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# Over the Hills: Locating the Politics in Redneck Discourse

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Over the hills: locating the politics in redneck discourse

Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Arts in Communication Studies

by

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\* Some portions of this project were presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Popular Culture association, Oct. 2004.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Over the hills: locating the politics in redneck discourse**

**Brent M. Heavner**

This project offers a critique of popular redneck discourse in the United States from a perspective that draws from Marxism, cultural studies, and whiteness studies. Three individual studies are presented in order to map out the tenor of popular discourse: a content audit of major print media that use the term redneck, a textual analysis of print media that use the term redneck, and a textual analysis of entertainment media that construct and encourage identification with a redneck lifestyle. The redneck construct, it is argued, serves to mark the boundaries of normative whiteness and obfuscate white privilege. As a commodified identity, redneck not only functions to entrench the status quo in terms of racial privilege, but also in terms of class and consumer culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the hills, beautiful hills  
There's a union in the West Virginia hills!  
Tho' o'er scab fields I should roam,  
Still I'll dream of happy home,  
And the Rednecks in the West Virginia Hills  
--- Walter Seacrist

Some people look down on me, but I don't give a rip  
I'll stand barefooted in my own front yard with a baby on my hip  
'cause I'm a redneck woman  
I ain't no high class broad  
I'm just a product of my raising  
I say, 'hey ya'll' and 'yee-haw'  
And I keep my Christmas lights on  
On my front porch all year long  
--- Gretchen Wilson

The song excerpts above illustrate well the way the term redneck has continually been reconfigured over time in popular culture. The former is an excerpt from a song popular among miners in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Penned by Walter Seacrist, a union song writer, it shows the esoteric use of redneck as a synonym for a union worker with communist leanings during the 1930s. The latter is an excerpt from a popular contemporary song performed by Gretchen Wilson titled *Redneck Woman*. While each of these songs invites identification with a narrative that celebrates rednecks, each constructs redneck identity quite differently. The redneck of Seacrist's song is a mythic union worker standing in solidarity against mine operators who would use scabs to undermine laborers' demands for a safe work environment and reasonable compensation. Wilson's redneck, however, is divorced from the politics of labor and marked instead by cultural practices that set her aside from "high class broads."

Redneck, as a constructed identity, has functioned alternately as a derisive label and a moniker with which people purposely identify. Along with being fluid in meaning, the term has often been politically charged, serving as an important site of negotiation for issues of class and race in the United States. Nonetheless, all redneck discourses are not of equal value for bolstering social consciousness. The central endeavor of this critique is to develop a sense of how redneck discourse functions in contemporary American popular culture. Toward this end, several popular texts that illustrate the ongoing negotiation of race, class, culture and proper living space through construction of, and identification with, redneck identity are discussed through the course of this project.

Inquiry into contemporary redneck discourse is warranted for several reasons. Foremost, examination of identity formation and language in popular culture is inquiry into the ubiquity of politics in our everyday lives. While the study of overtly political messages is important, scholarship should not overlook the politics implicit in popular media that may easily escape more casual analysis. Most of the texts discussed herein, moreover, would be viewed as apolitical by many, even their creators. Thus, while popular media that draw on the construct of redneck can easily fall under the radar of screen of political discourse analysis, their underlying complicity with, and at times entrenchment of, the status quo socio-political configuration is significant and deserving of more careful analysis.

To lay the groundwork for productive analysis of contemporary redneck discourse this chapter first turns to a discussion of the various connotations evoked by the label redneck at different times in American history. Next, the critical perspective that guides this project's engagement with contemporary redneck discourse is developed drawing



from work in critical whiteness studies, Marxist criticism, and cultural studies. Finally, this chapter identifies a series of specific texts to be discussed in the chapters that follow as illustrative of the continued negotiation of what it means to be a redneck.

### **REDNECK GENEALOGY**

Stand-up comic Jeff Foxworthy remarks that “if your family tree has no branches, you might be a redneck.” Scholarship surrounding the etymology of the term belies this view, however, illustrating the diverse origins of the redneck.

According to Eisiminger (1984), the label redneck was likely first used as a reference to poor whites in the southern United States because they often suffered from pellagra, a condition resulting from an inadequate diet that causes a red rash to emerge on the “neck and other parts of the body” (284). Though many etymologies attribute the origins of the term redneck to sun burnt necks that may have been characteristic of white laborers in the south in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eisiminger argues that this is, in fact, unlikely:

Since Pellagra was largely confined to The South during The Depression and earlier, and sunburned necks were not, it seems likely that pellagra had something to do with *redneck*'s rise in popularity which coincided with the rising incidence of the disease in the South (284 emphasis in original).

Based on interviews with descendants of individuals who lived in The South during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eisiminger (1984) concludes that pellagra is likely the point of origin for the term redneck, one that can even be traced back to England as a reference to whites in the American South as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (284).

Though this initial usage was not necessarily a class slur, it was certainly a class specific label, as pellagra occurred mostly among impoverished southerners (Eisiminger, 1985; Chacko, 2005; Jazeel, 2005). Poor southerners “who’s diets consisted mainly of pork fat and hominy grits” often lacked adequate levels of niacin in their diet, which caused the disease (Eisiminger, 1984: 284). Pellagra was certainly not confined to whites in the southern United States. Most deaths from the disease, in fact, were among black females (Chacko, 2005; Marks, 2003).

Whatever its origins, the label of redneck has functioned both strategically as a disempowering term and tactically as a site of empowerment at different historical moments in the United States. In the mid-nineteenth century, redneck was used as a class slur describing poor white laborers. In Mississippi the term was charged with political meaning when it was leveled specifically at farmers lobbying for populist reforms (Huber & Drowne, 2001: 434). Interestingly, Huber and Drowne (2001) present evidence that farmers adopted the term as a self-label, identification with which marked political opposition to the Bourbon Democrats who underrepresented their rural interests. Redneck, in contrast to a slur, was rearticulated as a symbol of class solidarity and political organization (435).

A similar movement of redneck between being an otherizing and empowering term can be observed in its usage to refer to Appalachian coal miners. Huber (1994) notes that “during the 1930s, *redneck* specifically meant ‘Communist’ (107, emphasis in original) when used as an epithet in reference to union miners, especially those on strike. Huber discusses the duality of the term in the context of the red handkerchiefs miners often wore around their necks:

Coal miners (...) wore the kerchiefs for the purpose of keeping the gritty coal dust off their necks, from down their workshirts, and out of their noses and mouths. But (...) the red handkerchief was doubly protective. In response to their derisive nickname, union coal miners rehabilitated and proudly adopted the name *rednecks* as a badge of honor. Union coal miners of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania fashioned a working-class identity and solidarity around the nickname *redneck* and the red bandanna, one of the oldest symbols of the labor movement in the United States. Thus, the red bandanna not only protected miners from the hazards of coal dust, it also marked a group identity and consciousness – another form of protection (108).

The term was adopted, Huber (1994) notes, across racial and ethnic lines by miners as a marker of solidarity against mine operators, their hired security, and scab workers. This negotiation of redneck illuminates it as a historically important site of struggle between classes; a struggle with great potential to empower working class people and focus attention on economic inequity.

According to Jarosz and Lawson (2002), once again during the 1970's redneck was charged with political meaning and “reworked in ambiguous and paradoxical ways to cement racial and class solidarity in the face of the civil rights movement” (11). They point to a series of cultural artifacts that “underscore the term as signifying a working man who is honest, upstanding, and masculine – the American individualist, the populist, the hardworking white man” (11). This more recent turn in redneck discourse –its construction through mass culture – certainly includes notions that continue to permeate the contemporary construction of redneck identity (12). Moreover, in contrast to the

racially-inclusive use of the term by union miners, the usage discussed by Jarosz and Lawson (2002) illustrates the more common race-specific connotation of the term.

Today, rednecks are a common caricature in American culture. Despite the prevalence of artifacts in popular media that draw upon the redneck construct, its latest usages have been subject to far less critical scrutiny than its etymology. Today, references to rednecks are common in print media, and redneck themed comedy and country music enjoy wide popularity. Even so, no close reading of the term has fully explicated its contemporary social and political functions.

In one of the few academic discussions of modern redneck discourse, Jarosz and Lawson (2002) note that, while it was once indeed a term connected to specific geographical regions, “the term ‘redneck’ has gone national and has been decontextualized from history, place, and class in America” (16). Through its widespread presence in mainstream media the term has been inserted into “middle-class culture in ways that reproduce notions of poor whites as unsophisticated, out-dated and comic” (13). To view the label as simply an epithet, however, would ignore the tension that exists between its pejorative use and its common use as a self-label. It would also preclude examination of the processes and of identification with the moniker as well as the social and political implications of that process.

To lay the groundwork for inquiry into modern redneck discourse, it is necessary to develop a critical perspective from which to engage modern texts that construct *rednecks*. Empirically, the struggle over the meaning of redneck identity has occurred in the context of class and race. An adequate methodology would thus assume a focus on the politics of capitalism, class, and whiteness. Examination of contemporary redneck

discourse, further, should be situated in the context of mass culture. Rednecks, as they are constructed in popular media assuredly inform and are informed by their construction in everyday interpersonal discourse. Further, the forces that shape mass culture – dominant cultural norms and profit seeking by media outlets – can reasonably be expected to shape redneck discourse as it manifests in American culture. As such, this project turns to previous work in whiteness studies and the political and social functions of popular texts as a foundation for the critical perspective that guides the research presented in the chapters that follow.

### **READING REDNECK DISCOURSE**

To engage a slur aimed primarily at white people via critical whiteness studies may seem paradoxical as criticism from the perspective is usually concerned with the implicit construction of whiteness vis-à-vis those othered in relation to whites. A model that assumes a class component of this centered *normative whiteness*, however, provides an accurate map of whiteness and contributes usefully to an understanding of how poor whites are constructed in discourse to serve the maintenance of the discursive formation of whiteness. In order to clarify the role of whiteness in this analysis this section will first review past work in critical whiteness studies. Second, shortcomings in current work on whiteness stemming from a lack of a consistently integrated focus on class will be addressed. Third, Ohmann's (1996) Marxist perspective on cultural criticism will be discussed with attention to both its strengths and weaknesses. Last, a critical perspective that combines these two frameworks will be articulated.

## Critical Whiteness

Redneck discourse is inexorably tied to white working class identity. Whiteness studies is a school of criticism that focuses on racializing whiteness in order to deconstruct race. Discourse that denigrates working class whites while bringing their race to the forefront, however, has been treated with kid gloves by many scholars, much to the detriment of the advancement of whiteness as a perspective for critique. Most scholars studying whiteness look toward constructions of individuals' othered in relation to whiteness. They understand white identity as implicitly constructed when speaking of other racial identities, because they are constructed vis-à-vis a white normative referent.

Because white identity "is based on the othering of all non-whites" (Bahk & Jandt, 2004:58), rather than through overt construction, it is afforded a race-neutral position. Whiteness occupies an invisible position as well by virtue of its construction *through* the discourse of other racial identities, rather than overtly through the construction of white identity. In short, people do not talk often about what it means to be white, because it is assumed to be nothing more than normal; it is unremarkable (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

Nakayama and Krizek (1995), in their seminal article *Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric*, explore the normalization of whiteness in discourse from a communication perspective. They view whiteness as a discursive formation and they adopt a spatial metaphor to describe and critique it. Their conceptualization of whiteness has been highly influential in subsequent scholarship, and is thus deserving of more detailed discussion.

*Whiteness as a discursive formation.* A discursive formation is "a group of statements in which it is possible to find a pattern of regularity defined in terms of order, correlation, position and function" (Macey, 2000: 101). Drawing from Foucault,

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) conceptualize whiteness as a discursive formation assembled from various constructions that work to constitute and reinscribe the privileged position of white people in our discourse and, attendantly, society. Accordingly, they discuss Whiteness as an “assemblage” that “functions mechanically” (294) to “mask and resecure its space through a movement between universality and invisibility” (296).

*Whiteness conceptualized through a spatial metaphor.* Noting the increasing popularity of spatial metaphors in academic work, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) establish that such a metaphor is useful to those working from the perspective of critical whiteness studies. They argue that scholars should set about the task of mapping the “relatively uncharted territory” that is the discursive space of whiteness. This metaphor is significant for two reasons. First, the spatial metaphor is quite useful as a tool for conceptualizing and describing whiteness. For example, whiteness is often described as a race neutral center around which racial identities are constructed. To talk of “mapping” whiteness is useful in that it points to the hidden nature of the power relations that (re)produce white privilege and the need for making them known. Second, the term is significant because of its critical implications. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) draw from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of critique through deterritorialization, contending that “once we view power spatially, a rearticulation of that assemblage is a counter hegemonic move” (294). Thus, the use of a spatial metaphor in the discussion of whiteness is not only useful from a conceptual standpoint, but has emancipatory implications as well.

Whiteness functions in everyday discourse to implicitly center whiteness in relation to oft constructed racial identities. For example, many whites resist self-labeling,

denying that they have a racial identity at all. In Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) study, when asked to self label some white respondents provided answers such as "I don't agree with the use of ethnic terms, I'm an American and that's all" (100). While some may view such statements as a laudable effort to deconstruct race, such moves actually function to secure whiteness as a non-racialized identity and to place the history of racism in America under erasure by evoking "American" as an all encompassing identity.

Other responses by whites to the request to self label not only reinforce whiteness as non-raced, but also its place at the center of our constructions of race. "One white respondent observed", for example, "that labels have negative meanings...Any label...so I don't like to use labels, I'm just me – white." (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995: 101). Responses like this are significant, in that while markers such as Black, African-American or Hispanic are treated as labels, "white" is offered as the opposite of a label. To be "just white" is not to possess a racial identity at all. This treatment of whiteness as non-raced, and other identities as raced illustrates whiteness's normative referent status in discussions of race.

These rhetorical moves by whites are indicative of the way whiteness is often privileged in everyday discourse as a centrally placed norm. By placing people who can be marked with racial labels *outside* of whiteness, whiteness is privileged as the norm and race becomes a characteristic of only non-whites. "A primary component of 'othering' is that of *difference*" writes Gaule (2001:334, emphasis in original). When only non-whites are marked as *different*, then whiteness is normalized, even if we never overtly discuss whiteness as *normal*.



