In the southern world of racial apartheid I grew up in, no racialized class division was as intense or as fraught with bitter conflict as the one between poor whites and black folks. All black people knew that white skin gave any southern “cracker or peckerwood” (ethnic slurs reserved for the white poor) more power and privilege than even the wealthiest of black folks. However, these slurs were not the product of black vernacular slang, they were the terms white folks with class privilege invented to separate themselves from what they called poor “white trash.” On the surface, at least, it made the lives of racist poor white people better to have a group they could lord it over, and the only group they could lord it over were black people. Assailed and assaulted by privileged white folks, they transferred their rage and class hatred onto the bodies of black people.

Unlike the stereotypes projected by the dominant culture about poor black folks, class stereotypes claimed poor whites were supposedly easily spotted by skin ailments, bad dental hygiene, and hair texture. All these things are affected by diet. While poor southern black folks often had no money, they usually had homegrown food to eat. Poor whites often suffered from malnutrition. Living under racial apartheid, black children learned to fear poor whites more than other whites simply because they were known to express their racism by cruel and brutal acts of violence. And even when white folks with class privilege condemned this violence, they could never openly oppose it, for to do so they would have had to take the word of black folks over those of white folks, thus being disloyal to white supremacy. A white person of privilege opposing violence against blacks perpetrated by poor whites might easily ruin their reputation and risk being seen as a “nigger lover.”

When I was a small child we lived in the hills without neighbors nearby. Our closest neighbors were “white trash,” as distinct from poor whites. White trash were different because they flaunted their poverty, reveled in it, and were not ashamed. Poor whites, like poor blacks, were committed to trying to find work and lay claim to respectability—they were law abiding and patriotic. White trash saw themselves as above the law and as a consequence they were dangerous. White trash were folks who, as our neighbors were fond of saying, “did not give a good goddamn.” They were not afraid to take the Lord’s name in vain. Most poor white folks did not want to live anywhere near black folks. White trash lived anywhere. Writing in the anthology White Trash: Race and Class in America, Constance Penly comments in “Crackers and Whackers”: “A Southern white child is required to learn that white trash folks are the lowest of the low because socially and economically they have sunk so far that they might as well be black. As such, they are seen to have lost all self-respect. So it is particularly unseemly when they appear to shamefully flaunt their trashiness, which, after all, is nothing but an aggressively in-your-face reminder of stark class difference…. “Privileged-class southern white folks sometimes saw white trash as more disgusting than black folks, but at the end of the day they lived by the creed that white stands with white and white makes its right.

Our “hillbilly white trash” neighbors lived by their own codes and rules. We did not call them names, because we knew the pain of slurs. Mama made it clear that they were people just like us
and were to be shown respect. While they did not bother us and we did not bother them, we feared them. I never felt that they feared us. They were always encouraging us to come over, to play and party with them. To most respectable black people, poor whites and white trash were the lowest of the low. Even when they were nice, black folks felt it was important to keep a distance. I remember being whipped for being overly friendly with poor white neighbors. At that time I did not understand, nor did our parents make it clear, that if anything had happened to us in their homes, as black folks we would just have been seen as in the wrong; that was the nature of Jim Crow justice. While we were encouraged to keep a distance from all white children no matter their class, it was clear that black people pitied and often felt contempt toward the white poor.

Desegregation led to the closing of all black schools. Busing took us out of our all-black neighborhoods into worlds of whiteness we did not know. It was in high school that I first began to understand class separation between whites. Poor white kids kept to themselves. And many of their well-to-do white peers would rather be seen talking to a black person than speaking to the white poor, or worse, to white trash. There was no danger that the black person they were talking to would want to come and hang out at their home or go to a movie. Racial lines were not crossed outside school. There could be no expectation of a reciprocal friendship. A privileged white person might confuse the issue if they showed attention to an underprivileged white peer. Class boundaries had to remain intact so that no one got the wrong idea. Between black and white there was no chance of a wrong idea: the two simply did not meet or mix.

Since some folks saw mama’s family as backwoods, as black hillbillies, she was always quick to punish any act of aggression on our part toward an underdog group. We were not allowed to ridicule poor whites—not even if they were taunting us. When we began to ride the bus across town to the white school, it was a shock to my sensibilities to interact with black children who were scornful of the misfortune of others. In those days it was a mark of pride for poor whites not to take the bus. That would have placed them in a context where black folks were in the majority. Now the white trash children of single mothers had to take the bus or walk.

