

Helping tackle systemic racism in Indianapolis: Involving the white working class

Until you understand white supremacy, everything else will confuse you.

-- Neely Fuller Jr.

Tell the poorest white man he's better than the best black man, and he won't notice you're picking his pocket. In fact, given him someone to look down on and he will take his billfold out and give you his money.

-- President Lyndon Baines Johnson

Many Black folk thought of Indianapolis as urban, "Up South." It was better than being "down South," but it retained many of the negative propositions of the deep South and was not yet enlightened or "progressive" as the West or East Coast counterparts. Conservatism and racism [here] were alive and compatible.

-- Mari Evans, "Ethos & Creativity in Indianapolis"

From the perspective of the Southeast Working-Class Task Force (SEW-CTF), due to Indiana's history of Eugenics (racial hygiene), systemic racism is inherent in the DNA of our state. In 1907 Indiana codified White Eugenics law, making sterilization mandatory for certain individuals. The law was repealed in 1974, yet our racism lingers. Therefore, it is hard to dismantle the pervading Eugenics legacy of legalized scientific racism here because Indiana is disproportionate by definition. Just untruth is just this: in various situations,



racism is inherent in the DNA of our Supremacy by passing the world's first mandatory for certain individuals. Eugenics legacy of legalized scientific stance of the task force that it will be racism here because Indiana is dis-pack Indiana's state seal.¹ The tragic systemic racism defines who we are.

Race and class in Indianapolis

One factor the Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF) must recognize is local intersectionality of class and race reflected in the 2010 census map. Indy is not only one of America's most 21 racially segregated cities (<http://www.businessinsider.com/most-segregated-cities-census-maps-2013-4>), but is a city segregated by both race and class. This is revealed in the super majority of the population below East and West Washington Street (Indy's Mason-Dixon Line) who are not just white (red dots), but if you ask anyone who knows Indianapolis, they will tell you these are historically working-class white neighborhoods.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/walkingsf/5560477952/in/album-72157626354149574/>.

The current limitations of local efforts to tackle racism

Twice I have taken the Race and Equity Institute's (<https://www.racialequityinstitute.com/>) 2-day anti-racism training through Indianapolis Public Schools. I have been involved in similar conversations around the city over the last 5 years. In all cases, the events were located on the north side in predominately middle to upper class areas. The discussions were also hosted and attended by mainly white middle-class participants. I have lived on Indy's south side for over 4 decades, and I would know if any anti-racism discussions are happening. A lot of this characteristic may be caused by our Southside's history of poor relations between Indy's working-class white and Indy's African American populations who were never really welcomed on the Southside.

See *The Southside Times* reporter John Johansson's 2004 story on UIndy Prof. Michael Cartwright's interpretation of Southside history: [Rich local \(Southside Indy\) heritage lives on in forgotten areas.](#)

CICF's Indy undoing racism challenge must intentionally include Marion County's white working class

Indy's Southside working-class white citizens have been characterized city-wide as somewhat "red neck" (if you will)...yet Southeast Working Class Task Force members would argue they have been manipulated by those who would gain from the created discord between and among poor white and poor to middle-class blacks, and now brown people.

We can't forget the lesson from Bacon's Rebellion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueLdYi1AE-Q>) or the post-Civil War Reconstruction era when the Northern white industrialists were successful in driving a wedge between and among poor disenfranchised blacks and whites—and their communities. See Dr. Henry Louis Gates 4-part series at <https://www.pbs.org/weta/reconstruction/>.

Question: how can CICF begin to regard, respect, and involve our city's white working class, some of whom have been negatively portrayed as "white trash" and perhaps contributors to local racism? Note there are no terms such as "black trash" or "brown trash." See Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* <https://www.amazon.com/White-Trash-400-Year-History-America/dp/0143129678>

The south side of "Up South" Indianapolis

Indy's acclaimed author and social activist Mari Evans realized as she grew up in Indianapolis, that Indiana was the most northern state of the south, a northern state many southerners migrated to after WW I and II.

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Washington Street is the Mason-Dixon Line of Up South Indianapolis...

As a result of its now famous gentrified make-over (houses once worth \$75,000 now selling for \$200,000-\$450,000+) most Indy residents know where Fountain Square is located. On the other hand, some people have not heard of Stringtown² or "the Valley."³

Poor whites: Race and class

Historically, the white poor population in Indianapolis, in many cases from Appalachian heritage, have an aversion to a) education (about which Mark Twain said, "I never let school interfere with my education"), b) formal schooling (which would try to "...educate them away from their culture") and, c) educated people (those they view as "educate beyond their intelligence" and who are exemplified in American humorist Will Roger's statement, "There's no one more stupid than an educated man when you get off the subject he was educated in").

From the standpoint of SEW-CTF, the consequences of neighborhood gentrification of Fountain Square, Stringtown and the Valley is tantamount to "cultural cleansing" poor whites in Indianapolis from their long-standing and deep-rooted way of life in communities, have been or will be erased from significance in the city by the gentrification process. This will only add to the valid distrust poor whites have of their government and other institutions. Official actions, histories, schools, welfare agencies, and criminal justice system will be deemed as untrustworthy because of the disparaged, ignored, replaced and/or erased culture of the working-class residents throughout the city.

