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# [*“Masterless Men” by Keri Leigh Merritt – Reviewed Mike Miller*](https://stansburyforum.com/2019/04/28/masterless-men-by-keri-leigh-merritt-reviewed-mike-miller/')

## BY [MIKE MILLER](https://stansburyforum.com/author/mikemiller)

**It was a story you don’t see told in history — and an interaction of poor people that we don’t talk about.**Keri Leigh Merritt

**Introduction**

Those seeking to break the white working class from Donald Trump’s grip would do well to read **Masterless Men**, the story of the white poor in the antebellum and postbellum Deep South.  They are people with deep social and economic problems that could become social and economic justice issues, and that could make southern white working class people allies of positive change rather than its hard-core opponents.  That is the democratic faith.  I want to place it against the authoritarian solution explicit in Donald Trump’s Presidency, and his campaign to win it: “No one knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it.” “The one that matters is me, I’m the only one that matters.” “I am the only one who can fix this. Very sad.”

Democratic faith requires democratic education, exemplified in the experiential learning pedagogy of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire.  They used experience as opportunities for education, and kept their teaching within the experience of those who were their “students”.  The experience is what people gain when they are organizing.  Contrary to the democratic faith is telling, really lecturing, “poor whites” about what their “real interests” are—an approach now all too common.  It might be a “correct analysis” for a term paper, but in the practical world it only deepens the divide between those fighting the “isms” and those who hold them.  This problem is not solved by many current “popular education” approaches that disguise their lectures with participatory methods while, in fact, the presenter does not want a process of exploration at all.

**A Stunning New Treasure To Help Us**

During the four+ years I was a “field secretary” for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, there was an awareness among some SNCC members that organizing poor whites was essential if black liberation was to be achieved.  A “Poor Whites Project” sought to accomplish that end.  It never got off the ground.  We lacked the experience and understanding to accomplish the result.  Support for the project was tenuous.  Among people who would react angrily to use of terms such as “Spik,” “Wop”, “Kike” or similar slanders, the use of “Honkie” drew a chuckle.

As black consciousness and pride rose, and the slogan “Black is beautiful” sought to overcome the internalized oppression of “if you’re black stay back; if you’re brown stick around; if you’re white you’re alright”, it occurred to me that while African-Americans could name prejudiced whites and the “white power structure” as their enemy, poor whites really had only themselves to blame for their circumstances.  There was no other consensus or emerging consciousness available to them to explain their poverty.  Today, of course, supported by the country’s President, they blame “The Other” who is taking their jobs, pushing them aside on the American status ladder and threatening their country.

Enter Keri Leigh Merritt!  I just finished her Cambridge University Press-published [***Masterless Men***](https://www.powells.com/searchresults?keyword=masterless+men).  It is an indispensible resource for those who want to overcome racism in the South, in particular, and in the country as a whole—a result that cannot be accomplished without specifically addressing it among the white working class, often characterized as “poor white”.  And, in turn, present approaches that ignore or minimize the oppression of poor and working class whites will not work to overcome racism.

**Keri Leigh Merritt**

Merritt is a white southerner, born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, raised in the South, and educated at southern universities.  You can tell reading the book that her interest is more than academic.  That led me to learn more about her in the [*History News Network interview with Robin Lindley, November 15, 2017*](https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/167224):

**“I started studying poor whites and the nineteenth century South as an undergraduate and realized their story was largely untold. They were nearly always left out of history simply due to the fact that they were illiterate. I knew I wanted to go on to graduate school and study this topic, because I believe it adds a lot of nuance to how race and class interact – and how racism is perpetuated in America.”**

…

**“I come from impoverished whites myself on my mother’s side…I still remember visiting my grandmother during the summers and seeing not only the poverty of the area but how it affected both whites and blacks in her area of town. All the rest of the town – the upper middle class and upper-class sections – was segregated. But the really poor area was completely integrated. That didn’t mean that the poor whites weren’t racist, but they still lived with black people. They worked with black people. They had an underground economy. It was a story you don’t see told in history — and an interaction of poor people that we don’t talk about.”**

Merritt was relentless in her search for information and documentation: oral histories with slaves who talk about poor whites, the Tennessee Civil War Veterans questionnaires, southern newspapers, coroner’s inquests, contemporary books written by defenders and critics of slavery, court testimony, census data, petitions to the powerful from poor whites, jail records, minutes of meetings, records of the sale of slaves and whatever else she could find.  “I used as many different sources as possible to form a more complete picture of the lives of the Deep South’s poor whites,” she said.