Whiteness, as a strategic rhetoric, works to define the parameters within which our discussions of race can occur (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Rowe, 2000; Shome, 1999). As Nakayama and Krizek (1995) put it: “[whiteness] affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. It wields power, yet endures a largely unarticulated position.” Thus, the goal of understanding and dismantling strategic whiteness emerges as an important and challenging one.

To summarize, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) view whiteness as a discursive formation that is best conceptualized and critiqued through a spatial metaphor. This perspective lays solid groundwork for inquiries into the nature and functioning of the power of whiteness. A third crucial observation made by Nakayama and Krizek (1995), and echoed by others (Flores & Moon, 2002; Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999), is that whiteness is a strategic rhetoric that functions to secure its power.

*Whiteness is a strategic rhetoric.* During times of overt social and legal privileging of those whose physical appearance earned them the moniker of “white,” white privilege was maintained by explicit and raw power through both legal and literal violence. With the success of the civil rights movement, however, the explicit privileging of white individuals in law has largely ended. (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Hence, though the occasional overt association of whiteness with “power in a rather crude, naked manner,” still occurs (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), the overt legal or cultural privileging of white people is increasingly rare (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999).

Whiteness, however, was not de-centered by these turns in law and social customs (Hayman & Levit, 1997; Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999). Instead, white privilege

was able to remain through mechanisms in our everyday discourse. In this sense, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) note, whiteness is a strategic rhetoric as opposed to a tactical rhetoric. The key distinction between the two is that a strategic rhetoric is exercised from a position of domination in order to maintain status quo relations of power, whereas a tactical rhetoric is exercised from a marginalized position in response to domination.

It is through this function as a strategic rhetoric that, despite potential challenges to its centrality, “the territory of whiteness [has been] able to mask and resecure its space through a movement between universality and invisibility” (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995: 296). In a move best characterized as “deceptive outflanking” (Spanos, 1993) white privilege threatens to become less visible and more insidious by taking up residence primarily in the realm of private discourses. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) point to an example of the influence of strategic whiteness in private discourse between whites, citing a respondent who mused:

I don't know exactly what it means to be white, but we all know don't we? I mean we never talk about it, but I know that we [white people] understand each other at some level. Like when a black guy gets on an elevator or when you have a choice to sit or stand next to a white person or a black person. You pick the white person and you look at each other, the whites, and just know tat we've got it better (298).

Race and whiteness as constructed among whites in private discourse often privileges whiteness while simultaneously making that privilege an “invisible and deniable [feature] of blissful belonging” (Bahk & Jandt, 2004: 66). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) thus suggest that one must engage texts where whiteness manifests carefully and critically to

work against the invisibility of whiteness. Indeed, whiteness is to culture as pornography is to the Supreme Court: indescribable yet intersubjectively agreed upon. Whiteness is ubiquitous yet goes unnoticed; it is invisible yet auspicious. Explicating whiteness through this move from raw privileging toward the “practice of not marking whiteness” (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999:21) is the challenge that now faces those employing the perspective of critical whiteness studies.

The question that emerges here is how did whiteness come to occupy this privileged position in language? The answer to this question is that privilege in discourse arose out of raw material privilege. Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford (1999) note that whites “have historically held power, [they] have no need to define themselves – they already occupy a naturalized position. Whites just are. They have a choice of attending to or ignoring their whiteness” (31). Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford (1999) point to the work of Gallagher (1994) who observes that “as the racial norm, being white...need never be recognized or analyzed by whites because whites generally view themselves as the racial yardstick with which other racial groups are compared. (167-168).

Importantly, the material conditions that gave rise to the construction of the homogenized white subject are clearly and intimately tied to class, specifically the class politics of northern urbanization at the turn of the century and the economics of “white flight” in the United State following the Second World War (Ruben, 2001:440). As popular culture took shape in the United States it was infused with notions of whiteness as normative. Even so, scholarship that focuses on the discursive boundary between whites and non-whites has yet to fully integrate class into its models of race. Further,

much work in critical whiteness remains mired in binary thought with a singular focus of white versus non-white in discourse. Marginalized white people are treated with kid gloves by many employing the perspective, much to the detriment of the advancement of whiteness as a tool for critique. Subjects that stand in the liminal space along the border between whites and non-whites remain largely outside the critical gaze of communication scholarship from the perspective of whiteness studies. Closer examination of instances when whites are pushed to the margin of whiteness in discourse can yield a clearer focus on the normative white center articulated by Nakayama and Krizek (1995).

Poor white people sit at what appears to be an uncomfortable yet critical intersection for many whiteness scholars. Little attention has been paid to situations in which white people are racialized. These are situations in which the race of white people is overtly or implicitly brought to the forefront in discussions of their impoverishment or perceived backwardness. As such, poor whites are denied the “invisible and deniable...blissful belonging” (Bahk & Jandt, 2004: 66) to whiteness afforded class privileged whites.

Most scholars addressing the relation of poor whites to whiteness rely on anecdotal accounts of poor whites’ marginalization in U.S. society (Wray & Newitz, 1997; Moon, 1999; Harkins, 2004). Such analysis, while important and valuable for their observations of the potential connection between the marginalization of poor whites and whiteness do not fully account for the way language functions as a mechanism to marginalize poor whites in order to construct, privilege, reify and cloak normative whiteness.

Notably, Wander, Martin and Nakayama (1999) do lend limited attention to the problematic assumption that “if you’re young, white, and male, you’ve got the world by the tail” (20). They observe that “to make any sense of ‘whiteness’ we have to include the notion of class, because rich whites have it better than poor whites” (22). A binary and absolute characterization of whites as privileged and non-whites as marginalized ignores the reality that there are “millions of *poor* white males” (20, emphasis in original). Wander, Martin and Nakayama (1999) recognize that terms like “poor white trash” and “red neck” are deployed to marginalize whites in our society. Unfortunately they end their analysis here, as if the glaring challenge to whiteness posed by white people that do not actualize the imaginary white normative referent in terms of class and culture serves to deconstruct white privilege by virtue of its existence.

Whiteness, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) write, is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible (...). It wields power yet *endures* as a largely unarticulated position (291, emphasis added). Epithets reserved for poor and working class whites must be critiqued in the context of white privilege’s ability to “mask and resecure its [privileged and race neutral] space” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995: 296) in discourse despite potential challenges to its centrality. It is important to consider how the fundamental contradiction posed by poor whites to the farce of white supremacy has been managed in the discourse of whiteness through movement between universality, invisibility, and visibility. Accordingly, the nexus between race and class so central to whiteness, and the recognition that the “racialization process is... infused with class ideology” (Moon, 1999: 181) must be brought to the forefront when attempting to come to grips with the pseudo-racialization of poor whites.

*Normative whiteness.* In her discussion of photography in colonial South Africa, Gaule (2001) argues that “depictions of poor whites with skin tones at the darker end of the spectrum serve to establish ‘difference’ and *subtly undermine* their position as white people” (336, emphasis mine). Gaule (2001) offers a more complete map of whiteness by conceptualizing *normative whiteness* as the center of the discursive formation of whiteness that would push some whites to the margin of whiteness. Gaule (2001) notes that “a primary component of ‘othering’ [is] difference.” “Variations and deviations from the centrally placed white norm,” she observes, serve to reify that normative referent as they “establish, control, and check the conditions and conventions that validate it” (334).

Even with the inclusion of Gaule’s (2001) concept of *normative whiteness*, though, the question of how this normative whiteness – including its classist intimations of whiteness as middle-class – became ensconced American discourse remains unanswered. Ohman’s (1996) concept of the professional-managerial class (PMC) provides insight into the whitening of class privilege and American culture

### **Whiteness and the origins of popular culture in America**

Ohmann (1996) makes a persuasive case that the turn of the century was a formative period in the development of what we now think of as popular culture in the United States. A “national mass culture”, Ohmann (1996) writes, “was first instanced in the United States by magazines, much like those of the present time, reaching large audiences and turning a profit on revenues for advertising for brand name products.” He continues that “this highly consequential change in the making of culture...[was] a transformative moment in the history of the United States, the history of culture, [and] the history of capitalism” (vii).

While turn of the century magazines may seem like a departure from our discussion of contemporary redneck discourse, they are significant for two reasons. First, if Ohmann (1996) is correct, they played a formative role in the development of present U.S. culture. Secondly, their development was driven by the same motive that shapes the development of mass culture today through media: profit.

*Capitalism at an impasse*

Ohmann (1996) locates the origins of popular culture in the United States around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period in which economic growth was at its highest. The capital that drove this growth was extracted from American laborers, both directly “from surplus value extracted through the labor process by industrialists (51), and indirectly through the generous gifts of states and the federal government to capitalists. Ohmann (1996) explains:

Ordinary Americans *gave* a rich mine of new capital to corporations, especially the railroads. Federal and state governments granted 180 million acres of public lands to them, in all, four times as much as to homesteaders, and even that figure bypasses the fact that many “homesteaders” were really land speculators. (...) So government lands, acquired partly with tax money, contributed a good share to the growth of capital. This is not to say that it was a bad idea to subsidize the growth of the railroad system, but only that doing so in this way transferred wealth upward (52, emphasis in original).

Paradoxically, this period of unprecedented growth also marked a time in which capitalism was in crisis. Workers were beginning to rail against “the efforts of businessmen to squeeze them in the cause of profit, capital formation, and control of the

work process (53). Furthermore, expansion of means of production had far outstripped demand, and profits were consequently in decline.

What emerged as the mechanism to resolve this crisis is what we now know as the advertising industry. The “masters of production”, writes Ohmann (1996) “could become the engineers of consumption as well” (57). By dividing consumers into market shares, and selling them *brands* as opposed to products, industrial capitalists reconfigured their relationship with their workers. Once workers left the factory they became *consumers*. “Not only would they colonize the leisure time of most citizens, as they had previously dominated work time,” remarks Ohmann (1996), “they would also integrate the nation into one huge market culture” (59). In this view, the origins of our modern consumer culture lie in “the integration of sales and production, well underway” at the turn of the century (74).

Inexpensive weekly magazines brought the idea of mass culture into the homes of many in the newly emerging professional-managerial class (PMC). Magazine editors sold their readers narratives of American culture – narratives with which they identified – through stories and photos. Presented amidst these myths of the cultured citizen were advertisements for commodities, ownership of which (it was intimated) marked inclusion and class status. In short, identities were constructed and sold to the PMC, identification with these identities drove purchasing. Consumers bought magazines to be sold to advertisers (Ohmann, 1996).

The definition of mass culture forwarded by Ohmann (1996) is as applicable to modern artifacts as it was to the magazines that marked the beginnings of the cultural production industry (that is to say – the production of culture that is necessary to ensure



the continued and smooth operation and growth of capitalism): “mass culture in a society like this one includes voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so, with dependable frequency; mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and is made for profit” (14).

Landau (2004) echoes Ohmann’s (1996) explanation of the function of magazines at the turn of the century in his discussion of the role of mass culture today. In his view, participation in mass culture through the purchasing of commodities tied to identities constructed by advertisers and the popular media that they support provides consumers with a “sense of belonging.” He asserts that people view consumption as a means of participation in culture and as a means of identifying who they are (69). This participation through consumption, he argues, has supplanted meaningful political participation aimed at shaping our social world (70). “If the ‘system’ refers to anything in the early twenty-first century,” he writes, “it is the unchallenged acceptance of a triangulated process of production-advertising-consumption as the best, and only, of all possible cultures” (2).

### *Selling the centered subject*

Mass culture in America is encoded with notions of normative whiteness. Those who initially held buying power in America were white. From its inception the cultural production industry sold white identities to its white audiences in order to induce them to spend their money on commodities that marked participation (or at least belonging) in a constructed white mass culture.

Ohmann (1996) terms the readership he discusses the professional-managerial class (PMC). While he is obviously talking about white people, that their whiteness goes largely unremarked by Ohmann (1996) is a testimony to the power of whiteness to maintain its invisibility even when it is glaringly obvious. None the less, Ohmann's (1996) PMC marks the beginnings of homogenized (white) culture in America. He draws from historian Sam Bass Warner in his observation that the PMC took shape when:

“middle class families ‘clustered together by their income capabilities and transportation needs so that the class divisions of the society came to be represented in large areas of similarly priced homes.’ Residential differentiation of this sort was probably an inevitable sequel to the elaboration of social strata attendant on capitalizations specialization of the labor process” (124).

Ohmann (1996) explicitly recognizes the homogenizing effect of this de-gentrification as well its contribution to the ease with which consumers could be sold constructed identities. He writes that “the evolution of the suburb and its mores had a central importance in the formation and the self-concept on the PMC. This new social location augmented personal appearance as a way of coding identity in the murky space of the industrial city” (136). It seems, at least in Ohmann's (1996) estimation, that we have been “bowling alone” (Putnam, 2000) since the turn of the century.

Homogenized white identity, importantly, arose out of the same economic and material conditions that Ohmann (1996) asserts gave rise to the PMC. Ruben (2001) explains that:

Economic spurs to suburbanization had a homogenizing effect on suburban populations. Demographically, suburban migration is well known as “white

flight” from urban centers. Yet that familiar phrase ignores the formative role suburbanization played in constructing a homogeneous white population to begin with. Suburbanization not only moved people out of cities but also transformed their primary social identifications, consolidating a pan-ethnic national whiteness (440).

This move, Ruben (2001) notes, “constituted a process of *political-economic* homogenization, a process of social nationalization” through which previous “ethnic and subnational sociogeographic identifications” (441, emphasis in original) were eliminated. A monolithic whiteness thus emerged, placing previous demarcations between whites under erasure.

Mass culture was created for the purpose of marketing identities to the PMC during the early 1900’s. The PMC, in turn, was the homogenized white subject assumed by Ruben (2001). Popular culture was infused with a white normative referent from its beginnings. It is built on a racist and classist foundation. The subject at the center of normative whiteness is not merely white but also class privileged. Poor whites are distanced from the discursive center of whiteness by virtue of their class. They are white, but not *that* white. Their whiteness is only remarkable because they do not embody normative whiteness. In this light, communication criticism from the perspective of whiteness that fails to incorporate class employs an incomplete model that fails to account for the multiple axes along which identities and power relation are shaped.

