

- 243 Trailer trash as squatters in Winkelman, Arizona (1950), Photograph Collection of the History and Archives Division of the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records, Phoenix, Arizona
- 248 Will Counts's photograph of Elizabeth Ann Eckford and Hazel Bryan in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 4, 1957, Will Counts Collection, Indiana University Archives
- 250 Taylor Thornberry, *Life* magazine, September 23, 1957, Francis Miller/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images
- 262 LBJ visiting Appalachian families for the Tour on Poverty (1963), #215-23-64, Inez Kentucky, LBJ Library Photograph by Cecil Stoughton, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas
- 288 Dolly Parton stand-up poster from Nashville, Tennessee, featured in Roy Blount Jr., "Country's Angels," *Esquire*, March 1977
- 289 Tammy Faye Bakker on the cover of her album *Don't Give Up* (1985)
- 300 Bill Maxwell's article "Seen as 'White Trash': Maybe Some Hate Clinton Because He's Too Southern," Wilmington, North Carolina, *Star-News*, June 19, 1994
- 305 Caricature of Sarah Palin in overalls by Steve Brodner in *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2009
- 307 Ritz Brothers from the Hollywood movie *Kentucky Moonshine* (1938) and the cast of A&E's reality TV show *Duck Dynasty* (2015)

## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

This book was originally published in the middle of the contentious 2016 presidential election season. By describing historical patterns, it had the effect of bringing some clarity to the otherwise feverish rhetorical muddle. And yet, in the aftermath of the election, conventional wisdom did little to improve upon the preelection confusion. As ABC reported, Donald Trump's shocking electoral success represented the "triumph of class over identity." It made no sense otherwise to analysts caught short. If the undeniable factors of racism and misogyny did not tilt the balance at the polls, then "the surging return of class in politics" must have. Searching for explanations is natural, but ABC did as punditry is wont to do and produced a false dichotomy in its effort to find a simple answer. The truth is, it's not one or the other: class and identity politics operate in tandem.<sup>1</sup>

While it is true that the major candidates who competed in 2016 all fell back on some form of a class-conscious vocabulary in advancing their positions, it cannot be said that identity politics disappeared in the face of "surging" class issues. From the outset of the Democratic primary process, while Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont was calling for a "class revolution," he drew in enormous numbers of millennials across the social spectrum who felt the weight of college loans. Despite Sanders's claims that his opponent was asking women to vote for her on the basis of her gender alone, front-runner Hillary Clinton directed her appeal to voters on economic issues common to "all working families." From early on in the primary, she focused alike on the pocketbook issue of child care and the racial and class roots of inner-city violence.<sup>2</sup>

Yet both the Democratic contenders had to make themselves likeable and familiar. Sanders looked like a ruffled professor and sounded like a vintage sixties radical, speaking truth to power. No wonder students liked him. Clinton drew in some of the younger Lean In audience, and also won over older African American women because of her proven

loyalty to the black community. Emotional bonds dominate the imagined “conversation” between candidate and voter, with little overt reference to class.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, in the immediate analytic (or pundit-driven) aftermath, it was class all the way. Going against the grain, in a widely cited op-ed, Columbia University professor Mark Lilla wrote in the *New York Times* just after the election that it was not class at all that lay at the root of Hillary Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump. He blamed her defeat on a Left-friendly version of identity politics. Trump’s rise was not about class-inflected racism or “whitelash,” he insisted, but served instead to expose liberals’ obsessive need to grant anyone who wanted it membership in a disadvantaged group: black, gay, female, and others. He argued that the Democrats, by their reductionist tendency, had caused “white, rural, religious Americans” to see themselves as ignored, even threatened. The liberal agenda was fueling a hostility toward political correctness; therefore, if the Democratic Party wished to do better, it would have to recover a “pre-identity” politics and reemphasize Americans’ shared values.<sup>4</sup> Once again, it was a narrowly defined view of voting, and of identity.

Owing to Trump’s eccentricities, blaming Clinton was inevitable. But the flaws in Professor Lilla’s logic run deeper. His assumption that there was a time when democratic politics was “pre-identity” reflects the larger problem of many respected commentators: attachment to an idealized conception of American democracy. American party politics has exploited the rhetoric of identity at least as far back as Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson. Given the resilience of the white trash slur, rural working-class whites hardly needed liberal lingo to feel alienated.

Illogically, Lilla uses Bill Clinton’s candidacy as one of his examples of identity-free politics. Yet as I detail in these pages, Clinton was a poster child of self-marketing. At the time, Republicans engaged in an unrelenting campaign to challenge Clinton’s legitimacy as president, making every effort to label him a southern bumpkin. In response, Clinton cleverly refashioned himself as the “Arkansas Elvis” and admitted, at times, to being a beer-drinking “Bubba.” He played “Heartbreak Hotel” on the saxophone and posed with a mule on the campaign trail. For the poor white kid from Hope, Clinton’s public image conjured nostalgia for the 1950s Elvis. No one was more skilled than the “comeback kid” in con-

structing an identity for himself that bridged North and South and in repackaging his personality so as to make him acceptable to working-class white men. The Yale liberal wore blue suede shoes.

If a serious scholar such as Lilla could get Bill Clinton wrong, it’s no surprise that Trump would succeed in confounding so many smart people, too. Journalists throughout 2016 scrambled to figure out what the attraction was to this loud, endlessly self-promoting New Yorker. They were sure it was some brand-new phenomenon born of reality TV and social media. But conventional wisdom was again wrong to see the 2016 election as a break from the past. Like many before him, Trump had tapped into a rich vein of identity politics: the embrace of the common man, the working stiff, the forgotten rural American.

American democracy’s quirky past haunted the Trump campaign. He was not the first cranky businessman to run for high office, even in recent memory. Ross Perot was, capturing 19 percent of the popular vote in 1992. Nor was Trump the first millionaire mogul with Hollywood ties to seek the presidency. That was William Randolph Hearst, a century ago. And he certainly can’t claim to be the first outsider who promised to clean up Washington and embody the hopes and dreams (and fears) of the common man. That honor belongs to Andrew Jackson. As critically, he was not the first politician to question the pedigree of a sitting president either. James Vardaman did that in spades, when he insulted President Theodore Roosevelt. Trump’s rhetorical appeal to the “silent majority” was stolen from Richard Nixon. Sarah Palin paved the way for him as an earlier version of a Republican reality TV populist. Trump’s favorite slogan, “Make America Great Again,” was, of course, Ronald Reagan’s first.

The argument of this book is that America’s class history is a more complicated story than we’ve previously considered. The past informs the present. Presidential candidates are not masters of their own destiny; rather, they are often a patchwork of rhetorical scripts, familiar gestures, political styles inherited from their predecessors, and whatever else they happen to borrow from the grab bag of popular culture.

