography by nullifying the herrenvolk thesis to suggest that whiteness was not as important to poor white Southerners as has previously been contended. The findings of this dissertation are therefore a vital contribution to the gap in scholarship on the lives of poor whites in the antebellum slave South.

[116] McCurry, p.304.

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