In brief, here’s what she discovered.  Southern white society was divided into three classes:  a relatively small aristocracy of large plantation owners who had slaves numbering from 20 to the hundreds and in a few cases thousands, and who were the oligarchy that ruled the south; yeoman farmers who owned relatively small parcels and struggled to make ends meet, though some owned one-or-two slaves; and “masterless men” and women who lived in deep poverty.  They hunted, fished, marginally farmed and stole to survive.  They traded with slaves, providing homebrew liquor in exchange for food the slaves appropriated from their masters.  The depth of their poverty sometimes exceeded that of slaves who, to be productive property, had to be fed the minimum required to work.

The exchanges between poor whites, slaves and freedmen weren’t limited to secretive trading.  They gambled and socialized together; friendships developed in some cases.  Throughout the antebellum period, they conspired and acted together in defeated rebellions, leading the slave-owner aristocracy to pursue carefully constructed divide-and-conquer strategies.  In some cases, they had children together, including those of white women, who, because of southern law, were born free (the same wasn’t true of the children of black women who were fathered by whites).

As slave numbers increased, their owners realized they could use them to do work previously done by whites hired in the market.  Poor whites became increasingly marginalized and increasingly hostile to slavery. They recognized that while legally free, they were, in fact, in bondage to the same system.  In some cases, they formed associations or unions that petitioned southern state governments to disallow slave competition.  In almost every case, they failed.  It became increasingly clear to poor whites and their advocates that the plantation aristocracy was their oppressor as well.

The period approaching southern secession was marked by increased conflict. Laws against vagrancy, loitering and begging led to the incarceration of poor whites, typically in horrific jails. It became clear to those who ruled that they could not count on the support of poor whites in the civil war that was coming.

As the war developed, evasion of military service was widespread.  Counties where there were few plantations, usually “hill country”, remained loyal to the union, as did large numbers of poor whites.  To counteract this threat, Confederate leaders created myths proclaiming the horrors whites would face if slaves were freed. Illiteracy due to poor or non-existent public education left poor whites unable to read about alternatives. Unionists, and especially abolitionists, were jailed, tarred and feathered, beaten, run out of town (and the state) and sometimes killed.

Poor whites bore the brunt of Confederacy fighting.  Owners of plantations with 20-or-more slaves were exempt from the draft.  As the war proceeded, poor whites deserted in large numbers joining draft dodgers in swamp lands, forests and other areas where they could hide from army recruiters and local law enforcement.

Postbellum it can fairly be said the oligarchy South won the Civil War in substance if not form.  Poor whites and blacks were better off, but everything is relative. It is difficult to say their lives substantially improved.  Now, however, it was blacks who were at the bottom of the social, economic and political hierarchy. Whites were better able to sell their labor in the absence of slave competition. The system of white privilege was erected by the South’s militarily defeated elite.  Briefly challenged later by the Populists, its structure persisted, and persists today—as the continuing public presence of symbols of the Confederacy attests.

**Weaknesses**

I wish Merritt had explored more deeply the Union Leagues that for a brief period created alliances between poor and poorer whites and blacks within the Republican Party.  Near the conclusion of her book, she notes Eugene Genovese’s “hints of mutual sympathy and compassion in a world in which so much conspired to sow distrust and hatred suggest that the Reconstruction era was not fated to end as it did.”  The outcome that prevailed was the opposite: poor whites now became the lowest class in a caste system in which they pride fully knew they were not black.  Failures of the Federal Government clearly played a role. Without enforcement of emancipation, laws and practices created slavery by another name.  Without land reform, freedmen and women had no economic base upon which to build.  (Merritt discusses the Homestead Act and Southern Homestead Act, which provided land for tens of thousands of poor whites to “finally join the ranks of landholders”.  No such opportunity was created for former slaves. Yet another failure also took place:  the one that might have built organization and social movement on Genovese’s “hints of mutual sympathy”.  Why were those efforts few, and why did those few fail?  I wish Merritt had given these questions more attention.

Though it would have taken her on a bit of a detour, some comment could have been made on what newly emerging Reconstruction black leadership, including elected officials, might have done to engage poor whites more deeply with the Republican Party.  Did their own status as more educated people, often coming from leadership backgrounds in the black church, create in them the same attitude that I saw in SNCC people who spoke of “Honkies”?

My organizer eyes found her sometimes fuzzy on what constitutes “education” for social change. She focuses on illiteracy and the absence of public schools for poor whites, but says little about the kind of education that can take place in the context of action if there is time and space for reflecting on what is being done. During the slavery era, that time and those spaces didn’t exist.  Did they during Reconstruction and, especially, Radical Reconstruction?

**Masterless Men** would have benefited from some tighter editing, and the footnotes are sometimes difficult to follow.

All these, however, are minor points about a book that is a must read for out times.

**Conclusion**

In her interview Merritt describes a new generation of southern historians, white and black, who are going deeply into the gritty day-to-day lives of slaves, freedmen, poor whites and white yeoman farmers.  It is a welcome development.

Her book is an essential read for anyone who cares about the future of the country.