Critics lament that our twenty-four-hour news cycle turned the 2016 election into a horse race or a sideshow, and they’re right. It was treated as a kind of sporting event. But democratic politicians have always had to lure in voters. In the early nineteenth century, southern backcountry

voters came for the free food, the fistfights, and such rowdy forms of entertainment as the “gander pull.” In this indelicate contest, two men on horseback competed for the honor of yanking off the head of a goose. As in the “Squatter’s Tale” about “Old Sug,” men at the polls expected to get a serving of whiskey and brown sugar as they listened to long-winded speeches. It is in the nature of democratic politics for office seekers to appeal with little subtlety to the tastes of the electorate. In the early twentieth century, in his run for governor and the U.S. Senate, Jeff Davis of Arkansas gained the favor of his working-class audiences by ripping off his collar and rolling up his sleeves. He intentionally imitated the uncouth, ungrammatical speech of the lower classes. Even Lyndon Johnson had to canvass in Texas for his Senate seat with a traveling band. Governor “Big Jim” Folsom of Alabama strutted across the stage barefoot.<sup>5</sup>

Trump’s antics mirror this long tradition. One of his campaign managers, Paul Manafort, admitted at one point that Trump was simply “projecting an image.” Who’s surprised? Americans have a taste for a “democracy of manners,” which is different from real democracy. Voters accept huge disparities in wealth, while expecting their elected leaders to appear to be no different from the rest of us. By talking tough, by boasting that he’d love to throw a punch at a protester, candidate Trump pretended he was stepping down from his opulent Manhattan penthouse to commingle with the unwashed masses. Wearing his not-so-classy bright red Bubba cap, and crooning at one rally, “I love the poorly educated,” he built upon a recognizable strain of American populism.<sup>6</sup>

Campaigns have long relied on shallow ploys and vicious rhetoric. In the first decade of the twentieth century, William Randolph Hearst’s campaign strategist, Arthur Brisbane, said: “The American people, like all people, are interested in PERSONALITY.” Even then they knew. The earlier billionaire (worth seven times what Forbes says Trump is worth; three times what Trump says Trump is worth) was a more credible populist. He was a staunch union supporter who said: “Wide and equitable distribution of wealth is essential to a nation’s prosperous growth and intellectual development. And that distribution is brought about by the labor union more than any other agency of our civilization.” Yes, he said *that* while running for president in 1904. Politicians have learned to

appeal to (and exploit!) the class discontents of the ordinary voter. An astute observer wrote in 1924 that American voters preferred to “cherish the unrealities they have absorbed” based upon “the primal instinct to defeat the side they hate or fear.” It is just as true today. To his supporters, Trump’s tactlessness and personal vindictiveness scored points, while his lack of policy understanding was overlooked. His fans reveled in his promise to “stick it” to “Crooked Hillary,” and her imagined core base of Washington insiders and too-smart-for-their-own-good Ivy League professionals.<sup>7</sup>

Many Trump supporters said they were drawn to him because he “speaks his mind,” and voiced a “raw honesty.” As *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat concluded early on, Trump was the anti-candidate, totally unpredictable. He wasn’t just playing a part but was refusing to be anything like a scripted politician. The nasty nicknaming of his opponents (“Low-Energy Jeb,” “Little Marco”) was one-half schoolyard bully bravado and one-half public relations branding. Yet his most consistent pitch was to speak for the “forgotten Americans,” those whose class identity and Middle-America sensibilities put them at odds with all politically correct liberals. His utter lack of civility made him the voice of the non-elite outsider.<sup>8</sup>

That is where the Sarah Palin model came in. The half-term Alaska governor was the ultimate outsider. She was selected as the GOP’s 2008 vice presidential nominee because John McCain’s camp bought into the conceit of reality TV, that anyone could be turned into a viable candidate if given the right makeover. She both intrigued and flabbergasted, whether she was pictured shooting caribou from a helicopter or tripping over standard syntax in her *Fargo*esque accent. Her appeal was the opposite of Barack Obama’s: whereas she was associated with the rural backwater of Wasilla, he was a hip, savvy Chicagoan.<sup>9</sup>

Trump seemed to want it both ways—a man of means and glamour and a man of the people; on the first front, though, he was a most ironic example of urban sophistication. The *New Yorker* bragged about his Wharton MBA degree, but he sounded like a working stiff from Queens. He loved to describe himself as classy, but his outlandish way of showing off his wealth put him squarely in the camp of the nouveau riche. He ignored his inherited wealth and status and proclaimed himself a self-made

millionaire. His trophy wives, his gold-accented Louis XIV furniture, and his passion for seeing his name plastered on anything and everything undermined any effort to project the highbrow appeal of old money or the intellectualism of Ivy League graduates. His bragging ways first led him into TV camp as an occasional player in *WrestleMania*, before going on to star in *The Apprentice*. None of this activity (or its contradictions) bothered his working-class voters. Just the opposite: it forged a bond. Every time he spoke, he rejected PC etiquette. He was "one of them."<sup>10</sup>

This hurling of insults is nineteenth-century political theater revived. Trump's tweeting frenzy resembled nothing so much as Andrew Jackson responding to critics by invoking the code duello. Revenge was the Jacksonian recourse in an era when perceived slights led to brawls and shoot-outs. In the fall of 2016, anticipating defeat at the polls, Trump asserted that the election had already been "rigged." In 1825, Jacksonians similarly attributed their hero's loss to a "Corrupt Bargain," because Congress refused to ratify popular opinion. Those who lionized Jackson adored him for his unpolished backcountry manner and uncompromising positions. He has been referred to as a "democratic autocrat." For the next century or more, he was democracy incarnate.<sup>11</sup>

That other Trump-like politician who leaps from the past, Mississippian James Vardaman, was known in the first decade of the twentieth century as "The White Chief." He, too, was the darling of angry lower-class whites, combining a cruel racist bent with a proclivity for trash-talking. Readers are reminded that when Theodore Roosevelt dined with African American leader Booker T. Washington in the White House, Vardaman went ballistic. Though Roosevelt was the scion of the proud and wealthy New York family going back to the colonial Dutch settlers, Vardaman used his own brand of birtherism to smear the president's pedigree. His unfiltered reaction was to allude to "Old Lady Roosevelt" having been frightened by a dog during her pregnancy; in a moment of alchemy, "qualities of the male pup" were transferred to the embryo, which was all that explained Roosevelt's embrace of a black man. It is worth adding that Vardaman was equally notable for his distinctive dark locks as for his wicked tongue. Democracy, no matter how dirty, belonged to the people, he held, and the people had the right to broadcast whatever they were feeling. The twenty-first-century Vardaman speaks

without self-censoring when he feels cornered by a disabled journalist or a blonde Fox News host with "blood coming out of her whatever."<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the founders' noble dream of an informed public, the American political landscape has never been able to sustain itself as a place for sound deliberation. Nor does American democracy consistently confer power to a calm problem solver. Outrageous language spoken by grandiose public men of all shapes and sizes and educational backgrounds, in and out of the halls of government, prefigured the passion-filled diatribes of the Civil War era. Then as now, the national media stoked the fires of popular discontent. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, print culture was huge, and newspapers across the country carried complete transcripts of bombastic speeches. One of the best-known practitioners of the democratic art of overstatement was Virginia planter-politician John Randolph of Roanoke, who often drowned out the practiced logic of his colleagues with oratorical detours drenched in comic indecision. Gawky to look at, this lifelong bachelor was an attack engine, thought clinically mad by many; yet the theatrically generated outrage he churned up drew crowds, and newspaper readers devoured all that he had to say. Appearance was part of Randolph's shrill charm, as were his mocking faces and rude antics: tall, impossibly thin, with a high, child-like voice, he took slugs from a flask on the floor of Congress; he loved to hear the sound of his own voice. His biographer Henry Adams said of his verbal combativeness, "He could gouge and kick, bite off an ear or a nose, or hit below the waist." Randolph asserted of his own "unprosperous" life that it was "the fruit of an ungovernable temper." The states' rights advocate was elected and reelected repeatedly over the course of decades; President Jackson named him ambassador to Russia. Like his anger-prone patron Jackson or the later Vardaman, John Randolph embodied an element in American democracy that still lives, and evidently thrives, and does not advertise for the founding generation's sobriety and deliberative spirit.<sup>13</sup>

What history teaches us about the true character of American democracy is that it cannot be generalized, and it cannot be defined scientifically. One cannot effectively lump voters together into arbitrary blocs based on demographic statistics and have it mean anything; there is no

reductionist, easily definable women's vote, or black or Latino vote, or Evangelical vote, or youth vote. And as *White Trash* has sought to make clear, the so-called white, working-class vote is an inaccurate designation as well. Class matters, as identity politics matters, but neither is sufficient alone to define categories of voting behavior.