To this day I have sad memories of the way Wilma, the white girl who was in my class, was treated by aggressive black children on the bus. Their daily taunts reminded her that she was poor white trash, the lowest of the low, that she smelled bad, that she wore the same dress day after day. In loud mean talk they warned her not to sit next to them. She often stood when there was an empty seat. A big girl with dark hair and unusually fair skin, she endured all the taunts with a knowing smirk. When she was pushed too far she fought back. She knew that with the exception of her ten minutes on that predominately black bus, white power ruled the day. And no matter how poor she was, she would always be white.

Academics writing about class often make light of the racial privilege of the white poor. They make it seem as though it is merely symbolic prestige. This is especially true of northerners. They have no intimate knowledge of the way southern poor whites terrorize and harass black folks in everyday life. My mother’s mother lived across town in a big old house in a white section. She could live there because she was surrounded by the homes of poor whites. When we, her grandchildren, were sent to see her, we feared our walk through the poor white neighborhoods. We feared the white folks who sat on their porches making fun of us or calling to
us to “come there.” We had been told to keep our eyes straight ahead and keep on walking. In the apartheid south, as in most northern neighborhoods, white was always right. Poor whites knew the power race privilege gave them and they used it. Describing her background growing up in Oklahoma, Roxanne Dunbar writes of poor whites: “In the end the only advantage for most has been the color of their skin and white supremacy, particularly toward African-Americans….” Race privilege has consistently offered poor whites the chance of living a better life in the midst of poverty than their black counterparts.

The white poor make up the vast majority of the poor in this society. Whereas mass migration of poor blacks from southern states to northern cities created a huge urban poor population, the white poor continue to live in isolated rural and suburban areas. Now and then they live hidden in the midst of white affluence. From their invention to the present day, the world of trailer park homes has been the territory of the white poor. While marking class boundaries, trailer park communities do not carry the stigma of degradation and deprivation commonly associated with the “ghetto”—a term first used to identify poor white urban immigrant communities. Indeed, in the not so distant past the psychological and economic self-esteem of the white working class and the white poor has been significantly bolstered by the class politics of white supremacy. Currently, we are witnessing a resurgence of white supremacist thinking among disenfranchised classes of white people. These extremist groups respond to misinformation circulated by privileged whites that suggests that black people are getting ahead financially because of government policies like affirmative action, and they are taught to blame black folks for their plight.

While anti-black racism has intensified among whites of all classes in recent years as part of civil rights backlash, overall the white underprivileged are less inclined to blame black folks for their economic plight than in the past. They are far more likely to see immigrants as the group taking needed jobs. Their racism toward nonwhite immigrants who are perceived to be taking jobs by virtue of their willingness to work for less mirrors that of black workers who blame immigrants. More and more the white and black poor recognize that ruling class greed ensures their continued exploitation and oppression.

These changes in the way the poor think are a direct result of racial integration. In many parts of the United States, desegregation led to greater contact between the black and white poor. Housing projects that had been at one time racially segregated were integrated. Greater societal acceptance of interracial bonding created the social context for white and black poor to mingle in ways unheard of at previous moments in our nation. Of course, in many areas, especially northern white cities, it was precisely this disruption of the conventional racial boundaries that led to reentrenchment along racial lines. New York and Boston ethnic white neighborhoods, where there is a class mix, remain race-segregated because racial discrimination in housing, work, etc., continues to be a norm. White power patriarchal violence is deployed daily to keep racial purity—to keep black folks, and any nonwhite group out. This does not change the fact that nowadays there is far more communication and bonding between the white and black poor.

More and more Americans of all colors are entering the ranks of the poor. And that includes white Americans. The evidence is in the numbers. In the essay “Trash-O-Nomics,” Doug Henwood states what should be obvious but often is not: “Of course, the average white person is
better off than the average non-white person, those of Asian origin excepted, and black people are disproportionately poor. But that sort of formula hides as much as it reveals: most officially poor people are white, and these days, a white household should consider itself lucky if its income is only stagnant rather than in outright decline.” It serves white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ruling class interests to mask this reality. Hence, the almost invisibility of the white poor in mass media.

Today, most folks who comment on class acknowledge that poverty is seen as having a black face, but they rarely point to the fact that this representation has been created and sustained by mass media. Concurrently, reports using statistics that show a huge percentage of black folks in the ranks of the poor compared to a small percentage of whites make it seem that blacks are the majority group in the ranks of the poor. Rarely do these reports emphasize that these percentages are based on population size. The reality they mask is that blacks are a small percentage of the population. While black folks disproportionate to our numbers are among the poor, the vast majority of the poor continue to be white. The hidden face of poverty in the United States is the untold stories of millions of poor white people.

Better to have poor and working-class white folks believe white supremacy is still giving them a meaningful edge than to broadcast the reality that the poor of any race no longer have an edge in this society, or that downsizing daily drags previously economically sound white households into the ranks of the poor. Clearly white skin privilege makes it easier for the white poor to receive levels of support that are not accorded darker-skinned groups, whether black, Hispanic, or Asian. Undue media focus on poor nonwhites deflects attention away from the reality of white poverty.