### **MARXISM AND WHITENESS: TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE CRITIQUE**

Ohmann (1996) engages the emergence of mass culture in America with a solidly Marxist bent. He keenly observes that the bourgeoisie, rather than an aristocracy, had

established the social order of mid-nineteenth century America and aimed to “legitimate its rule [by] making its interests seem natural, inevitable, and universal” (43). Such a system must rarely rely on brute force if it is to maintain the appearance that it is the most egalitarian and desirable (indeed, an immutable) configuration of society. Instead, it works hegemonically to articulate a *dominant logic* that does not function as “a negative force that punishes, orders, controls, prohibits, limits, excludes, and subjugates,” but rather “produces ‘docile bodies’--normalized, individualized, and homogenized in the disciplinary society” (Hwang, 1999).

### **Hegemony**

Accounting for this, Ohmann (1996) offers the theory of hegemony forwarded by Antonio Gramsci as an alternative to classical Marxism that would assume the architects of the advertising industry were directly focused on “management of ideology” (46). Ohmann (1996) is clear when he notes that in their day to day work “businessmen pursued no vision beyond the usual one of survival and accumulation” (61). Even so, their actions – rationally conceived within the logic of late capitalism - and the effects of those actions over the last century, illustrate “how hegemony works through media institutions to spread bourgeois ideology and enforce consent, when that may not be the conscious aim of anyone involved in the process” (46).

### **Strategy**

What makes Ohmann’s (1996) methodology inadequate for constructive engagement with the texts of redneck discourse is its lack of an explicit recognition of the inexorable connection between the *strategic rhetoric* of bourgeois ideology and the

*strategic rhetoric* of whiteness. Analysis of popular texts should lose sight of neither the class-specific nor the race-specific origins of popular culture.

Integration of Ohmann's (1996) Gramscian perspective with the project of mapping whiteness redresses the weaknesses of both models and provides a more focused conceptualization of whiteness, especially as it relates to class and popular culture in American society. The invisible center of whiteness that Nakayama and Krizek (1995) seek to make visible appears more clearly as a class-privileged homogenized white subject. Significantly, however, leveling the critical gaze upon this *normative* white subject does not necessarily dovetail well with Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) acceptance of the premise that treating "whiteness as victimizing to whites as well" is "misguided" (hooks, cited in Nakayama & Krizek, 1995:296). Notably, some poor whites *are* dislocated from the discursive and cultural center of whiteness. From the perspective articulated herein, this dislocation is potentially disempowering, at least in relation to the normative center of white discourse. This tension is a productive one however that marks the entry point of this criticism of redneck discourse. It is a tension that will be addressed (certainly not resolved) through the discussion of specific texts in the chapters that follow.

### **Space**

Finally, it is useful to return briefly again to the conceptualization of whiteness in terms of space. There is a reflexive relationship between the *discursive space* of whiteness and whiteness as it manifests and configures *actual spaces*. Significantly, as has been illustrated by the work of Ruben (2001), and here through careful consideration of Ohmann's (1996) concept of the PMC, the actual configuration of space has played a

significant role in the development of *normative whiteness*. Whiteness does not manifest itself in and exercise power over discursive space only, but also materially in the spaces where we live. Those spaces, in turn, offer themselves as the normative referent in discussions of how living spaces should be configured and the racial character of types of living spaces. Jarosz and Lawson (2002) address the spatial nature of redneck discourse in their observation that it serves to *distance* its targets from normative whiteness by relegating them an imaginary rural space characterized by an obsolete way of life. Shome (2003) argues that when spaces are marginalized in discourse the people who reside within those spaces are attendantly otherized. The referent spatial configuration against which spaces are constructed as improper or suboptimal, moreover, is without specific mention forwarded as the normative and most desirable one. The nexus between actual and discursive spaces as they operate within redneck discourse marks a second point of entry into redneck discourse.

### **ENGAGING REDNECK DISCOURSE: A PROJECT OVERVIEW**

The rich and varying connotations of the term redneck as it has been used in American mass culture point to the need to close the gap between scholarship that discusses its various meanings in the past and the yet understudied way redneck discourse functions today. The four chapters that follow attempt to do just that.

The second chapter of this project presents the results of a content analysis of a large sample of newspaper articles that use the term redneck published between 1990 and 1999. This sample is drawn from all major market newspapers in the nation, as well as the newswires that often supplement smaller papers. Generally, the results indicate that

redneck was used most often as a slur leveled at poor white southerners for the decade of the 1990's.

The third chapter articulates the role American redneck discourse plays in the construction and maintenance of middle-class norms of living space configuration, class, race, gender, sexuality and behavior. These functions are illustrated through a rhetorical criticism of selected print media from the larger sample used in the second chapter. Based on the textual analysis presented in the third chapter, redneck discourse, it is argued, works persistently to construct normative whiteness and obfuscate white privilege.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century was ushered in the tenor of redneck discourse appeared, on face, to take a significant turn. Distinct in some ways from the more negative characterizations of rednecks in the print media during the 1990's, the caricature of rednecks presented in popular music and comedy is benign and even charming. As an organizing theme of commodities like country music albums and movies, rednecks are presented in a far more palatable way. The implications of this turn both in terms of its commodification of redneck identity and its overall implications for a map of modern redneck discourse are discussed in the fourth chapter.

Ultimately, in the fifth and final chapter, it is argued that despite the seemingly harmless nature of the redneck construct in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its general meaning is not far removed from the derogatory use of the term. Further, this softening of redneck in the popular imagination actually works to strengthen redneck discourse as a sentry of normative whiteness and obfuscate its role in the maintenance of normative assumptions of the fairness of a system that privileges middle-class and rich whites at the expense of the impoverished, regardless of their race. Redneck discourse is discussed as

an assemblage that forms one cog in the machinery of whiteness. Redneck discourse normalize the socio-political status quo and masks the system of privilege that gave birth to the homogenized white subject.



## CHAPTER 2: MAPPING THE MODERN REDNECK.

From its original strategic use as an epithet leveled at poor whites living in the southern United States, through its tactical use in the 1930's as a term around which class solidarity was built, to its rearticulation in 1970's country music as a stand-in for the "hardworking white man" (Jarosz & Larson, 2002:11) in the face of civil rights reforms, redneck has proved to be a fluid term. Redneck's polyvalent meaning seems to change over time, across situations, and depending on who utters it. This complex and fascinating discourse has been under-theorized, especially within the field of communication studies, which had produced no significant scholarship examining redneck discourse.

The work of geographers Jarosz and Lawson (2002) provides one of the few critical engagements with redneck discourse as it operates in the United States. They recognize the lack of empirical research exploring "class conflict and definitions of racism *among* whites" arguing "that the discourse of 'redneck' is one important point of entry into the processes by which class differences" between whites are constructed and reinforced (10, emphasis in original). They make three observations about redneck discourse and its function in American culture based on ethnographic interviews with people living in three different rural areas. First, rural poor whites are constructed as living in an obsolete, old-fashioned way; second, "class status is understood and defined as lifestyle," rather than a material economic reality faced by some individuals; and third, rednecks are a foil for broader white racism. They recognize the term as an "unproblematized slur against working-class rural people" as well as a term of self-

identification as “part of the construction of working-class and middle-class masculine identity politics fashioning American class, racial, and ethnic identity” (12).

A less academic, and somewhat auto-ethnographic, treatment of redneck discourse in the United States is offered by Goad’s (1997) book *The redneck manifesto: How hillbillies, hicks and white trash became America’s scapegoats*. Goad caustically argues that poor whites are constructed in American culture as “gap-toothed, inbred, uncivilized, violent (...) gullible” criminal, wife-battering, “subhuman,” practitioners of “the asinine superstitions of poor-folks’ religion” who “breed anencephalic, mouth-breathing children” (15) and reside in “trailer parks out near Superfund cleanup sites (...) in rolling landfills of *curdled whiteness*” (16, emphasis added). Notably Goad (1997) did not discuss the phenomenon that Jarosz and Lawson (2002) observed five years later: the increasingly common redeployment of the term as a self-identifier.

Goad (1997) adopts a novel approach to the project of mapping popular redneck discourse through what he aptly refers to as “a short pseudoscientific study of how the mainstream press handles” the term redneck. He examined 115 articles that used the term redneck offered on the websites of the *Detroit Free Press* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He observed that uses of the term can be divided into four categories: “contemptible redneck clowns” (accounting for 39 of the occurrences), those who live in rural areas (accounting for 26 of the occurrences), those with no specific context for interpreting the meaning of redneck (accounting for 22 of the occurrences), and rednecks as white racists (accounting for 28 of the occurrences) (17-18).

The limitations of previous examinations of redneck discourse are significant. The work of Jarosz and Lawson (2002) is compelling, but limited in its generalizability and

the insight it provides into how redneck discourse is at play in American mass culture. Their study relied on ethnographic interviews conducted previously by other researchers. Because of this, they were unable to seek specific information from their respondents about their views of redneck discourse. These interviews were, in fact, not aimed at gathering data on redneck discourse at all, but rather information about broader issues of class and economics as they relate to geography. The only specific research on the uses of the term redneck in the work of Jarosz and Lawson (2002) is from a purposive selection of popular texts which receive only superficial, though insightful, treatment in their discussion. Many of their observations about how poor whites are constructed in American popular discourse are drawn from brief analysis of films like *Deliverance* and sitcoms like *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Their redneck specific texts are primarily country music songs from the 1970's.

Goad's (1997) work is equally lacking in generalizability due to its small sample, non-existent coding guidelines and lack of theoretical grounding. Further, the presence of only one coder also points to the need for more developed and systematic investigations of redneck discourse.

Methodological considerations aside, there is a chronological gap in research examining redneck discourse. As mentioned above, Jarosz and Lawson (2002) discuss constructions of redneck only in the light of anecdotal evidence drawn from a brief mention of four country music songs and a "redneck power" T-Shirt worn by Billy Carter – brother to former president Jimmy Carter – from the 1970's. They provide no close reading of any specific mass media uses of the term since. Goad's (1997) book, published

in paperback in 1997, offers an equally incomplete view of redneck discourse as it has functioned during the last decade.

Redneck discourse has been under-theorized and under-studied. Little close textual analysis has focused specifically on the construction of redneck identity and no systematically conducted content analysis has been undertaken to parameterize American redneck discourse. In order to redress these shortcomings and provide a solid foundation for future analysis of redneck discourse in the United States, this chapter outlines a broader examination of the uses of the term redneck in American print media through a content analysis of articles in which the term redneck occurs.

#### **Method**

A content analysis of a sample drawn from regional newspapers throughout the United States was conducted by seven coders including the principle investigator. After a training session, coders were given a computer-based codebook and asked to code for overall frame (positive/negative/neutral or unclear), as well as the presence of specific frames and items in the sample. A pilot test of the codebook using thirty items not included in the final sample revealed that intercoder reliability was consistently above 80% based on percent of agreement for all items.

#### ***Population***

The total population consisted of every article that included at least one use of the term redneck, or some variation of it (such as red-neck, or rednecks), from 271 regional newspapers as well as the state and local Associated Press Wire and Cox News Service (a total of 277 sources) from 1990 through 1999. The population was made up of 12, 679 articles. The two wire services were included because they likely represent articles reprinted in smaller regional newspapers not included in the population. Articles that

appeared twice were not excluded as long as they appeared in separate newspapers because they represent distinct occurrences of redneck discourse and their inclusion allows for comparisons of frequency of the term's occurrence over time as well as comparison of its use across regions. The population was divided into four geographic regions – Midwest (50 publications; 1,623 articles), Northeast (56 publications; 1,956 articles), Southeast (69 publications; 6,185 articles) and Western (102 publications; 2,915 articles) based on the city in which each newspaper was published. This was done to facilitate comparisons across geographic regions. A list of the included news sources and their division by geographic region is included in Appendix 1.

### ***Sample***

The sample for this study consisted of 20% of the total population (2,535 articles). A random 20% (using a random number table) were chosen from the population according to its division by region and year. Sampling was done in this way to provide an accurate snapshot of variations and changes in the frequency and use of the term redneck across time and geographic region. Because of the sampling procedure, articles from some regions and years represent a greater portion of the sample than do others. Articles from the Midwest represented 325 items in the sample (13%), those from the Northeast represented 391 items in the sample (15%), those from the Southeast represented 1,236 items in the sample (49%), and those from the Western states represented 583 items in the sample (23%). A complete list of the number of items per region per year for both the population and sample are shown in Appendix 2.

### ***Coding Procedures***

Each article in the population was assigned a number that corresponded with its hit number on Lexis-Nexis™. Articles from each subset – based on region and year –

were numbered consecutively, starting with the first article in that region for that year and ending on the last. The sample was chosen from these randomly. Coders were assigned several series of numbers that corresponded with articles in the sample. After their training session, each coded their portion of the sample independently. Of the total sample, a random 10% was double coded to test for intercoder reliability. Percent of agreement serves as the measure of intercoder reliability for this sample. More rigorous measures, such as Cohen's Kappa, show artificially low intercoder reliability for this study because they overestimate the likelihood of agreement by chance for nominal variables that can be coded only as either present or not present.

### ***Variables***

Coders recorded the name of the newspaper from which each article was taken as well as its publication date, headline, and geographic region. They also recorded the number of times the term redneck, or some variation of it occurred. Twenty other variables were coded for, six of them objective variables; fourteen of them more subjectively assessed variables. A comments section was also included to note other frames (one of the subjective variables was 'redneck as other frame') or for the coders to record remarks on why they chose to code an article the way they did or other noteworthy information.