Something else matters that rarely gets talked about: an amorphous, intangible something we might call "embodied appeal." It is the candidate's *metaphoric* identity, not a "true" identity, that citizens are met with in video clips and edited interviews. Whether the person running is a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent, and coming from a professional background as lawyer, doctor, military officer, or fame-chasing businessman, any individual who runs for national office is compelled to perform a kind of stage act. He or she becomes associated with a pet phrase, a slogan, a staged look, a zinger, a moniker—in short, the candidate exudes an appeal designed to push the emotional buttons of the broadest voter base imaginable. Optics matter. The size of crowds becomes a rallying point. The viability of detailed plans that the problem-solving, would-be legislator or would-be executive has studied, compared, and compiled is never as memorable as the performance dimension of the campaign.

Language rules. It is oft remarked that negative ads predominate because they work on the impressionable minds of voters. This is one of the sadder facts of modern electoral politics, yet the will does not exist to alter the increasingly expensive, all-out attack mode of saturation commercial bombing, in favor of measures that would be more amenable to the calmer vision of the framers of the Constitution who, as it happens, did not even address the prospect of the formation of organized political parties. (The original "Greatest Generation" was not composed of as many geniuses as we've been taught.) One of the reasons why the pollsters are often wrong is the widespread failure to account for the ways in which voters are convinced by what they are hearing. Selective belief, preference for one "truth" over another, explains, for instance, how someone can dismiss the vast majority of scientists who see incontrovertible evidence of dangerous trends in climate change. Political choices are hardly rational choices. An unconscious linguistic relationship forms between candidate and voter, and choice metaphors preoccupy a voter's thoughts.

Presidential elections are battles over worldviews. The symbols that

mattered most to Trump voters were about class, but the metaphoric meaning played out in a more expansive rhetoric that divided constituencies by competing markers of identity. The unspoken and spoken themes of the political contest were:

---

**Clinton Democrats**

Pedigreed Elites  
 Urban Insider  
 Cosmopolitan  
 Professionals  
 Meritocracy  
 Faith in Upward Mobility

---

**Trump Republicans**

Disinherited  
 Rural Outsider  
 Provincial  
 Working Stiffs  
 Hard Work  
 Fear of Losing Class Status

Both Trump at his inaugural and President Obama in his farewell remarks called for solidarity, but their visions of what constitutes togetherness are completely at odds. President Obama and Hillary Clinton celebrated American exceptionalism, which for them was bound up in education and economic opportunity, cultural diversity, and the promise that "all men are created equal." Democrats, in general, endorse the liberal ideal of meritocracy, in which talent is rewarded through the acquisition of earned academic credentials. Yet this dream is not possible for all Americans. Only 32.5 percent of Americans today graduate college, which means that the majority does not imagine this path up the social ladder as its ticket to success. Trump, in contrast, would appear to envision solidarity in terms of an "America First" patriotism.<sup>14</sup>

Back in 2004, campaigning for the Democratic nomination, South Carolina Democrat John Edwards capitalized on a powerful image when he continually hammered the existence of "two Americas." The same imagery was put to use in 2016 by the nominee of the Republican Party, who painted the country he sought to rule as an economically war-torn wasteland, lacking in the vitality and the productivity that had made it dominant in the past. (In his 2017 inaugural, Trump described the "rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of America.") In this metaphoric construction, recovering greatness meant replenishing the strength of an all-American workforce, returning it to its accustomed (and deserved) position at the top of the food chain.

Hardworking breadwinners who had come to see diminishing returns, their pride in performance outstripped by foreign manufacturing, found their candidate. You, the disinherited, have lost ground, he said, and are at a standstill in your lives, because your federal government has *allowed* this terrible decline to occur. Whereas Senator Edwards had directed his slogan at gross inequality, shining a light on *all* the poor and underrepresented, Trump courted the predominantly white workforce, whose percentage of the population was evidently in decline; thus, immigrants and refugees became targets—"the usual suspects," if one goes back to attacks on the Irish, southern Europeans, Chinese, Jews, and others, in past generations.<sup>15</sup>

The election has opened up festering wounds. The deepest of these exposes how we measure the value of civic virtue and hard work. Many successful Americans believe they have made it on their own and have little patience for the complaints of those left behind. Trump perceived a world of winners and losers, and many of his supporters want to reinforce the old stigmas that separated the productive worker from the idle. They wanted the boundaries between the unemployed and employed to be firmly enforced, not weakened. "Make America Great Again" is another way of saying that hard work is no longer automatically rewarded as a virtue. It tapped the anxieties of all who resented government for handing over the country to supposedly less deserving classes: new immigrants, protesting African Americans, lazy welfare freeloaders, and Obamacare recipients asking for handouts. Angry Trump voters were convinced that these classes (the "takers") were not playing by the rules (i.e., working their way up the ladder) and that government entitlement programs were allowing some to advance past more deserving (white, native-born) Americans. This was how many came to feel "disinherited."<sup>16</sup>

The phenomenon of social and political alienation cannot be easily cured. Even Vice President Joe Biden remarked in 2016 that Democrats had placed too much emphasis on "pedigree." He meant intellectual pedigree, class pedigree. This simmering resentment made it easier for Trump to widen the cleavage by suggesting that the federal government had been hijacked by the first African American president, who remained illegitimate in the eyes of many in the GOP. Trump had not only dominated headlines by challenging President Obama to produce his birth

certificate, but he also, significantly, questioned his Harvard credentials. Racial pedigree was used to undercut intellectual pedigree.<sup>17</sup>

"Taking our country back," as the Tea Party harangued after 2010, became a convenient slogan for Trump to use against the Obama administration and its surrogate Hillary Clinton. By 2016, Trump's "I will bring the jobs back" seemed a winning concept. Distrust of fluid class boundaries made many voters fear competition from below. They lacked faith in the promised social mobility of the meritocratic system. As one Trump supporter from Pennsylvania who attended the inauguration explained as he imagined his son's future: "Where I'm from, we see kids get engineering degrees and end up working at McDonald's." Anecdotal evidence suggested a rigged system and a zero-sum game for success. If there were undeserving winners, there must be losers.<sup>18</sup>

Trump's statements, up to and including his inaugural address, may have been short on specific policy prescriptions; but no moment was lost whenever the incoming president saw a chance to promise that he alone could restore the American dream. "We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams." He repeated the word *dream* at least four times on January 20, 2017.<sup>19</sup>

Dreams may make the heart beat faster, but they do not improve social conditions or ensure fairness in the workplace or secure the family farm. So, once again, it is the language deployed by the politician that obscures patterns we have seen before but that strikes voters as new and urgent. This is what professional historians are called on to do: to look backward and uncover what is missing in current popular conceptions. Hopefully, then, this book has achieved its goal of historicizing the plight of the underclass over four centuries. Perhaps, too, it is clearer to more Americans that the rural as well as postindustrial wasteland can no longer be overlooked as a site of meaningful social and political discontent. The prevailing mood among those whose manners have been mocked since colonial times—whether called waste people, mudsills, rednecks, or white trash—should matter to us. They are a factor in American history, because class is as American as it ever was British.