Ruling class interests have a stake in reinforcing a politics of white supremacy, which continues to try to socialize white working-class and poor people to blame their economic plight on black people or people of color globally. Since anti-black racism has never been eliminated in the culture, it does not take much effort on the part of the dominant white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture to brainwash poor whites to believe that it is black folks who stand in the way of their academic advancement. White hatred of nonwhite nonblack immigrants is not as virulent and intense as the hatred of black folks. As white political scientist Andrew Hacker documents in Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal, in this society racism is at its most violent and dehumanizing when it comes to black folks.

No doubt ruling class groups will succeed in new efforts to divide and conquer, but the white poor will no longer direct its class rage solely at black people, for the white poor is divided within its ranks. Just as there are many poor whites who are racist, there are a substantial group of poor whites who refuse to buy into white supremacist politics, who understand the economic forces that are crippling the American working class. Progressive white poor and working-class people understand the dynamics of capitalism. All over the United States class unrest is mounting. Since there is no collective resistance the future of class struggle is not clear.

Ending welfare will mean that more white women than ever before in our nation’s history will enter the ranks of the underclass. Like their black counterparts, many of them will be young. Workfare programs, which pay subsistence wages without the backdrop of free housing, will not enhance their lives. As the future “poorest of the poor” they are far less likely to be duped into
believing their enemies are other economically disadvantaged groups than their predecessors. Since they are the products of a consumer-oriented culture of narcissism, they are also more inclined to be indifferent to their neighbors’ plight. Constant deprivation creates stress, anxiety, along with material woes. But their desire to ease their pain can change indifference into awareness and awareness into resistance.

Given that today’s culture is one where the white and black working class and poor have more to say to one another, there is a context for building solidarity that did not exist in the past. That solidarity cannot be expressed solely through shared critique of the privileged. It must be rooted in a politics of resistance that is fundamentally antiracist, one that recognizes that the experiences of underprivileged white folks are as important as those of people of color. The class segregation that historically divided the white poor from their more privileged counterparts did not exist in predominately black communities. And while generations of white families have historically remained poor, a host of black folks pulled themselves out of poverty into privilege. In solidarity these folks have historically been strong advocates for the black poor even though that too is changing. More often than not they did not encourage solidarity with the white poor because of persistent anti-black racism. Now they must become advocates for the white and black poor, overcoming their anti-white prejudices. Concurrently, the black and white poor must do the work of building solidarity by learning more about one another, about what brings them together and what tears them apart. We need to hear more from all of us who have bridged the gap between white and black poor and working-class experience.

When I left the segregated world of my poor and working-class home environment to attend privileged-class schools, I found I often had more in common with white students who shared a similar class background than with privileged class black students who had no experience of what it might mean to lack the funds to do anything they wanted to do. No matter our color, students from poor and working-class backgrounds had common experiences history had not taught us how to sufficiently name or theoretically articulate. While it was definitely easier for folks from poor white backgrounds to assimilate visually, we all experienced estrangement from our class origin as well as the fear of losing touch with the worlds we had most intimately known. The bonds we forged in solidarity were and are not documented. There is no record of our conversations or how these solidarities shaped our future politics. Many of us used this bonding through class across the boundary of race as a groundwork for a politics of solidarity that has stood the test of time.

While racism remains an integral fact of our culture, it too has changed. Xenophobia more so than racial hatred often characterizes where white citizens stand on race. The utterly segregated black neighborhoods of my upbringing are no more. The white poor in need of shelter move into places where once no white face was ever seen. This contact does not mean an absence of racism. But it does mean that the criteria and the expression of racism has changed. It also means that there is more of a concrete basis for positive interaction between poor black and white folks. When I walk in these communities created by class division, I see grown white and black folks refusing to interact with each other even as I see more interaction than in the past. And I see white and black children freely crossing the boundaries of race to meet at that class juncture which brings them together in a common landscape they call home.
These bonds may mean little given the fact that there are so many more race-segregated white working-class and poor communities. Even in the places where white and black do not meet, there are more diverse opinions about class and race. Nothing is as simple as it was in the past when the needs of the white poor were pitted against the needs of the black poor. Today, poverty is both gendered and racialized. It is impossible to truly understand class in the United States today without understanding the politics of race and gender. Ultimately, more than any previous movement for social justice, the struggle to end poverty could easily become the civil rights issue with the broadest appeal—uniting groups that have never before taken a stand together to support their common hope of living in a more democratic and just world—a world where basic necessities of life are available to everyone, to each according to their need.