*Objective variables.* Coders recorded the presence or absence of five objective variables in each article: references to the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy or his "Blue Collar" comedy troupe; whether or not persons self-identified a redneck; discussion of music in relation to the term redneck; discussion of country music in relation to the term redneck; discussion of rock music in relation to the term redneck; and discussions of both rock and country music in relation to the term redneck. The latter three variables were recorded

separately to make final analysis of the results easier. The inclusion of these variables is predicated on the theorizing about redneck discourse by previous authors as well as the first chapter of this project.

*Subjective variables.* Coders were asked to assess the presence or absence of fourteen subjectively assessed variables. The first three variables recorded the overall frame for the term redneck provided by the article. Coders were given the mutually exclusive choice between a positive framing, a negative framing, or a neutral/unclear framing of rednecks within the article.

Eleven other variables were coded for: 1) rednecks presented as racists and/or bigoted; 2) rednecks presented as masculine or chauvinist; 3) rednecks as those who reside in rural spaces; 4) rednecks as poor and/or economically disadvantaged; 5) rednecks as incestuous or inbred; 6) rednecks as southerners; 7) rednecks as violent or troublesome; 8) rednecks as white; 9) rednecks as unintelligent or uneducated; 10) rednecks as drunks or characterized by excessive alcohol consumption; and 11) rednecks as other frame not specified by the codebook.

Rednecks were sometimes described overtly using each of these variables, but often intimation of these frames was still clear when a word-correlation standard would not lead one to code for the variable. For example, specific instructions for the *racist and/or bigoted* variable included directions to code references to rednecks being involved in lynchings, anti-civil rights activities, or other indicators of racially motivated discrimination as positive for the framing of rednecks as racists. Consistent with literature discussing critical whiteness studies, coders were instructed to code redneck as white if the race of others was mentioned when no race was specified for rednecks, as well as

when the race of rednecks was specified. Directions for inferring the presence or absence of other subjective variables were of a similar nature as the two discussed above.

Ultimately, for each of these variables coders were instructed to use as their standard the inferences a reasonable person should be expected to make based on context clues within the articles.

## **Results**

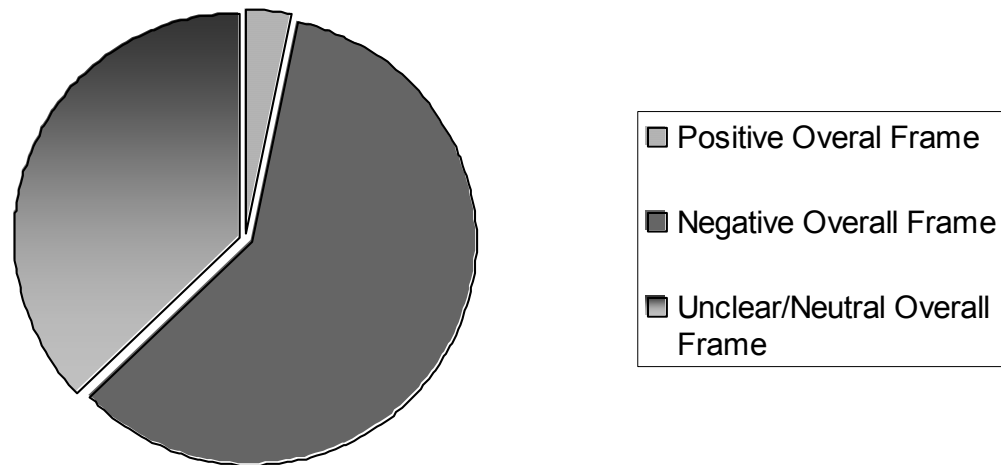
After coding and checks on intercoder agreement, which was consistently near or over 80%, some items were dropped from sample based on the way the term redneck was used in the article. Results for the total sample are reported first. Results after selected items were excluded from the sample are reported second.

### ***Complete sample***

In the total sample of 2535 articles the term redneck occurred 4089 times, or about 1.6 times per article. Overall, articles tended to use redneck as an epithet, constructing and presenting rednecks in a negative light. Coders reported that 83 articles – about 3% of the sample - framed rednecks in a positive light. Intercoder agreement on the *positive overall frame* variable was excellent at over 96 percent. 1506 articles –59% of the sample – were coded as framing rednecks negatively. Most often, in these articles, the label was deployed as an epithet in a manner indicative of the description of the cultural meanings of *redneck* articulated by Goad (1997) and Jarosz and Lawson (2002). Coders agreed on the *negative overall frame* variable 82% of the time. The second most common frame reported by the coders was a neutral or unclear framing. 940 articles – 37% of the original sample – were coded as framing rednecks in an unclear or neutral manner. Intercoder agreement for the *unclear/neutral overall frame* variable was 79%. These results are represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:  
Positive, Negative and Neutral Frames for total sample**



Characterizations of rednecks consistent with the observations of Jarosz and Lawson (2002) and Goad (1997) were present and often prevalent in the total sample. It was specified or clearly intimated that rednecks were white in 13% of the total sample. Coders identified 332 articles that made the whiteness of rednecks apparent, with an intercoder agreement of 91%. 401 articles – 16% of the total sample – were coded as presenting rednecks as racists with an intercoder agreement of 92%. Rednecks were framed as being indicative of rural spaces 17% of the time, in 426 of the articles in the sample, and as being presented as southerners in 641 articles coded, or about 25% of the sample. Intercoder agreement was at 86% and 87% respectively for these variables. Rednecks were framed as unintelligent, uneducated or ignorant in 344 articles or around 14% of the time. Coders agreed on this variable 93% of the time. A tendency toward violence also emerged as a characteristic often attributed to rednecks. Coders reported

that 357 of the articles, again around 14%, presented rednecks as violent with 87% intercoder agreement.

Less prevalent were presentations of rednecks as characterized by poverty, excessive alcohol consumption, chauvinism, or incestuousness. It was intimated that rednecks live in poverty in 238 of the 2535 articles coded - 9% of the time – with coders in agreement on this variable in nearly 97% of cases. Rednecks were portrayed as excessive consumers of alcohol in 6% - 156 items – of the sample. Intercoder agreement for the *characterized by excessive alcohol use and/or drunkenness* variable was also high at 94%. Coders reported that 4% of articles presented rednecks as chauvinist males, identifying occurrences of this framing in ninety-eight articles with an intercoder agreement of just over 97%. Thirty-three items - 1% of the total sample - were coded as representing rednecks as incestuous or inbred with coders in agreement 100% of the time on this variable.

The connection between constructions of redneck identity and country music, as well as the common discursive connections between rednecks and rural or “country” spaces, evidenced in the work of Jarosz and Lawson (2002) led to the inclusion of variable recording the presence or absence of specific references to music in general, country music and rock music in the sample. The mere presence of references to country or rock music artists was not alone sufficient for an article to be coded as mentioning country or rock music in relation to the term redneck. Rather, only articles in which a type of music was specified in relation to the term redneck were positively coded for these variables. 269, about 11%, of the articles in the sample were coded as mentioning music. Country music was mentioned specifically in 6% of the total sample (in 161 cases)

and specific references to rock music in relation to rednecks were identified in 3% of the total sample (75 cases). Both country and rock music were mentioned in 2% of the sample (42 cases). Intercoder agreement fell below 96% on only one of the variables, the mention of music, which coders were in agreement on in over 94% of cases. As these are objective variables, the limited number of mismatches (only 37 total for all 4 variables) can be attributed to errors in data entry and/or misinterpretation of the guidelines for coding these variables.

The popularity of the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy and his “Blue Collar” comedy troupe led to the inclusion of a variable to record the presence or absence of mentions of Foxworthy or the Blue Collar Comedy Tour in sampled articles. Coders reported that 8% of articles, 191 of the 2535 items in the sample, included a reference to the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy. A number of these cases, however, were articles reporting the status of Foxworthy’s CD’s on the popular music charts with no mention of their content and no clear frame for interpreting the meaning of the term redneck.

Coders were also instructed to record instances in which individuals self-identified as rednecks. Coders were instructed to code for the presence of this variable when individuals evoked the term redneck as a self descriptor, not when it was a nickname or was used by one individual to describe another. In 5% of cases an individual’s self-identification as a redneck was observed. The *self-identification as a redneck* variable was coded as present in 116 articles with an intercoder agreement of 98%.

Finally, coders were given the option of noting the presence of a defining characteristic of rednecks observed in a given item that was not specified in the codebook.

When coders coded articles for the presence of the *redneck as other frame* variable they were instructed to record that frame specifically in their comments. 361 times, in 14% of cases in the original sample, coders observed defining characteristics of rednecks not included in the codebook with 83% intercoder agreement.

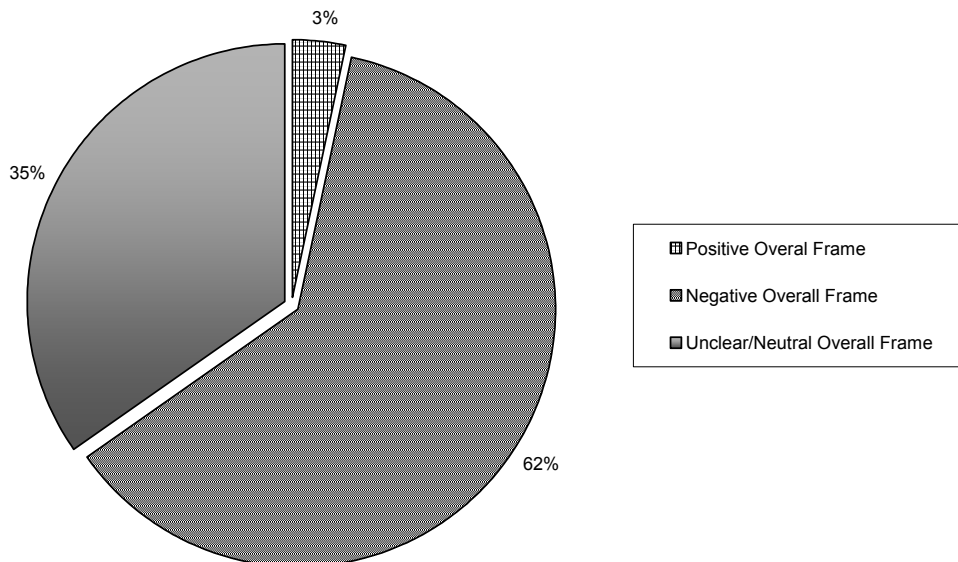
### ***Revised Sample***

Discussions with coders and review of the collected data led to the decision to revise the sample by eliminating ninety items from it. The revised sample of 2445 articles excluded articles that reported the results of horse or dog races in which an animal with redneck in their name ran. Articles discussing bird species with redneck in their name were removed from the sample as well. Mere listings of popular music charts that included Foxworthy's albums with redneck in the title were also excluded. References to necks made red by sunburns, such as one article in the *Chattanooga Free Press* that claimed sunscreen use was the best way to "ward off red necks," were also dropped from the sample. This was done to reduce the sample to only items that used the term redneck as a descriptor for people.

In the revised sample there were 3984 occurrences of the term redneck. The number of occurrences per article stayed the same at just over 1.6 uses per article on average. Though both the number of positive frames and the percentage of the sample they represented stayed the same, all items dropped from the sample were coded as having an unclear or neutral overall frame. As such, the percentage of items coded as framing rednecks in an unclear or neutral way dropped slightly from 37% to 35%. The percentage of negative overall frames rose attendantly from 59% to 62%. These results are shown in Figure 2. Likewise, slight rises in the frequency of occurrences for the

*redneck as poor and/or economically disadvantaged* variable (from 9% to 10%), the *redneck as southern* variable (from 25% to 26%), the *redneck as violent* variable (from 14% to 15%), and the *redneck as other/not specified frame* variable (from 14% to 15%) were observed. The percentage of articles in which references to Foxworthy's comedy were made dropped from 11% to 8%. These results are reported in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:**  
**Positive, Negative and Neutral Frames for revised sample**



Analysis of the data collected reveals some noteworthy trends. Comparisons of the actual number of occurrences of the word *redneck* and the actual number of positive, negative or unclear/neutral frames by year would be misleading because of the enormous differences in the number of articles sampled for each year. A comparison of these variables across regions based on raw data is similarly problematic, as some regions

contained more newspapers than others. As such, to control for differences in the number of articles that include the term redneck from year to year and in the number of publications from region to region, the mean number of occurrences and mean number of positive, negative, or unclear/neutral frames were compared.

The number of articles published containing the word redneck, or some variation of it, grew steadily each year from 1990 through 1996. From 1996 through 1998 the number of articles using the term remained high, but did not exhibit growth again until the final year of the decade. The average number of times the term appeared per article spiked modestly in 1993 but showed no notable changes until 1998 when, for the final two years of the decade, the term appeared more than twice per article in the sample. These results are shown in Table 1 and Figures 3 and 4.

Trends in the framing of rednecks in print news media, whether positive, negative or unclear/neutral, remained mostly consistent across the decade of the 1990's. The number of positive frames in articles per year displayed almost no change from 1990 to 1999. From 1993 through 1995 the number of unclear frames rose slightly, while the number of negative frames showed a slight decrease. Showing little change from 1995 through 1998, in the final year of the decade occurrences unclear frames declined, while the appearances of negative frames rose back toward previous levels. These results are shown in Figure 3.