Punditry has tended to reduce the reality of class, which crosses lines of racial and gender identity, and to replace it with an all-encompassing

marker of dispossession that exclusively features the once ascendant, now aggrieved “white working-class male.” Such an artificial, monolithic designation of working class reinforces the idea of voting blocs as fixed categories. As a result, politicians are said to appeal to one or another preset group. We need to see beyond.<sup>20</sup>

We need to look honestly at the real perils of our electoral system in this age of media celebrity and instantaneous communication, especially when compounded lies cease to shock and a cacophony of voices among insistent ideologues compromise constitutional principles and make it harder and harder to know which policies stand the best chance of improving the lives of more citizens. We need to stop thinking that some Americans are the real Americans, the deserving, the talented, the most patriotic and hardworking, while others can be dismissed as less deserving of the American dream.

One thing we can do in the interest of national self-improvement is to further the conversation about the manipulations of class identity by political aspirants, who game the system each time they sell unreal expectations to people whose interests they only pretend to represent. If we do not study ourselves with due attention to disturbing patterns in our history, we will be learning little, and democracy can scarcely claim to be the best form of government.

## PREFACE

One of the most memorable films of all time is *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), a classic portrait of the legacy of slavery and racial segregation in the South. It is a film that I have been teaching for over two decades, and is one of President Obama’s favorite movies. Yet when my students watch this film (even if they were exposed to it in high school), they see for the first time that the drama within has not one but two disturbing messages.

One plotline is about the brave, principled lawyer Atticus Finch, who refuses to perpetuate the racial double standard: despite opposition, he agrees to defend an African American, Tom Robinson, on the charge of raping a poor white girl, Mayella Ewell. Though the court finds Robinson guilty, we the viewers know he is innocent. An honorable, hardworking family man, he stands well above the degraded Ewells, his accusers. The shabbily attired Mayella is cowed by her bully of a father, a scrawny man seen in overalls, who is devoid of merit or morality. Bob Ewell demands that the all-white jury of common men take his side, which they do in the end. He insists that they help him avenge his daughter’s honor. Not satisfied when Robinson is killed trying to escape from prison, he attacks Atticus Finch’s two children on Halloween night.

Bob Ewell’s full name is Robert E. Lee Ewell. But he is not an heir of one of the aristocratic families of the Old South. As Harper Lee described them in the novel from which the classic film was adapted, the Ewells were members of the terminally poor, those whose status could not be lifted or debased by any economic fluctuation—not even the Depression. They were human waste. In the author’s words, “No truant officers could keep their numerous offspring in school; no public health officer could free them from congenital defects, various worms, and diseases indigent to filthy surroundings.” They lived behind the town dump, which they combed every day. Their run-down shack was “once a Negro cabin.” Garbage was strewn everywhere, making the cabin look like the “playhouse

of an insane child." No one in the neighborhood knew how many children lived there: some thought nine, others six. To the town of Maycomb, Alabama, the Ewell children were simply "dirty-faced ones at the windows when anyone passed."<sup>1</sup> The Ewells are unmistakably what southerners (and a lot of other people) called white trash.

Americans today have a narrow and skewed understanding of white trash. One of the most powerful and most familiar symbols of backward attitudes associated with this unfavored group is that captured in newspapers and in television footage of 1957, showing the angry white faces of protest amid school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 2015, tattooed KKK protestors defending the Confederate flag outside the Columbia, South Carolina, statehouse evoked similar feelings, demonstrating the persistence of an embarrassing social phenomenon. The stock of the Food Network's popular performer Paula Deen, a Georgia native known for her cholesterol-rich recipes, suddenly took a nosedive in 2013, when it was revealed that she used the "N word"; almost overnight, her down-home reputation sank and she was rebranded as a crude, unsophisticated redneck. At the other extreme, television viewers have been treated to such repackaged vaudeville characters as Jefferson Davis "Boss" Hogg in *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–85), which could be seen in reruns until 2015, when it was dropped because of the Confederate flag painted on Bo and Luke Duke's car, "General Lee." The very title of this show was a pun on class identity, since the Dukes are poor Georgia mountain folk and moonshiners, yet their name implies English royalty.<sup>2</sup>

These white trash snapshots offer an incomplete picture of a problem that is actually quite old and regularly goes unrecognized. In their conversations about viral events such as those noted above, Americans lack any deeper appreciation of class. Beyond white anger and ignorance is a far more complicated history of class identity that dates back to America's colonial period and British notions of poverty. In many ways, our class system has hinged on the evolving political rationales used to dismiss or demonize (or occasionally reclaim) those white rural outcasts seemingly incapable of becoming part of the mainstream society.

The Ewells, then, are not bit players in our country's history. Their history starts in the 1500s, not the 1900s. It derives from British colonial policies dedicated to resettling the poor, decisions that conditioned American notions of class and left a permanent imprint. First known as

"waste people," and later "white trash," marginalized Americans were stigmatized for their inability to be productive, to own property, or to produce healthy and upwardly mobile children—the sense of uplift on which the American dream is predicated. The American solution to poverty and social backwardness was not what we might expect. Well into the twentieth century, expulsion and even sterilization sounded rational to those who wished to reduce the burden of "loser" people on the larger economy.

In Americans' evolving attitudes toward these unwanted people, perhaps the most dramatic language attached to the mid-nineteenth century, when poor rural whites were categorized as somehow less than white, their yellowish skin and diseased and decrepit children marking them as a strange breed apart. The words "waste" and "trash" are crucial to any understanding of this powerful and enduring vocabulary. Throughout its history, the United States has always had a class system. It is not only directed by the top 1 percent and supported by a contented middle class. We can no longer ignore the stagnant, expendable bottom layers of society in explaining the national identity.

The poor, the waste, the rubbish, as they are variously labeled, have stood front and center during America's most formative political contests. During colonial settlement, they were useful pawns as well as rebellious troublemakers, a pattern that persisted amid mass migrations of landless squatters westward across the continent. Southern poor whites figured prominently in the rise of Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party, and in the atmosphere of distrust that caused bad blood to percolate among the poorer classes within the Confederacy during the Civil War. White trash were dangerous outliers in efforts to rebuild the Union during Reconstruction; and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the eugenics movement flourished, they were the class of degenerates targeted for sterilization. On the flip side, poor whites were the beneficiaries of rehabilitative efforts during the New Deal and in LBJ's "Great Society."

At all times, white trash remind us of one of the American nation's uncomfortable truths: the poor are always with us. A preoccupation with penalizing poor whites reveals an uneasy tension between what Americans are taught to think the country promises—the dream of upward mobility—and the less appealing truth that class barriers almost

invariably make that dream unobtainable. Of course, the intersection of race and class remains an undeniable part of the overall story.

The study presented here reveals a complicated legacy. It's not just a question of labeling the bottom at any given time. Rationalizing economic inequality has been an unconscious part of the national credo; poverty has been naturalized, often seen as something beyond human control. By this measure, poor whites had to be classified as a distinct breed. In other words, breeding was not about the cultivation of social manners or skills, but something far more sinister: an imposed inheritance. The language of class that America embraced played off English attitudes toward vagrancy, and marked a transatlantic fixation with animal husbandry, demography, and pedigree. The poor were not only described as waste, but as inferior animal stocks too.