People who live in the Valley live there for a reason

When the folks in the Valley, in particular, realize that the same people they were trying to avoid by living in the Valley are coming down from wealthier areas like the North side of Indianapolis to take over their community and displace them, their prejudice against what they traditionally see as liberal “over-educated know-it-all” whites will be reinforced.

“Discover Stringtown Living!”

A local gentrification initiative (i.e., the displacement of original resident via real estate development) is Stringtown Living (<https://stringtownliving.com/>) which, from the standpoint of SEW-CTF, is unabashedly re-assembling Stringtown’s history in order to camouflage its current colonization.

“Stringtown is a street by street reflection of new developments, new ideas, and the beautiful emphasis on existing homes looking brighter and discovered.”

What are developers trying to say--existing homes of long-time working class residents weren’t bright enough? Surely the homes of people who have lived there for decades were bright enough for them! And, “discovered” by whom...like Columbus discovered America? This line of advertising represents gentry class sensibilities of “urban pioneers” who see themselves as homesteading one of the wilderness areas of Indianapolis.

As quoted above, in no uncertain terms, Indy’s status quo is throwing Stringtown and the Valley under the bus in order to meet needs of its “urban settlers” i.e., the opportunist professional-class moving in along the “new” White River. What’s happening in Stringtown goes along with gentrification of the Valley making domestic refugees out of soon to be displaced members of these long-standing and culturally unique communities which have given Indianapolis its distinct character.⁴ [The Riverside “Master Narrative” H. S., gentrification, and the “new” White River](#)

What’s important here is gentrification is not only displacing these families, but is displacing their culture (history, language, food, music, toys, wisdom, games, epistemologies, etc.)—indeed their everyday way of life, which center around 3 major characteristics—which are examples to all Americans: one’s family, job, and friends/neighborhood.

One’s family is everything, but right behind family is what one does for a living, and *pride* in both holding a job and doing the job well. Next is one’s friends and neighbors making up one’s immediate community who are depended upon for immediate needs such as child care, auto repair, and borrowing a lawnmower

Indy’s white working class labor helped build and sustain the economy of our city

If CICF appreciates local history, they’ll know over the last 150 years, it was the working-class whites who were among the main laborers who “did all the heavy lifting” that built Indianapolis. They labored, some standing the whole shift working on assembly lines in hot noisy factories sustaining themselves, their families, and our city’s economy.

Since the 1980’s, changes from globalization and neo-liberalism have shown that worker production increased, however wages remained stagnate. This has left working-class whites to face and deal with economic/employment challenges. See the book *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty* <http://pedagogyofthepoor.org/the-book/> or <https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>

Now add to this the disregard these long-time Stringtown and Valley residents will feel via gentrification (as is the case in Fountain Square where I grew up), feelings which will only add to their vulnerability in regard to appeals from community and political leaders that the causes of their economic problems are African Americans, “Mexicans” and other migrants and immigrants...

This essay is not saying dismantling racism in regard to white and Black middle-class and upper-class citizens will be easy (especially in Indiana), but CICF’s real challenge is winning the hearts and minds of Indy’s whites who are the poor, the “service sector” working poor, and the blue collar demographic.

SEW-CTF again reminds CICF of the lessons learned from Bacon’s Rebellion and Reconstruction couched in LBJ’s insight, “Tell the poorest white man that he is better than the best black man, and he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. In fact, given him someone to look down on and he will take his billfold out and give you this money.”

The point here is *Indianapolis working-class whites have too much to lose when systemic racism is dismantled.*

Finally, a review of CICF staff and board members backgrounds/employment histories shows SEW-CTF few, if any, are prepared to reach, engage, and validate Indy’s poor whites, let alone their racism.

I hope I am making sense.

John Harris Loflin.
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Notes

1 A deconstruction of our Indiana state seal reveals to SEW-CTF no women, children, Native Americans, or African Americans. The animal life is leaving and the plant life, the trees are being cut down. What is left is the white male with the patriarchal sun on the rise, all showing our Hoosier state in inherently disproportional.

2 Stringtown is west of White River (and the campuses of the hospitals and IUPUI), east of Belmont, and south of Michigan and North of West Washington

3 “The Valley” is west of White River and east of Harding, and south of Oliver Ave [and the old GM stamping plant] and north of McCarty.

4 There are 2 country music stations ranked in the Top 10 Indy FM stations: # 5 97.1 Hank FM and #9 nationally recognized 95.5 WFMS <http://theindyalist.cityvoter.com/best/fm-radio-station/arts-and-entertainment/indianapolis>. Indianapolis has a long history of supporting county music.

Suggested information

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?459562-1/how-fight-white-supremacy>

Mari Evans “Ethos & Creativity in Indianapolis”

<http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Mari-Evans-Ethos-Creativity-in-Indianapolis.pdf>

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The Southeast Working-Class Task Force was established in early 2015 by the Southeast Congress and is an outcome of the Southeast Poverty Study Circle. The task force is dedicated to the following goals regarding our southeast neighborhoods: preserving its working-class history and culture, increasing the representation of low-income families in community affairs, and easing and eradicating poverty.