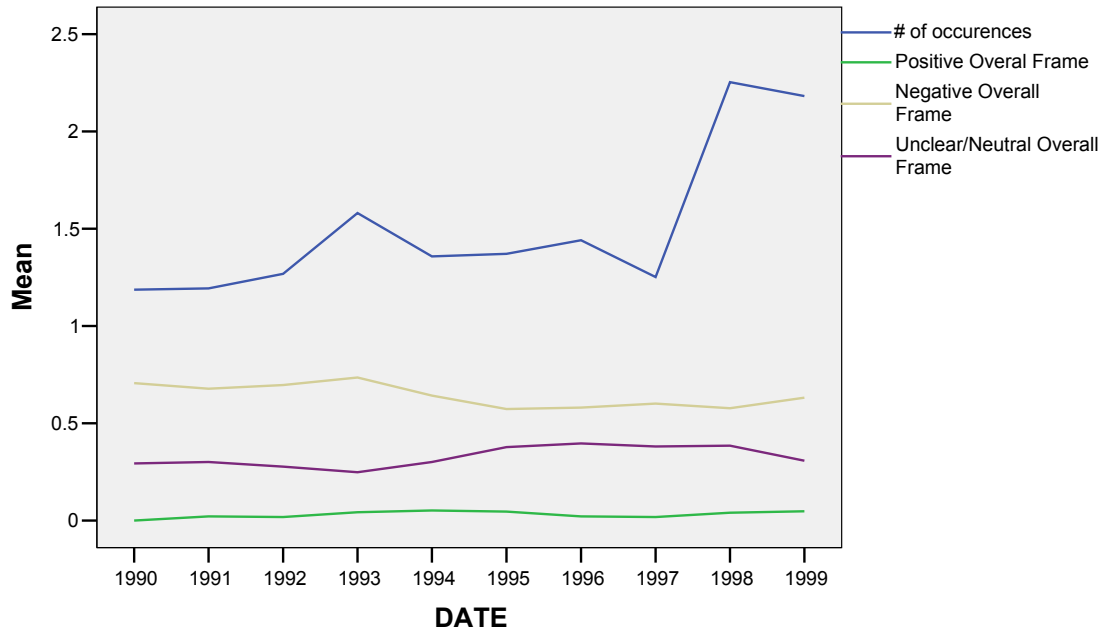
The variation that did occur in overall framing appears to be related to mentions of Foxworthy's comedy. Presumably because of the seemingly benign nature of Foxworthy's act, or at least its presentation as such, coders had a strong tendency to record articles that mentioned the comic as presenting rednecks in a neutral and/or

unclear frame. For example, from the beginning of 1993 through the end of 1994 there was a measurable spike in the number of articles mentioning Foxworthy. During the same period there was a marked decline in the mean number of negative overall frames and an inverse rise in the number of neutral frames. Similar trends are observable throughout the decade, as shown in Figure 5. A Pearson's Product Correlation revealed a significant correlation of .258 between the mention of Foxworthy and a neutral overall frame.

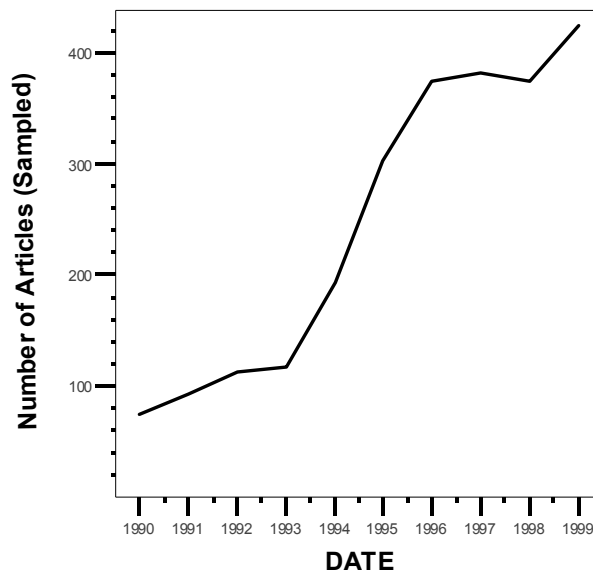
**Table 1:**

DATE	Mean number of occurrence	Number of articles	Std. Deviation
1990	1.19	75	.926
1991	1.19	93	.875
1992	1.27	112	1.860
1993	1.58	117	4.875
1994	1.36	193	1.304
1995	1.37	302	1.519
1996	1.44	374	2.065
1997	1.25	381	1.170
1998	2.25	374	16.187
1999	2.18	424	19.544
Total	1.63	2445	10.435

**Figure 3:**  
**Comparison of Mean Number of Occurrences and Overall Frames**

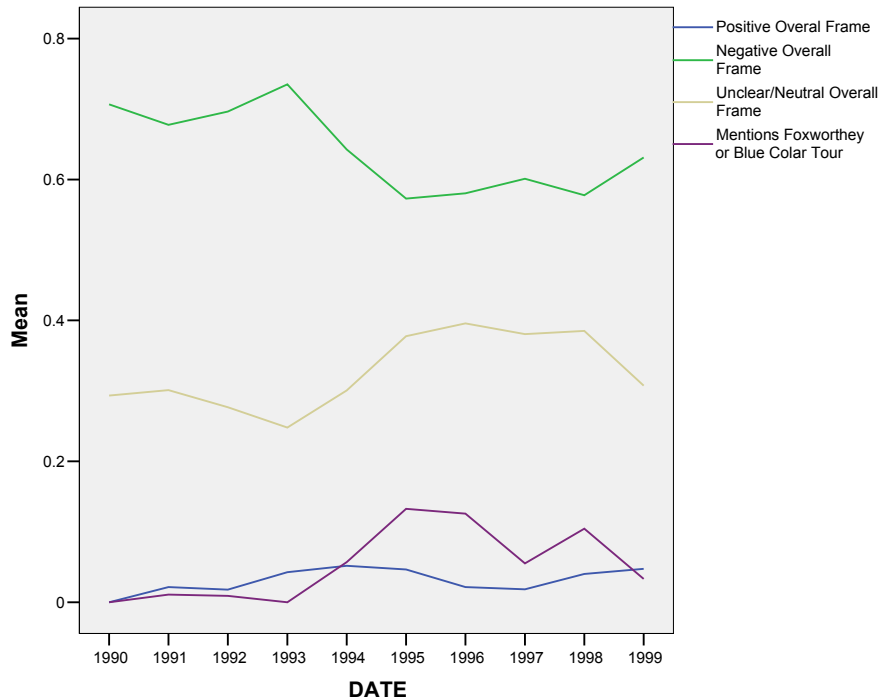


**Figure 4: Number of Articles By Year**

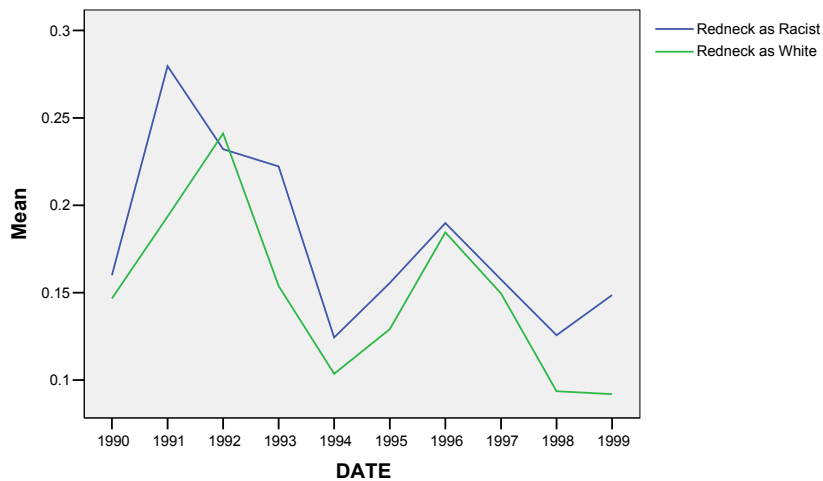




**Figure 5: Overall Frame & Mentions of Foxworthy's Comedy**



**Figure 6:  
Comparison of codes for the Rednecks as Racist and Rednecks as White Variables**



Perhaps the most intriguing relationship revealed through comparison of means across the decade is that between instances in which coders identified rednecks as white and racists. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 6, the means for each mirror one another year-by-year. A Pearson's Product Correlation revealed a significant correlation coefficient of .499 for these two variables. That coders identified rednecks as white and as racist so often when coding the same article is intuitive from the perspective of whiteness studies. The specification of the race of the target of the racism allowed coders to infer whiteness even in cases when it was not specified. These instances provide a clear example of how whiteness maintains its location at the normative center of race discourse often without even revealing itself overtly.

**Table 2: Comparisons of means for white & racists codes**

1997	Mean	.15	.16
	N	381	381
	Std. Deviation	.357	.365
1998	Mean	.09	.13
	N	374	374
	Std. Deviation	.292	.332
1999	Mean	.09	.15
	N	424	424
	Std. Deviation	.289	.356
Total	Mean	.14	.16
	N	2445	2445
	Std. Deviation	.343	.371
	Std. Deviation	.362	.418
1994	Mean	.10	.12
	N	193	193
	Std. Deviation	.306	.331
1995	Mean	.13	.16
	N	302	302
	Std. Deviation	.336	.363
1996	Mean	.18	.19
	N	374	374
	Std. Deviation	.388	.393

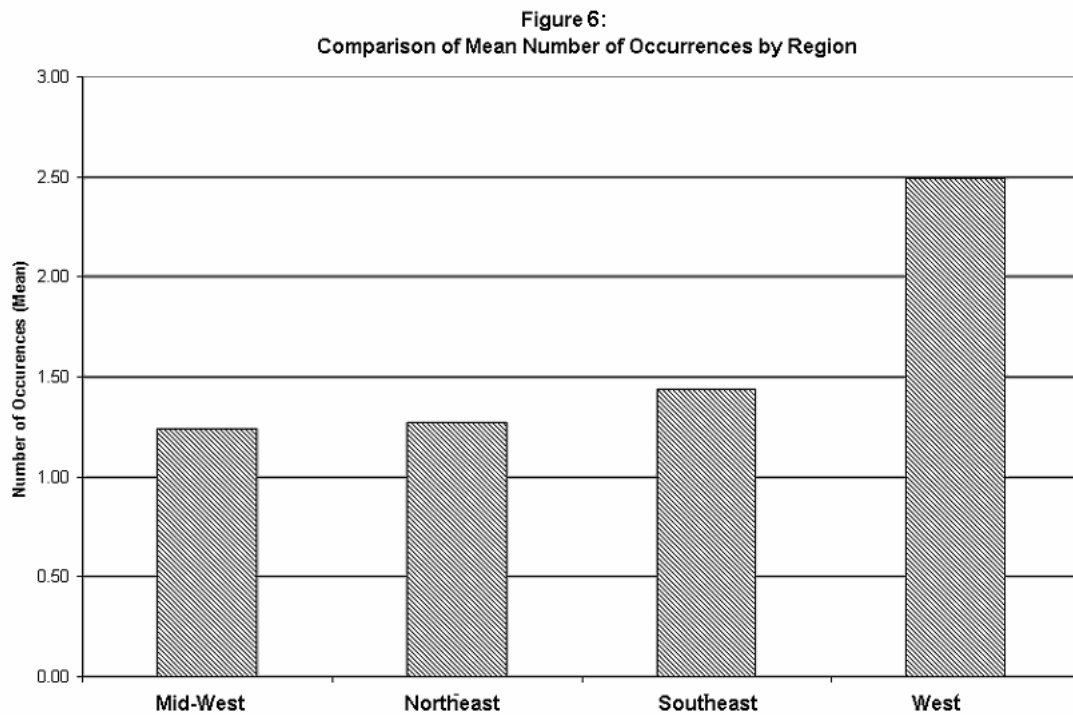
**Table 4: Occurrences by Region**

Region	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Mid-West	1.24	314	1.342
Northeast	1.27	385	2.739
Southeast	1.44	1181	1.815
West	2.49	565	21.398
Total	1.63	2445	10.435

Table 5:

Region (REGVAR)		RACE	CHAU	RURL	POOR	INBRD	SOUTH	VILNT	WHITE	UNED	DRNK	SELFID
Mid-West	Mean	.22	.04	.22	.11	.03	.25	.16	.17	.16	.05	.03
	N	314	314	314	314	314	314	314	314	314	314	314
	Std. Deviation	.413	.207	.417	.307	.158	.431	.363	.378	.363	.227	.176
Northeast	Mean	.21	.04	.14	.09	.01	.22	.19	.19	.12	.06	.03
	N	385	385	385	385	385	385	385	385	385	385	385
	Std. Deviation	.410	.194	.342	.284	.113	.415	.393	.393	.322	.237	.174
Southeast	Mean	.13	.04	.18	.11	.01	.32	.13	.11	.14	.07	.07
	N	1181	1180	1181	1181	1181	1181	1181	1181	1181	1181	1181
	Std. Deviation	.341	.196	.384	.313	.108	.467	.333	.317	.353	.253	.247
West	Mean	.16	.04	.16	.07	.01	.17	.15	.13	.14	.06	.03
	N	565	565	565	565	565	565	565	565	565	565	565
	Std. Deviation	.371	.194	.368	.260	.103	.379	.356	.334	.351	.238	.171
Total	Mean	.16	.04	.17	.10	.01	.26	.15	.14	.14	.06	.05
	N	2445	2444	2445	2445	2445	2445	2445	2445	2445	2445	2445
	Std. Deviation	.371	.196	.379	.296	.115	.439	.353	.343	.349	.244	.213

There were notable differences observable between regions as well as years in the sample. When controlling for differences in the number of papers in each region, the samples from both Mid-West and Northeast regions included about 1.25 occurrences of the term redneck per article. The Southeast region was slightly higher at 1.44 occurrences per article, while the Western region was by far the highest at almost 2.5 occurrences per article. These results are reported in Table 4 and Figure 6. Other variables were largely consistent across regions with the notable exception of the *redneck as southern* variable, which was coded as present significantly more often in the Southeast region than in other regions. These results are shown in Table 5.



### **DISCUSSION:**

This study reveals that, when enough information is presented for a reader to come to understand what it means to be a redneck without relying on their preconceived notions, the portrait painted of rednecks is overwhelmingly a bad one. It is important to consider, however, that the large number of unclear/neutral frames identified by coders is misleading. In many of these articles, the term redneck was used as a stand-alone descriptor with no other context clues that would lead coders to identify one or more of the frames included in the codebook as present. Taken in light of the results from this content analysis and the work of previous scholars, these neutral frames may very well represent references to the commonly understood caricature of the redneck in American popular culture as an impoverished, racist southerner with a tendency toward violence.

For example, one article coders identified as framing rednecks in a neutral/unclear manner discussed the way people came together across their differences in support of the Jacksonville Jaguars. The author wrote:

For them, the past, present and future are all balled up into one knot right here, 12 miles west of the Atlantic Ocean and 12 miles south of the Georgia line, halfway between Atlanta and Miami. This is where New Joisy (SIC) meets Dixie, where locals with red necks and retirees with red legs reach across the cultural divide to bond through the Jags. (Fowler, 1995: sports).