Over the years, populist themes have emerged alongside more familiar derogatory images, but never with enough force to diminish the hostility projected onto impoverished rural whites. We have seen in recent decades the rise of tribal passions through the rediscovery of "redneck roots," a proud movement that coursed through the 1980s and 1990s. More than a reaction to progressive changes in race relations, this shift was spurred on by a larger fascination with identity politics. Roots implied that class took on the traits (and allure) of an ethnic heritage, which in turn reflected the modern desire to measure class as merely a cultural phenomenon. But as evidenced in the popularity of the "reality TV" shows *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* in recent years, white trash in the twenty-first century remains fraught with the older baggage of stereotypes of the hopelessly ill bred.

A host of well-known and lesser-known figures contributed to the long saga of America's embattled lowly breed. These include Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Davy Crockett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jefferson Davis, Andrew Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Theodore Roosevelt, Erskine Caldwell, James Agee, Elvis Presley, Lyndon Baines Johnson, James Dickey, Billy Carter, Dolly Parton, William Jefferson Clinton, and Sarah Palin, to name a few. Examining their ideas, shifting public images, and self-images helps us to make greater sense of the curious and complicated story of American class identity.

This book tells many stories, then. One is the importance of America's rural past. Another, and arguably the most important, is the one we

as a people have trouble embracing: the pervasiveness of a class hierarchy in the United States. It begins and ends with the concepts of land and property ownership: class identity and the material and metaphorical meaning of land are closely connected. For much of American history, the worst classes were seen as extrusions of the worst land: scrubby, barren, and swampy wasteland. Home ownership remains today the measure of social mobility.

My interest in this topic goes back to graduate school, where I was fortunate to have worked with two remarkable scholars whose approach to history shaped my professional career in significant ways. Gerda Lerner, my doctoral dissertation adviser, had a keen passion for demystifying ideologies, and she instilled in me a wariness for the limits of conventional wisdom. Paul Boyer was an intellectual historian with an amazing range, who wrote with subtlety and grace about Puritan New England, nineteenth-century moral reformers, and twentieth-century religious fundamentalists. The border town of San Benito, Texas, figures into my interest in this topic as well. It was my mother's birthplace. Her father, John MacDougall, was a modern-day colonist, bringing settlers from Canada to farm the land.

Friends and colleagues have helped this book along in crucial ways. I wish to thank those who read chapters, gave suggestions, or sent along sources: Chris Tomlins, Alexis McCrossen, Liz Varon, Matt Dennis, Lizzie Reis, Amy Greenberg, and my LSU colleague Aaron Sheehan-Dean. Lisa Francavilla, managing editor of *The Papers of Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Charlottesville, Virginia, called my attention to a valuable letter; Charles Roberts graciously shared with me a crucial newspaper article on the resettlement community of Palmedale, Alabama. My Viking editor, Wendy Wolf, with roots in New Orleans, was instrumental in tightening the argument and policing the prose. Wendy put an extraordinary amount of time, skill, and care into the manuscript; her thoughtful editing has taken a complex history and made it far more reader friendly, proving that academic rigor does not have to limit accessibility. Most of all, I have to thank Andy Burstein, my dearest confidant and fellow historian, whose critical eye made this a much better book.

## INTRODUCTION

# Fables We Forget By

---

We know what class is. Or think we do: economic stratification created by wealth and privilege. The problem is that popular American history is most commonly told—dramatized—without much reference to the existence of social classes. It is as though in separating from Great Britain, the United States somehow magically escaped the bonds of class and derived a higher consciousness of enriched possibility. After all, the U.S. Senate is not the House of Lords. Schoolbooks teach the national narrative along the lines of “how land and liberty were won” or “how ordinary folks seized opportunity.” The hallowed American dream is the gold standard by which politicians and voters alike are meant to measure quality of life as each generation pursues its own definition of happiness unfettered by the restraints of birth (who your parents are) or station (the position you start out from in the class system).

Our cherished myths are at once bolstering and debilitating. “All men are created equal” was successfully employed as a motto to define the promise of America’s open spaces and a united people’s moral self-regard in distinguishing themselves from a host of hopeless societies abroad. The idea of America was presented by its chief promoters with great panache, a vision of how a modern republic might prove itself revolutionary in terms of social mobility in a world dominated by monarchy and fixed aristocracy.

All that is bolstering. However, the reality on the ground was and is considerably different. In the most literal terms, as we shall see, British colonists promoted a dual agenda: one involved reducing poverty back in England, and the other called for transporting the idle and unproductive to the New World. After settlement, colonial outposts exploited their unfree laborers (indentured servants, slaves, and children) and saw such expendable classes as human waste. The poor, the waste, did not disappear, and by the early eighteenth century they were seen as a permanent breed. This way of classifying human failure took hold in the United

States. Every era in the continent's vaunted developmental story had its own taxonomy of waste people—unwanted and unsalvageable. Each era had its own means of distancing its version of white trash from the mainstream ideal.

By thinking of the lower classes as incurable, irreparable “breeds,” this study reframes the relationship of race and class. Class had its own singular and powerful dynamic, apart from its intersection with race. It starts with the rich and potent meaning that came with the different names given the American underclass. Long before they were today's “trailer trash” and “rednecks,” they were called “lubbers” and “rubbish” and “clay-eaters” and “crackers”—and that's just scratching the surface.

Lest the reader misconstrue the book's purpose, I want to make the point unambiguously: by reevaluating the American historical experience in class terms, I expose what is too often ignored about American identity. But I'm not just pointing out what we've gotten wrong about the past; I also want to make it possible to better appreciate the gnawing contradictions still present in modern American society.

How does a culture that prizes equality of opportunity explain, or indeed accommodate, its persistently marginalized people? Twenty-first-century Americans need to confront this enduring conundrum. Let us recognize the existence of our underclass. It has been with us since the first European settlers arrived on these shores. It is not an insignificant part of the vast national demographic today. The puzzle of how white trash embodied this tension is one of the key questions the book presumes to answer.

America's class language and thinking began with the forceful imprint left by English colonization. The generations of the 1500s and 1600s that first envisioned the broad-scale English exploitation of America's natural environment employed a vocabulary that was a mix of purposeful description and raw imagery. They did not indulge in pretty talk. The idea of settlement had to be sold to wary investors; the planting of New World American colonies had to serve Old World purposes. In grand fashion, promoters imagined America not as an Eden of opportunity but as a giant rubbish heap that could be transformed into productive terrain. Expendable people—waste people—would be unloaded from England; their labor would germinate a distant wasteland. Harsh as it

sounds, the idle poor, dregs of society, were to be sent thither simply to throw down manure and die in a vacuous muck. Before it became that fabled “City upon a Hill,” America was in the eyes of sixteenth-century adventurers a foul, weedy wilderness—a “sinke hole” suited to ill-bred commoners. Dark images of the New World accompanied more seductive ones. When early English promoters portrayed North America as a rich and fertile landscape, they grossly and perhaps knowingly exaggerated. Most were describing a land they never had seen, of course. Wary investors and state officials had to be convinced to take the plunge into a risky overseas venture. But most important, it was a place into which they could export their own marginalized people.

The idea of America as “the world's best hope” came much later. Historic memory has camouflaged the less noble origins of “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” We all know what imagery springs to mind when patriots of our day seek confirmation that their country is and was always an “exceptional” place: modest Pilgrims taught to plant by generous Indians; Virginia Cavaliers entertaining guests at their refined estates along the James River. Because of how history is taught, Americans tend to associate Plymouth and Jamestown with cooperation rather than class division.