Without any description of the characteristics of rednecks by the author, this article clearly fell into the *neutral/unclear frame* category. Even so, a close reading suggests that this usage makes reference to the commonly assumed characteristics of rednecks, so ubiquitously accepted that the author expects his audience to assume a meaning for

redneck without cues within his article. Further, the contrast between “retirees with red legs” (read: class privileged whites who have migrated in retirement from cooler northern states) and “locals with rednecks” (read: poor southern whites) easily supports the inference that the author is evoking the common pejorative usage of the label.

Another article coded as neutral/unclear is similarly revealing. Walcott (1995) quotes a gentleman in his article discussing a potential run for the presidency by Colin Powell who said "I hope that [Powell runs for the presidency]. He's the only one I know who could bring this country together. Hell, even the rednecks would vote for him" (3A). While the cursory use of the label redneck in this article did not meet the criteria for it to be coded as negative, it seems apparent that the term is being deployed as an epithet. Presumably, they quip that “even the rednecks would vote for him” either makes reference to an inability among redneck to make informed decisions as voters (a lack of intelligence) or to white rednecks who would find Powell likable despite their propensity to be racists.

Though 3% of the sample was coded as framing rednecks in a positive light, these occurrences do not necessarily represent a wholesale rearticulation of what it means to be a redneck. To be coded in this way articles merely had to include a presentation of being a redneck as a good thing. Some of these instances included a *defense* of the normative redneck construct. In one article about country music singer Toby Keith, the author wrote “in Toby Keith's world, to be called a redneck is a good thing. Dang. Make that a very good thing” (Bialczak, 1999: E5). While the author’s use of ‘dang’ may well make reference to the caricature of the uneducated redneck, Keith himself debunks this stereotype claiming "in 1999, when you have a good education, and you work hard for

your life, it's all right to be a redneck, just don't let any of your friends confuse a redneck with those toothless people who fight on the Jerry Springer Show" (Quoted in Bialczak, 1999: E5). What Keith does not make clear here is exactly what redneck characteristics *are* defensible. He does not warn against confusing rednecks with white racists, heterosexist bigots, or poor southerners. Further, Keith himself seems to have the penchant for violence so commonly attributed to rednecks in American mass culture, sounding the hawkish call to put a "boot" in the "ass" of Muslims in his 2002 hit *Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (the Angry American)*.

Similarly, in an article by a Times-Picayune staff writer about the decision at Clemson University to fire successful coach Ken Hatfield and replace him with the relatively inexperienced Tommy West, a former Clemson administrator explains the decision as such:

"Hatfield didn't have enough redneck in him, I guess," said Bob Bradley, who served as the school's sports information director from 1955 to 1988. "He lived 15 miles out of town and wouldn't go by and drink beer with 'em. You won't find a finer guy than Ken Hatfield, but he didn't fit the mold that Clemson people wanted" (Quoted in Bennett, 1996: Sports D1).

Thus, while being a redneck is presented in this case as a positive thing in the culture of Clemson's football fans, it is not presented as differing in any way from the commonly evoked caricature of the redneck. In fact, this quote even makes reference to the drunkenness attributed to rednecks overtly in 6% of the sample coded herein.

At least for the decade of the 1990's redneck was used largely as an epithet. According to 62% of the sample analyzed in this study, to be a redneck is unequivocally

bad. While 35% of articles in the sample were coded as framing rednecks neutrally or offering no clear frame at all, a large number of these articles do little to remediate the image of the redneck, although they avoid the blatant negative characterizations seen in the afore mentioned 62%. The remaining 3% coded as positive often offered little context for determining the characteristics of a redneck and sometimes merely portrayed the redneck of epithet caricatures as a good thing.



### CHAPTER 3: REDNECK AS A SLUR

Show me a white, redneck cracker who wants to kill black people, I'll show you a man who whips his mama and whips his children

---Dick Gregory

I know the people living under the punchline. They're my people. And when some smart-ass suburbanite jokes about inbreeding and incest, I know they slander people who clerk for eight hours a day and teach Sunday school and raise families and coach Little League, a group of human beings who would give almost anything for the opportunities of a college education. Excuse me if I don't laugh at the latest redneck jokes.

---James Hart

I listened to the limo-libs constantly dumping on white trash. Silently enduring their barbs as if they were telling polack jokes and didn't realize I was polish (. . . .) It was always the people in their neighborhoods who were the primary trash-bashers. Because poor blacks remind them of their sins, they refrain from nigger bashing; because poor whites remind them of their successes, they shit on rednecks and laugh. What should I call the nontrashy Caucasians? White Gold? The Valuable People? The true profiteers of white imperialism?

---Jim Goad

The caricature of the redneck has been with us for some time in American popular culture. For the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the rednecks of our collective imagination have served as a favorite target for derision. Through their construction as rednecks “poor, white, rural folk in the US are often known in popular culture (. . . .) as lazy, trashy, obsolescent, stagnant, and resistant to change” (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002: 8-9). The decade of the 1990's saw the term redneck used often in print media, and its use rose dramatically during the last three years of the decade. The prevalence of the term's use in print media points to the need for closer attention to such occurrences.

The frequency with which the label redneck is applied to individuals, spaces and activities in print media is staggering. The persistence of uses of redneck as an unproblematic slur shows that it is still acceptable to deride poor rural whites in the United States. The study of redneck discourse in print media is also useful because use of the term in op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, and quotes are likely to influence and mirror the way such discourse plays out in everyday conversations.

When used contemptuously, the redneck label works through four distinct but related discourses of space, race, class and culture. First, redneck discourse associates certain spaces specifically and certain types of spaces in general with rednecks. Second, as noted by Jarosz and Lawson (2002:10), redneck discourse is charged with normative assumptions of class and economics. “Class status”, observe Jarosz and Lawson (2002), is understood and defined by lifestyle”, thus the “material processes of social power and economic restructuring that produce the harsh realities of poverty” are obscured (10). Third, the racial subtext of redneck discourse functions to entrench normative whiteness and obfuscate white privilege. Fourth, redneck discourse constructs its subjects as cultural and behavioral deviants.

A close reading of the most common uses of the term in print news reveals these functions of redneck discourse. The first section of this chapter articulates such a reading considering individually the spatial, racial, classist, and behavioral characterization of rednecks in print media through consideration of specific examples of usages of the term redneck. The second section turns to the work of articulating redneck as an assemblage: a complete discursive framework comprised of the distinct and interrelated functions discussed in the first section of the chapter.

## **THE DISTINCT FUNCTIONS OF REDNECK DISCOURSE**

Redneck functions often as an epithet to depict its subjects as non-normative in terms of the spaces where they live and the way such spaces are configured. At times, rednecks are portrayed as the racist guardians of white privilege. Alternatively, rednecks are often defined by their poverty and deviant behavior. An in-depth look at each of these functions separately can contribute greatly to a holistic view of the construct of the redneck.

### **Space**

The functions of discourses of space employing the redneck construct are threefold. First, redneck discourse works to marginalize certain spaces and, in turn, the people who reside in those spaces. Second, these spaces are marked as underdeveloped and/or culturally obsolete (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Third, redneck used as an epithet constructs and normalizes modern Western middle-class configurations of space through the construction of negative difference.

Often examinations of hegemony and power relations in society focus on identity alone (Shome, 2003: 39). As Shome (2003) points out, often “we see space as a background, a backdrop against which the real stuff of history and politics is enacted” (39). Discursive constructions of space, however, play a central role in empowering or disempowering people and communities (Bennett, 2000). Shome (2003) contends, for example, that labeling of colonias - informal housing communities along the U.S./Mexico border - as “illegal” immigrant spaces contributes to a view of the individuals who live there as being “out of place” (Shome, 2003). Similarly, the discourses of urban development and de-concentration construct inner city communities as improper and dysfunctional spaces. The inhabitants of such spaces are attendantly otherized (Bennett,

2000). Though it has received less attention from scholars, the interplay of identity and space in redneck discourse is significant as well.

The Beverly Hillbillies were out of place in Beverly Hills. Their backwardness was only rational when located within an obsolete rural space. It is only natural that such a relationship between culture and space would play-out on American television in light of the race, class, and space *specific* origins of mass culture. The discursive and actual homogenization of white identity – the development of the PMC as discussed by Ohman (1996)- was predicated uniquely on the emergence of white suburban communities. Likewise, culture was first *produced* as a commodity to be sold to homogenized white audiences. This move signaled the end of selling products and the beginning of selling culture. The emergence of popular culture was grounded in the development of white spaces characterized by white privilege. In the Beverly Hillbillies and popular media of today, mass culture belies its racist, classist assumptions of normative space and whiteness.

In terms of its spatial character, American redneck discourse locates its subjects in rural spaces, often in The South. It also implies spatial configuration of redneck communities; i.e. trailer-parks. When the rednecks of popular discourse do enter the realm of suburban and urban space, they are “rural intruder[s]” (Wilson, 2000, quoted in Jarosz & Lawson, 2002:17), or cultural interlopers. Though often associated with specific spaces, rednecks are at other times tied discursively to rural spaces in general. References to “local rednecks,” “backwoods rednecks” and “redneck yokels” abound in popular redneck discourse. The imaginary rural spaces evoked in redneck discourse are often

“backward, different, and even dangerous” (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002: 16). When not disparaged, these spaces are romanticized as unfortunate casualties of development (13).

Just as the construction of race vis-à-vis whiteness implicitly constructs and normalizes whiteness, the construction of a space as backward or obsolete occurs against a normative referent of modern social-spatial configuration (i.e. the suburbs and cityscapes subject to urban renewal). In this discourse, development – an inherency of capitalism – is immutable and normative. Development is the rational course of action when society encounters *undeveloped* or *underdeveloped* space.

Sometimes, spaces are defined by a prevalence of rednecks. A piece in Florida’s *New Times Broward-Palm Beach* titled “Down in the Boondocks,” for instance, takes a jab at the residents of Loxahatchee, a town on the southeast coast of Florida:

Question: How do you compliment a girl from Loxahatchee?

Answer: "Nice tooth."

Question: How do you compliment ten girls from Loxahatchee?

Answer: "Nice set of teeth."

Now, I don't mean to deride Palm Beach County's less-ritzy towns -- well, maybe I do -- but let's face it: It's Hicksville out there. Ford truck country. The main supplier of rednecks in need of serious dental work to the Jerry Springer and Sally Jessy Raphael shows. (Karetnick, 1999:¶1-5).

In the same fashion an attorney quoted in an editorial about his defense of a black man wrongfully convicted of rape in 1983 mused that the county in which the trial took place “was a redneck, racist county and had a reputation as such (...) Everyone at the prosecution table was white, the victim was white, the witnesses against him were white.

It was the opposite for Calvin. He was black, I was black and his alibi witnesses were black" (quoted in Torpy, 1999:¶27). Jacksonville Florida's West side has been characterized in a similar way, according to one resident quoted in the *Florida Times-Union* who said "I speak with people at work, and they have a very negative connotation about the Westside -- that there are a bunch of rednecks, weirdos over here" (Soergel, 1999: ¶23).

Entire states and geographic regions are sometimes painted as redneck spaces as well. The gulf coast of the United States is undoubtedly the space most often associated with rednecks in print, commonly called the "redneck Riviera." This reference, in fact, has appeared more than 130 times in major papers since 2000. *Times Union* staff writer Dan Lynch (1999) makes a connection between rednecks, their behavior and the spaces to which they are germane in a 1999 editorial, writing "A certain number of white cops in New York's capital city -- I can't say precisely how many -- behaving like redneck skinheads from East Armpit, Alabama" (Lynch, 1999:¶22). And exactly what is redneck behavior more indicative of Alabamians than New Yorkers? In this case, white police officers beating an already handcuffed black suspect.

A *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial makes a similar connection between rednecks, their behavioral norms, and the region in which they live. "Jasper, 30 miles west of Louisiana, is in the heart of a region notorious as a redneck refuge with a fearsome history of black lynchings," writes the author (Graczyk, 1998: 8). Hence rednecks are associated not only with racism, but also with a specific geographic region characterized by racism and whiteness. An editorial appearing in the *Charleston Daily Mail* (West Virginia), draws such a connection between rednecks and geographic space as well in

response to a column that appeared previously deriding the game of soccer: “Dan LeRoy? Is he sure his name isn't Leroy Daniels?” writes the author, “His name doesn't sound very Appalachian, but he writes like some tobacco-chewing, bigoted redneck” (Ellis, 1998: pg. 5A). Appalachia, in this case, is clearly portrayed as a realm of racist rednecks.

Trailer parks are a specific type of space often associated with rednecks. L.E. Clark, former Mayor of Clark Texas, commented that his opponent defeated him by rallying votes among “trailer-house trash.” “Most of those people over there are renting from him,” Clark mused, “that's how he controls them. ... There's a bunch of those rednecks that live over there in that mobile-home park” (quoted in Lewis, 2005:¶17). The author of a 1995 *Wisconsin State Journal* review of Carrot Top's comedy routine endorsed the connection between trailer parks and rednecks, writing that the prop comedy which included “a rectangle pail for redneck kids to use at the beach to make mobile homes out of sand” (Kassulke, 1995: ¶7) made the act “fuel for the funny bone” (¶3).

When regions, states, counties or communities are depicted as redneck spaces they are done so to draw contrast between places where rednecks reside and the implied normative referent of modern white urban and suburban communities. This marking of spaces as incorrect, or at least sub-optimal, insidiously identifies them as in need of reconfiguration. That is to say, obsolete rural redneck space should be rehabilitated and recast in the image of the spatial normative referent of redneck discourse.