And it gets ever more misty-eyed from there, because disorder and discord serve no positive purpose in burgeoning national pride. Class is the most outstanding, if routinely overlooked, element in presuppositions about early settlement. Even now, the notion of a broad and supple middle class functions as a mighty balm, a smoke screen. We cling to the comfort of the middle class, forgetting that there can't be a middle class without a lower. It is only occasionally shaken up, as when the Occupy Wall Street movement of recent years shone an embarrassing light on the financial sector and the grotesque separation between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. And then the media giants find new crises and the nation's inherited disregard for class reboots, as the subject recedes into the background again.

An imaginary classless (or class-free) American past is the America that Charles Murray has conjured in his book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (2012). For Murray, an authority in the minds of many, the large and fluid society of 1963 was held together by the shared experiences of the nuclear family. When they watched *The*

*Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, average Americans believed they were seeing their lives on the small screen.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing could be further from the truth. Even in its innocent youth, television caricatured people by class types. One only need consider a few of the other popular shows of those halcyon years to prove the point: *Petticoat Junction* (1963), which chronicled rural life at the Shady Rest Hotel and contrasted a simpler people with their savvy city relations; *The Farmer's Daughter* (1963), featuring a Swedish American maid from the farm who goes to work for a U.S. congressman; *Green Acres* (1965), where Arnold the pig is the smartest resident of the hick town of Hooter-ville; and, finally, that classic satire of social mobility, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962), whose mountain-bred oil millionaires seem like evolutionary throwbacks in the eyes of city folk. And lest we forget, *Ozzie and Harriet* began its long run at the same time as *The Honeymooners*, a brilliant send-up of a bus driver, a sewer worker, and their poor working-class wives. Everyone who tuned in understood perfectly well that *Ozzie and Harriet's* world bore no resemblance to Ralph and Alice Kramden's. Parody was one way Americans safely digested their class politics.

Selective memory allows us to romanticize a golden age that functions as a timeless talisman of American identity. For Charles Murray, who ignores the country's long history, the golden age is 1963, when the essence of the American creed was somehow captured in a Gallup poll in which respondents refused to self-identify as either poor or rich: approximately half said that they were working class, while the other half perceived themselves as middle class. As if a single statistic could possibly tell a comprehensive story, the social scientist writes, "Those refusals reflected a national conceit that had prevailed from the beginning of the nation: *America didn't have classes*, or, to the extent that it did, Americans should act as if we didn't" (emphasis added). Murray's fable of class denial can only exist by erasing a wealth of historical evidence that proves otherwise. The problem is, the evidence has never been effectively laid out, allowing gross misrepresentations to stand.<sup>2</sup>

By gaining first a better understanding of the colonial context and, next, charting the steps by which modern definitions of class were established, we will be able to see how ideas and ideals combined over time. By acknowledging the ongoing influence of older English definitions of poverty and class, we will come to recognize that class identity was

apparent in America—profoundly so—long before George Gallup saw it as a creature of public opinion; indeed, class resonated long before waves of immigrants swept ashore in the nineteenth century and an awkward, often heated process of acculturation ensued. Above all, we must stop declaring what is patently untrue, that Americans, through some rare good fortune, escaped the burden of class that prevailed in the mother country of England. Far more than we choose to acknowledge, our relentless class system evolved out of recurring agrarian notions regarding the character and potential of the land, the value of labor, and critical concepts of breeding. Embarrassing lower-class populations have always been numerous, and have always been seen on the North American continent as waste people.

Historical mythmaking is made possible only by forgetting. We have to begin, then, with the first refusal to face reality: most colonizing schemes that took root in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British America were built on privilege and subordination, not any kind of proto-democracy. The generation of 1776 certainly underplayed that fact. And all subsequent generations took their cue from the nation's founders.

A past that relies exclusively on the storied Pilgrims, or the sainted generation of 1776, shortchanges us in more ways than one. We miss a crucial historical competition between northern and southern founding narratives and their distinctive parables minimizing the importance of class. The Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution, principal founding documents, loom large as proof of national paternity; the six-foot-three-inch Virginian George Washington stands head and shoulders above his countrymen as the figurative "father" of his nation. With Virginia's claim to an origins story in mind, another founding father, John Adams, heralded the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, as an earlier and stronger model for an American patrician-patriarch. The lesson is easy: then as now, origins are contested territory. What can't be denied, however, are the class origins of the anointed leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the web of stories the founding generation itself wove, our modern beliefs have most to do with the grand mythmakers of the nineteenth century. The inspired historians of that period were nearly all New Englanders; they outpaced all others in shaping the historical

narrative, so that the dominant story of origins worked in their favor. That is how we got the primordial Puritan narrative of a sentimental community and a commendable work ethic. Of course, the twin attributes of religious freedom and hard work erase from the record all those settlers who did not live up to these high ideals. The landless, the impoverished, the progenitors of future generations of white trash conveniently disappear from the founding saga.

There were plays and poems, in addition to standard histories, flowing from the pens of Bostonians as they praised the separatists who established the early settlements. As early as 1769, New Englanders began celebrating "Forefathers Day" in Plymouth. Boston artist Henry Sargent unveiled his painting *Landing of the Fathers* in 1815. But the first volume of George Bancroft's widely praised *History of the United States* (1834) may be the best example of how the *Mayflower* and *Arbella* washed ashore and seeded the ground where love of liberty bore its ripest fruit in hubristic orations by the likes of Daniel Webster at well-attended nineteenth-century anniversary celebrations. These efforts were magnified as a result of promotional skills demonstrated by such organizations as the Colonial Dames, who worked to elevate the *Mayflower* Pilgrims and Winthrop's Puritans into some of the foremost figures in our national memory.<sup>4</sup>

In 1889, the Pilgrim Monument (now known as the National Monument to the Forefathers) was dedicated at Plymouth. Showing just how "colossal" the original plan was, the Boston architect and sculptor Hammett Billings submitted a design for a 150-foot monument, which he conceived as the American version of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It does not nullify his purpose that the final sculpture proved to be of a smaller scale and (predictably) allegorical: a female figure of Faith points to heaven and clutches a Bible, much like the Statue of Liberty with her torch.<sup>5</sup>

Monuments imperfectly record the past, as we all know. There is strange discrepancy between the chiseled female form (which could appear almost anywhere) and the event being recalled. John Gast's famous 1872 painting *American Progress* has an ethereal female spirit flying above the pioneers' transcontinental migratory march west across the plains; stagecoaches, wagons, railroad tracks, telegraph lines push aside Indians and buffalo that stand in their way. Billings's statue also

heralds Faith, who lofts above the actual people on the *Mayflower*: their names appear less prominently on the side of the structure. Thus the first English settlers' personal motives for making the journey have been subsumed into a singular, overwhelming force of religious liberty. The settlers remain mute. The complex process of colonization is condensed and forgotten, because all human traces (the actual people tied to those names) are lost. There is no remembrance of those who failed, those without heirs or legacies. Instead, time has left subsequent generations with a hollow symbol: progress on the march.<sup>6</sup>

The compression of history, the winnowing of history, may seem natural and neutral, but it is decidedly not. It is the means by which grade school history becomes our standard adult history. And so the great American saga, as taught, excludes the very pertinent fact that after the 1630s, less than half came to Massachusetts for religious reasons. The tall tales we unthinkingly absorb when young somehow remain within; the result is a narrowly conceived sense of national belonging productive of the most uncompromising of satisfying myths: "American exceptionalism." We are unique and different, and the absence of class is one of our hallmarks.