### **Class**

Contemporary redneck discourse often locates rednecks at the lower end of the income scale. The dual specters of poverty and ignorance often accompany one another in popular discourse. From its first use through today's contemporary discourse, redneck has made specific reference to an individual's class status. Modern redneck discourse,

however, operates more subtly than it did at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The observations of Jarosz and Lawson (2002) are of value here. They remark that modern redneck discourse presents class as lifestyle, rather than material reality. This trend, they argue, shifts focus from the material realities of class mobility in American society. Comic Jeff Foxworthy exemplified this trend in a 1997 interview on a Knoxville radio station, “you can't give rednecks money. They don't put it in a mutual fund. They put it in boots.” (quoted in Morrow, 1997:¶6).

This same discourse also functions to demarcate a *normative whiteness*, as Gaule (2001) develops the concept in her study of South African photography. The financial and lifestyle *differences* that are constructed as the markers of rednecks are different in relation to normative, class privileged whites. Thus, while poor whites would on face pose a challenge to the farce of white supremacy, redneck discourse manages this contradiction in the discourse of whiteness by attributing poor whites’ failure to actualize the narrative of white, middle-class success to their personal choices.

Tasker in a 1995 Miami Herald article makes reference to the poverty one would expect among rednecks without overtly casting them as poor when he uses them as a counterpoint to “bluebloods” (G1). A *Houston Chronicle* piece makes a similar intimation noting that pool halls are crafting a more “upscale” image. “Pool is really upgrading its image” says one individual quoted in the article, “It doesn't just attract rednecks” anymore (Hassell, 1994: ¶15). Even more subtle is a *Washington Post* sports writer’s labeling of an individual as a “redneck millionaire” from Georgia (Phillips, 1998:D6). A unique redneck indeed, this oxymoronic construct serves well to reduce



class status to lifestyle and geography. You can take the redneck out of poverty, but you cannot take the poverty out of the redneck.

LeRoy (1999) discusses the class content of the label redneck in a 1999 Op-Ed, observing that “West Virginians know the stereotypes by heart, the jokes about rednecks and inbreeding and missing teeth and outhouses and bare feet, about being poor and uneducated and inherently gullible” (¶1). In LeRoy’s (1999) account the poverty of rednecks is closely related to deviant behavior, poor hygiene and dim-wittedness. A 1997 *South Bend Tribune* (Indiana) opinion piece focused on the push for an affirmative action program in Houston quoted then Mayor Bob Lanier’s comment that a vote against affirmative action would contribute to a perception of Houston as “Redneckville.” The author of the column immediately followed Lanier’s comments by claiming that “it is noteworthy that poor whites (‘rednecks’) were evenly split on affirmative action, while upper-income whites voted 71 percent to 29 percent to abolish it” (Rowan, 1997:¶6-7). Redneck is thus used as a synonym for a poor racist white individual.

### **Bigotry**

In American redneck discourse it has become popular to portray the rednecks we construct as the torch bearers of racism and bigotry. Racism directed at blacks by whites is quite commonly relegated to the realm of redneck behavior. White columnists, it seems, love to point to racist rednecks, thereby surgically removing the skin-cancer of racism from normative whiteness. There is something white about rednecks. The racial subtext of redneck discourse, however, runs more than skin deep. The caricature of the redneck, assert Jarosz and Lawson (2002), provides a convenient subject onto which whites can project white racism and the guilt that accompanies racial privilege. To evidence this, they point to the popular redneck discourse that surrounds white supremacist

organizations, observing that “discourses around white supremacy serve to map racism onto a minority of people (...) while ignoring everyday acts of racism within mainstream, middle-class white America” (15).

A 1998 *Times Union (Albany)* staff writer suggested “The Rednecks” as a possible name for a “hate-group” at a local high school (Woodruff, 1998:B1). When white actor Mickey Rourke blamed the riots in Los Angeles following the trial of white LAPD officers for the brutal beating of Rodney King on “malicious directors like Spike Lee and John Singleton” (Ebert, 1992:¶1), of *Do the Right Thing* and *Boys in the Hood* fame respectively, film critic Roger Ebert’s (1992) review of the Cannes Film Festival that year included a hypothetical dialog between Spike Lee and Rourke. Lee responds to Rourke’s comments in this dialog by calling him an “ignorant redneck crackerhead”(¶2). While Rourke’s comments were clearly inappropriate, Ebert’s (dis)placement of the view espoused by Rourke – that black popular cinema of the time fueled racial animosity – into the realm of redneck discourse assuages broader white guilt by simultaneously engaging in anti-racist rhetoric and lending no attention to the systemic white privilege rioters were rallying against.

In much the same fashion, an editorial in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* discussing the racism experienced by Jackie Robinson and his wife when they first visited the American south makes the common discursive move of displacing white racism onto the constructed redneck. The author writes:

The Robinsons had been married for a few weeks when they left for Daytona Beach, Fla., in 1946. Suddenly, these college-educated Californians had Southern rednecks telling them that they could not board planes, they could not use airport

restrooms, they could not eat in airport restaurants. This blatant racism was a shock to Rachel, who had spent her life in Los Angeles, where Jim Crow laws of segregation did not exist. (Reusse, 1997:¶3-5).

In this column it was not whites who were the perpetrators of the racism Robinson and his wife faced. Nor was it southerners. Either term would have yielded an accurate account of the situation. White author Reusse (1997), however, fingers rednecks as the culprits.

In a May 1992 *Illinois Legal Times* editorial the author (Carman, 1992) discussed then presidential candidate Ross Perot's "membership in a segregated Dallas country club" (¶10). The editorial condemned the very idea of segregationist organizations and pointed out the inherent contradiction posed by Perot's membership in the organization as he lashed out at mainstream politicians over the continued existence of de facto "reservations" in the form of poor, predominantly black and Native American, communities in the United States. Later in the article, the author turned back to the issue, referring this time to Perot's membership in the "redneck country club" (¶27). The use of the term redneck as a stand-in for white segregationists is indicative of the way bigotry in America is dismissed as mere redneckery, not something that exists among the general white populations.

Redneck is tied closely enough with racism that one can use the term to accuse others of racism without ever calling anyone a racist. In a *Buffalo News* editorial discussing cuts in the budget for the federal Drug-Free Schools program the author uses redneck as a stand-in for racist when we writes that "it was the label that did in the program, of course. To Gingrich's brand of cracker Republicanism, drugs equals blacks

and ghetto Latinos (...) Red-neck Republicans see drugs as an urban problem, and in this Congress cities can go to hell” (Turner, 1995: ¶3-4).

The connection between rednecks and racism is perhaps best exemplified by the persistent discursive connection drawn between rednecks and the Klu Klux Klan. This connection can be drawn so readily in our society that the owner of a combination KKK museum and Klan-gear retailer (hoods, crosses etc.) in South Carolina named his establishment “The Redneck Shop.” This connection is not drawn most often, however, by Klansmen themselves. When the Klu Klux Klan held a rally in downtown Pittsburgh in the winter of 1997, some citizens protesting the rally carried signs proclaiming "white sheets hide red necks" (Carpenter, Et.al, 1997:¶63). One letter to the Editor published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* in February of 1997 in response to an article about the Klan rally exhibited the common anti-racist rhetoric that dismisses Racism as perpetuated only by rednecks:

Any member of the human race who is capable of rational thought, regardless of jaded or biased judgmental leanings, can clearly see through the rhetoric of the Klan-Aryan alliance and perceive these men for that they are close-minded rednecks who utilize contempt in a feeble attempt to mask fear. That simple threat springs from premeditated, calculated misunderstanding of those who may differ in religious conviction or skin pigmentation (Sweeney, 1997:¶2).

Here the author clearly constructs difference between both non-Christians and non-whites and an unnamed normative whiteness. Further, the author makes the common move of reducing racism to a sentiment harbored by rednecks who reside outside of normative whiteness.

Though under the guise of anti-racist rhetoric, discursive moves like the one seen above actually serve to reify normative whiteness through its implicit construction. Marty (1999) argues that:

White children born in the United States inherit the moral predicament of living in a white supremacist society. Raised to experience their racially based advantages as fair and normal, white children receive little if any instruction regarding the predicament they face, let alone how to resolve it (...). As a result, many white anti-racists organize their social justice efforts around an ignorance of the racially based privileges they poses that reinforce racist disadvantage for others (51-52). Redneck discourse provides a solution to this predicament in two ways. First, the redneck construct serves as proof that class-privilege is not inherently related to whiteness because rednecks fail to actualize class mobility despite their whiteness. Second, because rednecks are imagined as shouldering the burden of racism for all whites, middle-class white guilt is assuaged.

Rednecks are not only the perpetrators of anti-black hatred in America, but also most other forms of bigotry as well. A 1999 *Houston Press* editorial evidences the polyvalent nature of redneck bigotry when it reports and than an employer told a gay employee that theirs was “a goddamned redneck company, not a goddamned queensville. We don't hire queens; we don't hire niggers” (Grossman, 1999:¶6). Likewise, *Rocky Mountain News* Columnist Gary Massaro (1998) quoted a volunteer for the Arts Against AIDS committee who recounted the story of how he came to be involved with AIDS activism:

"I took my car into a garage a few years ago. And the redneck mechanics had rubber gloves in there. I asked them why. And they said if a homosexual came in, they'd put on the gloves so they wouldn't get AIDS working on his car. I haven't gone back to that garage"

Another use of the label redneck as a stand-in for heterosexist can be seen in a letter to the editor appearing in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* in April of 1993. The gay male author writes that "there is another part of me that is frightened (...) of 'Randy Redneck' who thinks (...) it will be perfectly acceptable for him to do some 'fag-bashing' on a Saturday night" (Wilson, 1993: ¶3). In these instances, both by the perpetrators of heterosexism and the objectors to it make a clear association between rednecks and anti-gay sentiments.

Just as whites commonly attribute racism to rednecks, it seems that straight people also construct anti-homosexual bigotry as something perpetrated by rednecks. One mourner at a public funeral for Mathew Shepard, a gay man brutally murdered in Wyoming, said to a member of the press "I didn't know Matt. I came here to show that not all the people in Wyoming are intolerant rednecks" (Salmon-Heyneman, 1998:¶1). A *Deseret News* opinion piece similarly dismissed Shepard's murders as "two mentally deficient rednecks" (Jennings, 1999: ¶4).

Racist rednecks also do the dirty work of hating foreigners and immigrants as well. A *Columbus Dispatch* editorial characterized a proposition to make Ohio an "English-only" state (thereby prohibiting state agencies from conducting business with residents in languages other than English) as some politicians' attempt to "to pander to the redneck in us" (Harden, 1997: ¶12).

When William Greenwald, a poor white man, was accused of “instigating a weekend brawl” (Clendenning, 1996:¶2) with Cambodian immigrants in his neighborhood by leveling racial slurs at them, the Portland Chief of Police commented that the incident was attributable to Greenwald’s “redneck hatred” (¶9). Referring to naturalized citizens of Cambodian descent as “gooks” (¶5) is certainly inappropriate. Nonetheless, the chief’s invocation of the common trend to blame rednecks for racial hatred does serve to place the burden of white ethnocentrism squarely on the shoulders of specific, if imaginary, sub-portion of the white population: poor rednecks. While class-privileged whites reap immeasurable privilege from a social system that bolsters their living standards through low consumer-cost service industries that pay recent immigrants and other economically marginalized disproportionately non-white people lower than living wages, their place within this system is subtly obfuscated when ethnocentrism is firmly placed under the purview of rednecks.

What’s more, rednecks even serve as the scapegoats for Anti-Semitism in the United States. Jack Kelly’s (1999) op-ed piece in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* about presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan’s anti-Semitism provides an interesting example of this trend. The author observes that “many who like Pat Buchanan personally, or who agree with him politically, excuse his sotto voce Jew-baiting by saying they don't think Pat believes this stuff himself; he's just throwing red meat to the rednecks” (¶16). Rednecks who Kelly (1999) describes in the next paragraph as “squads composed chiefly of mouth-breathing morons no sensible person would want to be around” (¶17). The author clearly intimates in the preceding quote that voters in general should not be expected to find anti-Semitic political philosophy appealing, just rednecks. About

Buchanan's split with the GOP, one political commentator said that the Republican party "has a little less tarnish on its soul" with the departure of Buchanan's "redneck George Wallace populism" (Kiernan, 1999: ¶22).

Attributions of anti-Semitism only to rednecks, not the broader (white) Christian populations, can also be found elsewhere. A passage in staff writer Curtis Wilkie's (1995) *Boston Globe* editorial about a rural Nebraska Community reads:

There are a few Jewish families in Fremont, but the town is overwhelmingly composed of practicing Christians. Of the 30 churches in Fremont, seven are Lutheran. "We all work together," said Rev. Robert Hansen, a retired Lutheran minister who served the same church here for 33 years. "I don't know of any tensions. Once in a while you get a redneck pastor or priest, but people don't follow them much." (¶33)

Again here, it is the imagined cohesive cultural faction of rednecks that perpetuates and exhibits bigotry against Jews, and not the broader good Christian population.

For those who recognize systemic white-male-heterosexual-Christian privilege as a bad thing, rednecks can even be blamed for the continuance of that system. In a retrospective editorial appearing in the *Deseret News*, a Salt Lake City Newspaper, the author recalls a time "when some rednecks trying to stop integration blew up (...) [some] school buses" (Borders, 1999:¶2) in Texas during July of 1969. Similarly, an October 1999 op-ed in the *Tulsa World* identifies rednecks as the gatekeepers of white privilege. "In pre-civil rights era America," the author writes, "blacks were regularly threatened, beaten and lynched. Young men and women of color who struggled against the white-dominated system were tagged "uppity" by rednecks" (Orr, 1999:¶1). Though in the



opening line the past role of rednecks as protectors of whiteness is discussed, the article immediately turns to the “modern day lynching” of Matthew Shepard (§4) and to the story of two white men who went “hunting” for non whites in the mid-west and Los Angeles (§6) as examples of hate crimes the continue to be perpetrated against gays and minorities by rednecks.