Exceptionalism emerges from a host of earlier myths of redemption and good intentions. Pilgrims, persecuted in the Old World, brave the Atlantic dreaming of finding religious freedom on America's shores; wagon trains of hopeful pioneer families head west to start a new life. Nowhere else, we are meant to understand, was personal freedom so treasured as it was in the American experience. The very act of migration claims to equalize the people involved, molding them into a homogeneous, effectively classless society. Stories of unity tamp down our discontents and mask even our most palpable divisions. And when these divisions are class based, as they almost always are, a pronounced form of amnesia sets in. Americans do not like to talk about class. It is not supposed to be important in our history. It is not who we are.

Instead, we have the Pilgrims (a people who are celebrated at Thanksgiving, a holiday that did not exist until the Civil War), who came ashore at Plymouth Rock (a place only designated as such in the late eighteenth century). The quintessential American holiday was associated with the native turkey to help promote the struggling poultry industry during the Civil War. The word "Pilgrim" was not even popularized until 1794.

Nevertheless, the “first” Thanksgiving has been given a date of 1621, when well-meaning Pilgrims and fair-minded Wampanoags shared a meal. The master of ceremonies was their Indian interpreter, Squanto, who had helped the English survive a difficult winter. Left out of this story is the detail (not so minor) that Squanto only knew English because he had been kidnapped and sold as a slave to an English ship’s captain. (Coerced labor of this kind reminds us of how the majority of white servants came to America.) Squanto’s friendship, alas, was a far more complicated affair than the fairy tale suggests. He died of a mysterious fever the very next year while engaged in a power struggle with Massasoit, the “Great Sachem” of the Wampanoag confederation.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the obvious stature of a Washington and a Jefferson, and Virginia’s settlement thirteen years pre-Pilgrim, the southern states lagged behind the scribbling northerners in fashioning a comprehensive colonial myth to highlight their own cultural ascendancy in the New World. Here’s what we have: Less a story than a mystery, there persists to this day a morbid curiosity about the 1587 “Lost Colony” of Roanoke, a puzzle on the order of Amelia Earhart’s disappearance over the Pacific. A strange allure surrounds every vanishing people—recall the wildly popular television series *Lost*. Or Plato’s Atlantis. Ghost ships and ghost colonies invoke a marvelous sense of timelessness; they exist outside the normal rules of history, which explains why Roanoke’s mystery mitigates the harsh realities we instinctively know the early settlers were forced to face.<sup>8</sup>

If Roanoke is a tantalizing curio of a lost world, Jamestown, its more permanent offspring, grew to represent the Virginia colony’s origins in a way that could compete with the uplifting story of the Pilgrims. The 1607 founding of Jamestown may lack a national holiday, but it does claim a far sexier fable in the dramatic rescue of John Smith by the “Indian princess” Pocahontas. As the story goes, in the middle of an elaborate ceremony, the eleven-year-old “beloved daughter” of “King” Powhatan rushed forward and placed her head over Smith, stopping tribesmen from smashing his skull with their clubs. A magical bond formed between the proud Englishman and the young naif, cutting through all the linguistic and cultural barriers that separated the Old and New Worlds.

This brave girl has fascinated poets, playwrights, artists, and film-

makers. She has been called the “patron deity” of Jamestown and the “mother” of both Virginia and America. A writer in 1908 dubiously claimed that Pocahontas was actually the daughter of Virginia Dare, the youngest member of the Roanoke colony, making the Indian princess a child of European descent lost in the wilderness, much like Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes*, published three years later.<sup>9</sup>

The best-known, most recent version of the story is the 1995 Walt Disney animated film. Strikingly beautiful, unnervingly buxom, and more like a pop culture diva than a member of the Tsenacommacah tribe, Disney’s Pocahontas fabulously communes with nature, befriending a raccoon, talking to a tree; she is nearly identical to other Disney heroines Snow White and Cinderella, who also boast a menagerie of animal friends. Why? Communing with nature draws upon the potent romantic image of the New World as a prelapsarian classless society. Old tropes meld seamlessly with new cinematic forms: women in Western culture have been consistently portrayed as closer to Mother Nature, lushness and abundance, Edenic tranquility and fertility. There is no rancid swamp, no foul diseases and starvation, in this Jamestown recreation.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have debated whether the rescue of Smith ever took place, since only his account exists and its most elaborate version was published years after Pocahontas’s death. Smith was a military adventurer, a self-promoter, a commoner, who had the annoying habit of exaggerating his exploits. His rescue story perfectly mimicked a popular Scottish ballad of the day in which the beautiful daughter of a Turkish prince rescues an English adventurer who is about to lose his head. Though an Anglican minister presided over Princess Pocahontas’s marriage to the planter John Rolfe, one member of the Jamestown council dismissed her as the heathen spawn of a “cursed generation” and labeled her a “barbarous[ly] mannered” girl. Even Rolfe considered the union a convenient political alliance rather than a love match.<sup>11</sup>

We should not expect Disney to get that right when the fundamental principle of the classless American identity—sympathetic communion—is at stake. The film builds on another mythic strand of the oft-told tale: it is John Smith (blond and brawny in his animated form), not Rolfe, who takes on the role of Pocahontas’s lover. Exaggerating her beauty and highlighting her choice to save Smith and become an ally of the English

is not new. When a less-than-flattering portrait appeared in 1842, making her plump and ungainly, and not the lovely and petite Indian princess, there was a storm of protest over what one critic called a “coarse and unpoetical” rendering. Her Anglicized beauty is nonnegotiable; her primitive elegance makes her assimilation tolerable. Indeed, it is all that makes acceptance of the Indian maiden possible.<sup>12</sup>

The Pocahontas story requires the princess to reject her own people and culture. This powerful theme has persisted, as the historian Nancy Shoemaker observes, because it contributes to the larger national rationale of the Indians’ willing participation in their own demise. Yet this young girl did not willingly live at Jamestown; she was taken captive. In the garden paradise of early Virginia that never was, war and suffering, greed and colonial conquest are conveniently missing. Class and cultural dissonance magically fade from view in order to remake American origins into a utopian love story.<sup>13</sup>

Can we handle the truth? In the early days of settlement, in the profit-driven minds of well-connected men in charge of a few prominent joint-stock companies, America was conceived of in paradoxical terms: at once a land of fertility and possibility and a place of outstanding wastes, “ranke” and weedy backwaters, dank and sorry swamps. Here was England’s opportunity to thin out its prisons and siphon off thousands; here was an outlet for the unwanted, a way to remove vagrants and beggars, to be rid of London’s eyesore population. Those sent on the hazardous voyage to America who survived presented a simple purpose for imperial profiteers: to serve English interests and perish in the process. In that sense, the “first comers,” as they were known before the magical “Pilgrims” took hold, were something less than an inspired lot. Dozens who disembarked from the *Mayflower* succumbed that first year to starvation and disease linked to vitamin deficiency; scurvy rotted their gums, and they bled from different orifices. By the 1630s, New Englanders reinvented a hierarchical society of “stations,” from ruling elite to household servants. In their number were plenty of poor boys, meant for exploitation. Some were religious, but they were in the minority among the waves of migrants that followed Winthrop’s *Arbella*. The elites owned Indian and African slaves, but the population they most exploited were

their child laborers. Even the church reflected class relations: designated seating affirmed class station.<sup>14</sup>

Virginia was even less a place of hope. Here were England’s rowdy and undisciplined, men willing to gamble their lives away but not ready to work for a living. England perceived them as “manure” for a marginal land. All that these idle men understood was a cruel discipline when it was imposed upon them in the manner of the mercenary John Smith, and the last thing they wanted was to work to improve the land. All that would keep the fledgling colony alive was a military-style labor camp meant to protect England’s interests in the country’s ongoing competition with the equally designing Spanish, French, and Dutch governments. That a small fraction of colonists survived the first twenty years of settlement came as no surprise back home—nor did London’s elite much care. The investment was not in people, whose already unrefined habits declined over time, whose rudeness magnified in relation to their brutal encounters with Indians. The colonists were meant to find gold, and to line the pockets of the investor class back in England. The people sent to accomplish this task were by definition expendable.<sup>15</sup>

So now we know what happens to our colonial history. It is white-washed. Though New World settlers were supposed to represent the promise of social mobility, and the Pilgrims generated our hallowed faith in liberty, nineteenth-century Americans paradoxically created a larger-than-life cast of “democratic” royalty. These inheritors founded the first genealogical societies in the 1840s, and by the turn of the twentieth century patriotic organizations with an emphasis on hereditary descent, such as the General Society of Mayflower Descendants and the Order of the Founders and Patriots of America, boasted chapters across the nation. The highly exclusive Order of the First Families of Virginia was established in 1912, its members claiming that their lineage could be traced back to English lords and Lady Rebecca Rolfe—whom we all know as the ennobled and Anglicized Pocahontas.<sup>16</sup>

Statues are the companions of elite societies in celebrating paternal lineage and a new aristocracy. They tell us that some families (and some classes) have a greater claim as heirs of the founding promise. Municipal and state leaders have supported the national hagiography in bold form by constructing grand monuments to our colonial city fathers. The

version of John Winthrop that the Revolutionary John Adams had favored, dressed in Shakespearean or Tudor-Stuart attire and with an ornate ruff collar and hose, first graced the Back Bay of Boston in 1880. But the largest such memorial is the twenty-seven-ton statue of William Penn perched atop City Hall in Philadelphia. After it was completed in 1901, no structure in the entire city was permitted to be taller than Penn's Quaker hat until 1987, ensuring that the founder's sovereign gaze towered over the City of Brotherly Love, commemorating the colonizing act of territorial possession. In British law, ownership was measured by standing one's ground—that is, holding and occupying the land. Land itself was a source of civic identity. This principle explains as well the totem value of "Plymouth Rock," the large stone discovered long after the last Pilgrim breathed New England air, christened in the eighteenth century as the first piece of land on which the *Mayflower* settlers stood.<sup>17</sup>

Commemoration of this kind begs the following questions: Who were the winners and losers in the great game of colonial conquest? Beyond parceling the land, how were estates bounded, fortunes made, and labor secured? What social structures, what manner of social relationships did the first European Americans really set in motion? Finding answers to these questions will enable us to fully appreciate how long-ago-established identities of haves and have-nots left a permanent imprint on the collective American mind.

Americans' sketchy understanding of the nation's colonial beginnings reflects the larger cultural impulse to forget—or at least gloss over—centuries of dodgy decisions, dubious measures, and outright failures. The "Lost Colony" of Roanoke was just one of many unsuccessful colonial schemes. Ambitious-sounding plans for New World settlements were never more than ad hoc notions or overblown promotional tracts. The recruits for these projects did not necessarily share the beliefs of those principled leaders molded in bronze—the John Winthrops and William Penns—who are lionized for having projected the enlarged destinies of their respective colonies.

Most settlers in the seventeenth century did not envision their forced exile as the start of a "Citty upon a Hill." They did not express undying confidence in Penn's "Holy Experiment." Dreamers dreamt, but few settlers came to America to fulfill any divine plan. During the 1600s, far from being ranked as valued British subjects, the great majority of early

colonists were classified as surplus population and expendable "rubbish," a rude rather than robust population. The English subscribed to the idea that the poor dregs would be weeded out of English society in four ways. Either nature would reduce the burden of the poor through food shortages, starvation, and disease, or, drawn into crime, they might end up on the gallows. Finally, some would be impressed by force or lured by bounties to fight and die in foreign wars, or else be shipped off to the colonies. Such worthless drones as these could be removed to colonial outposts that were in short supply of able-bodied laborers and, lest we forget, young "fruitful" females. Once there, it was hoped, the drones would be energized as worker bees. The bee was the favorite insect of the English, a creature seen as chaste but, more important, highly productive.<sup>18</sup>

The colonists were a mixed lot. On the bottom of the heap were men and women of the poor and criminal classes. Among these unheroic transplants were roguish highwaymen, mean vagrants, Irish rebels, known whores, and an assortment of convicts shipped to the colonies for grand larceny or other property crimes, as a reprieve of sorts, to escape the gallows. Not much better were those who filled the ranks of indentured servants, who ranged in class position from lowly street urchins to former artisans burdened with overwhelming debts. They had taken a chance in the colonies, having been impressed into service and then choosing exile over possible incarceration within the walls of an overcrowded, disease-ridden English prison. Labor shortages led some ship captains and agents to round up children from the streets of London and other towns to sell to planters across the ocean—this was known as "spiriting." Young children were shipped off for petty crimes. One such case is that of Elizabeth "Little Bess" Armstrong, sent to Virginia for stealing two spoons. Large numbers of poor adults and fatherless boys gave up their freedom, selling themselves into indentured servitude, whereby their passage was paid in return for contracting to anywhere from four to nine years of labor. Their contracts might be sold, and often were, upon their arrival. Unable to marry or choose another master, they could be punished or whipped at will. Owing to the harsh working conditions they had to endure, one critic compared their lot to "Egyptian bondage."<sup>19</sup>

Discharged soldiers, also of the lower classes, were shipped off to the colonies. For a variety of reasons, single men and women, and families of the lower gentry, and those of artisan or yeoman classes joined the mass

migratory swarm. Some left their homes to evade debts that might well have landed them in prison; others (a fair number coming from Germany and France) viewed the colonies as an asylum from persecution for their religious faith; just as often, resettlement was their escape from economic restrictions imposed upon their trades. Still others ventured to America to leave tarnished reputations and economic failures behind. As all students of history know, slaves eventually became one of the largest groups of unfree laborers, transported from Africa and the Caribbean, and from there to the mainland British American colonies. Their numbers grew to over six hundred thousand by the end of the eighteenth century. Africans were found in every colony, especially after the British government gave full encouragement to the slave trade when it granted an African monopoly to the Company of Royal Adventurers in 1663. The slave trade grew even faster after the monopoly ended, as the American colonists bargained for lower prices and purchased slaves directly from foreign vendors.<sup>20</sup>

To put class back into the story where it belongs, we have to imagine a very different kind of landscape. Not a land of equal opportunity, but a much less appealing terrain where death and harsh labor conditions awaited most migrants. A firmly entrenched British ideology justified rigid class stations with no promise of social mobility. Certainly, Puritan religious faith did not displace class hierarchy either; the early generations of New Englanders did nothing to diminish, let alone condemn, the routine reliance on servants or slaves. Land was the principal source of wealth, and those without any had little chance to escape servitude. It was the stigma of landlessness that would leave its mark on white trash from this day forward.

So, welcome to America as it was. The year 1776 is a false starting point for any consideration of American conditions. Independence did not magically erase the British class system, nor did it root out long-entrenched beliefs about poverty and the willful exploitation of human labor. An unfavored population, widely thought of as waste or "rubbish," remained disposable indeed well into modern times.

## Part I

---

# TO BEGIN THE WORLD ANEW