### **Deviance**

Finally, rednecks are characterized by absurd or taboo behavioral norms, including bestiality and laziness. The rednecks of popular discourse are often violent. One Tampa Tribune article observes that “a ‘redneck’ is a good old boy who is ignorant, bigoted and violent” (*Tampa Tribune*, 1995: 6). An *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* Op-Ed makes reference to “rednecks, whose racism, intolerance and violence suggest that they are the modern manifestation of the Southern ‘mind’” (G1). Similarly, an aforementioned *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* editorial printed in 1993 expressed fear that rednecks would engage in violent “fag-bashing” (Wilson, 1993: §3). Some usages of Redneck intimate, rather than specify, their violent nature by making reference to redneck “ruffians” (Williams, 1998:1F), “brutal rednecks” (Evansen, 1992), or “aggressive rednecks” (Kehr, 1997).

Violence aside, redneck caricatures often include sexual deviance, especially libidinousness and incestuousness. Goad (1997) writes that early essays on the American south constructed poor southern white women as libidinous; characterized by “sensuality and intemperance” (Helper, quoted in Goad, 1997:80) and “led to the birth of a familiar stereotype, that of the ultrafecund cornpone Earth Mother. She pops out babies as if she were an estrogen-injected rodent, littering her rocky rural front yard” (80-81).

Rich (1991) refers to characters in a play - “a redneck couple living in a rural Louisiana trailer court, [who wear] tattoos, eat both Cool Whip and Miracle Whip, own a Princess phone and use a Crisco can as a flower vase” - as “the baby-makers” (¶4) in a *New York Times* article. *Publishers Weekly Review* (2005) reviewed a children’s counting book called *Ten Redneck Babies*, writing that:

The book kicks off with an outing to town (bumper stickers on the family's van testify to the driver's patriotism and NASCAR devotion), but the rest of the couplets and pictures are mostly devoted to the sibling babies' (some crawling, some toddling) gentle mischief as they scamper in and around their rural home, clad in diapers or overalls: ‘6 redneck babies cotton pickin’—/ One ate a lunch of crisp fried chicken’ (56).

The review continues that rather than portraying the books subjects as “hardscrabble” the book makes “the characters' lives look appealingly bucolic” (56). The ability of pre-school age children to make such a distinction, however, is suspect. The premise that the book’s treatment of southerners as rednecks is innocuous seems unlikely as very idea of counting “redneck babies” carries the implications that rednecks commonly spawn enough children to provide budding counters a challenge. Consider the brevity of a children’s’ book concerned with counting a yuppie couple’s children.

The rednecks of popular discourse are not only libidinous, but so uncontrollably so that they turn to the most devious of sexual behavior: incest. A 1998 *New York Times* article makes reference to “incestuous rednecks” in a discussion of the video game *Deer Hunter*, which includes a mock advertisement for West Virginia tourism inviting gamers to "come for the hunting, stay for the wacky dancing, banjo-playing, inbred freaks" (Herz,

1998:G4). The *St. Petersburg Times* similarly makes reference to characters in a book as “inbred redneck criminals” (Glidewell, 1998:1) and to the national perception of Florida “as a place peopled by violent or incestuous rednecks” (Glidewell, 1997:¶12). Columnist James Hart (1998) of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* recognizes the common trend toward casting rednecks as incestuous, writing:

I know the people living under the punchline. They're my people. And when some smart-ass suburbanite jokes about inbreeding and incest, I know they slander people who clerk for eight hours a day and teach Sunday school and raise families and coach Little League, a group of human beings who would give almost anything for the opportunities of a college education. Excuse me if I don't laugh at the latest redneck jokes.

It seems the “dumb, inbred” redneck caricatures observed by Goad (1997:15) are still alive and well in the American media.

Rednecks are often distinguishable from normal “sophisticated people” (Jarosz & Lawson 2002:8) in popular discourse by virtue of their personal hygiene habits. One individual quoted in a *St. Petersburg Times* article referred to rednecks as “toothless” (Miller, 1998:3), as did an individual quoted in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* who mused that “the Supreme Court just ruled that the Ku Klux Klan members can wear their hoods in public. I mean, is anyone dying to rip off that sheet to see what's underneath? Woosh. A drunk, dumb, toothless redneck. Now there's a surprise” (Gincel, 1994:E4). The author of a November 1993 *St. Petersburg Times* connected a few of the axes along which rednecks deviate from normative behavior when expressing fears of being stranded in rural Florida. He wrote that the “terrible scene from *Deliverance* rushes into my head.

Toothless redneck perverts may be waiting ahead; my only sharp object is a ballpoint pen” (Klinkenberg, 1993: 1D).

### **REDNECK AS AN ASSEMBLAGE**

The pervious section describes how redneck functions as an epithet across the four related discourses of space, class, race and deviance. Juxtaposition of these functions reveals that they work together to parameterize what it means to label someone, someplace, or some act contemptuously as redneck. Taken together, the subsets of redneck discourse discussed above work together in a manner analogous to tent poles: each discrete function simultaneously reinforces and is reinforced by each other discrete function to support an overarching structure. It is this overarching structure – redneck discourse as a whole – that is the concern of the second section of this chapter.

Race, space, class and lifestyle all intersect, for example, in the construction of the trailer park as a redneck place. Trailer parks are configured in a specific way, both spatially and in terms of their location within the class hierarchy of the housing market.

Often deviant behavior serves as the foundation of the narrative rationality of other subsets of redneck discourse. The fantasy theme of the incestuous redneck, for example, is tied closely with the construction of rednecks as poor. It is worthwhile to consider the broader function of discourses of sexual deviance not specific to rednecks, but instead as applied to poor women in general. The primary locus of the attack on the American poor is the single parent family headed by a libidinous mother (Czapanskiy, 2002; Crooms, 2001; Crooms, 1998, Crooms, 1995; Mink 2001, Albelda, 2001). In fact, references to the “fecund welfare queen”, which intensified during the Reagan presidency,

form the heart of the political narrative of the poor on welfare (Piven, 1998). Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky (2001) explain :

Harsh and Racist representations of the poor were intimately connected to the ideologies undergirding the have revolution. Popular and political rhetoric sensationalized the pathologies of the poor, fueling a near-fundamentalist moral panic among the middle class as they themselves also faced economic insecurity. Liberal-Left rhetoric that once “excused” the poor as victims was neutralized by right-wing attacks that vilified the poor as a moral threat to the middle class. Obsessive references to fecund welfare queens, and later, the specter of black men, shaped the political culture of the Reagan era and beyond, the rhetoric of vilification reinforced the racist and sexist ideologies on which the have revolution was built. These representations also reinforced a sexualized view of the poor as pathologically “oversexed.” This Presumption not only treated the poor as an affront and danger to the middle class; it also provided the justification for explaining the persistence of poverty as rooted in poor people’s “lack of monogamy” and “hypersexuality.” (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001: 7)

The narrative holds that women on welfare are poor because they are unable to control their sexual appetite (as middle and upper class women presumably can), and poor women will be encouraged to have additional children out of wedlock by the lure of welfare benefits. Accordingly, eliminating their incentive to do so becomes the first priority of welfare programs (Crooms, 1995; Crooms, 2001; Mink 2001). The dual specters of the “welfare king” and the “welfare queen” function to make gender

dysfunction part of the over model of personal dysfunction that allow policy makers to blame the poor for their poverty, rather than systemic inequalities (Crooms, 2001).

The inexorable relationship between poverty, lifestyle, and personal choices in redneck discourse points to the direct role of such assumptions in popular redneck discourse. Rednecks are distinguished from middle and upper-class whites by an inability to control their sexual appetites and to take pragmatic financial concerns into account when choosing to have children. Thus, just as it does in the broader war against the poor, assumptions of sexual deviance serve to represent redneck's poverty as stemming from personal choices, not systemic inequalities.

The narrative of the libidinous redneck can work in a much more nuanced way in some cases. Jarosz and Lawson (2002) note that "recent and contemporary transformations of Western rural places are accompanied by a discourse of the obsolescent redneck that parallels early colonization discourses" (14) and that, in general, "negative uses of redneck in American popular discourse "parallels closely with Western development discourse and the project of modernization" in an "unmistakable" manner (13). One Cato institute policy report, an example of such "development discourse," argues that

As economies develop and become richer, people tend to have fewer children. In preindustrial, agricultural economies, children produce wealth as farm workers, and later they provide retirement security for their parents. Children are assets. A large number of children correlates with wealth. In developed economies, children consume wealth, for education and the like. They are an expense. Thus people

tend to have fewer kids. A low fertility rate is an effect, not a cause, of development. (Richman, 1997:¶31)

Jarosz and Lawson (2002:13-14) suggest that redneck discourse constructs redneck spaces as undeveloped and/or underdeveloped, and that development discourses are consistent in nature, whether concerned with local or international development. If these premises are accepted, then the construction of rednecks as “baby-makers” (Rich, 1997:¶4) contributes to their characterization as living in an obsolete manner. Again, rednecks not only provide a defining counterpoint to normative white affluence, but also serve to define class status as a function of personal choices and lifestyle. “Through this process,” write Jarosz and Lawson (2002) “the myth of class position as one of choice emerges (....) Thus ‘rednecks’ as an essentialized group – a political, ideological cipher and cliché – become a foil for while, liberal, middle-class guilt” (10-11).

Deviance does the work of securing rednecks in their role as the torchbearers of white racism as well. If rednecks are racists and rednecks engage in deviant behavior, then racism is deviant behavior not indicative of normative whites. Heterosexist violence, wife beating, and ethnocentrism are also cast as deviant when tied to the construct of the redneck. Deviance is by definition not normative. The normative whiteness implicitly constructed in redneck discourse is thus sterilized. Negative constructions of rednecks thus serve to dredge the cultural mainstream ensuring it is free of racism, sexism, homophobia and ethnocentrism. The discursive space in which rednecks reside - rural, underdeveloped and dysfunctional - provides a convenient place to stockpile the guilt of white privilege, racism, sexism and intolerance just as the real underdeveloped, rural and

impoverished space of The Skull Valley Indian reservation provides a convenient place to stockpile highly radioactive spent nuclear fuel. Out of sight, out of *town*, and out of mind.

Though specific connotations of the term vary depending on what facet of normative white privilege it is deployed in the services of, when used as a contemptuous label redneck consistently makes reference to those out are markedly different from middle class whites in terms of their lifestyle, income, and living spaces. Taken together over time, the persistent characteristics of our imagined redneck counterparts come together to form an assemblage. Redneck is a commonly understood slur that connotes these differences without any need to make direct reference to them. By marking difference vis-à-vis normative whiteness redneck helps to mark not only to color boundaries of whiteness, but also its boundaries in terms of class, sexuality, living space, and cultural norms for behavior and lifestyle.

The continued use of redneck as a slur across each of the individual discourses of space, race, class and culture does more than deflect white racism. It also serves to (re)secure white's construction as non-raced. Race is constructed as a measure of difference from normative whiteness. The frequency with which the term redneck is used as an epithet in print media shows that, while it is a race-specific slur, it has not been thrown to the lexical trash bin like other derisive terms with racial connotations have. It remains acceptable because it is specific to whiteness – which benefits from a non-raced status in discourse. The acceptance of redneck as a term in popular discourse is the acceptance of whiteness' race neutrality. Its continued prevalence only reinforces this neutrality and contributes to the linguistic privileging of whiteness.



## CHAPTER 4: REDNECKS AS GLORIOUSLY UNSOPHISTICATED

It's alright to be a redneck  
It's alright to drive around in a dirty ol' truck  
Catch a bunch of fish and shoot a bunch of duck  
It's alright to be a redneck  
Chase around the girls on Friday night  
You wanna make'em feel alright  
--- Alan Jackson

Redneck identity is a commodity. It is sold by the likes of Jeff Foxworthy and Gretchen Wilson. Texts of entertainment media offer sites at which to study the construction (and production) of redneck identity, as well as identification with, consumption of, performance of, and negotiation of redneck identity as a response to its construction. The relationship between the production and consumption of discourse is reflexive. To understand what redneck means in American culture we cannot look to discrete texts alone.

The term's broad cultural meaning is informed not only by the texts that construct redneck identity, but also by the woman who identifies with Gretchen Wilson as she sings *Redneck Woman* while driving to work. Likewise, the seemingly benign use of redneck in the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy does not draw its meaning in a vacuum, neatly separated from the pejorative use of the term in everyday discourse. The comedic value of Foxworthy's redneck bit relies on the difference between the popularly constructed redneck and the more sophisticated normative individual.

This chapter moves away from print media uses of the label redneck and looks to entertainment media in which one finds references to rednecks.

The southern themed comedy of Jeff Foxworthy, for example, constructs redneck identity. References to rednecks can often be found in country music songs as well. One

can even purchase redneck branded T-shirts and greeting cards. Jarosz and Lawson (2002) write that “redneck discourse is currently being commodified and merchandised nationally as a source of humor and comedy” (12). Importantly though, as also noted by Jarosz and Lawson (2002), while most of these late commodifications of redneck discourse “reproduce notions of poor whites as unsophisticated, out-dated, comic”, uneducated and deviant, they “elide considerations of racism and white supremacy that are often associated with the term redneck” (13). What’s more, such uses of the term do more than use redneck discourse to sell commodities (compact discs, greeting cards, figurines, etc...); they sell redneck identity as well. To illustrate these functions of redneck discourse this chapter turns to an analysis of several popular constructions of redneck identity.

In order to textualize whiteness, as Nakayama and Krizek (1995) suggest we should, and to gain insight into the construction of redneck identity in popular culture it is necessary to examine artifacts that, taken together, can provide a somewhat complete snapshot of contemporary commodified redneck discourse. This chapter analyzes a set of texts and artifacts that not only construct redneck identity but either overtly or implicitly encourage identification with it. Comedy and music texts mark an entry point into the production/consumption process.

Jeff Foxworthy’s comedy marks an obvious starting point for examination of redneck discourse. Foxworthy, an IBM programmer turned stand-up comedian, has become the world’s foremost expert on redneck identity. His “you might be a redneck” jokes, which spawned a comedy album by the same name, have been widely popular since the mid-nineties when his first album hit number 3 on the billboard country charts.

His subsequent album reached number 2 on the country charts and broke the top ten on pop charts. By 2000, Foxworthy had parlayed his bit into the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, which later spawned several albums by artists who toured with him as well as two full-length movies of the troupe's comedy and a television show starring three of the four comics on the tour.

Foxworthy's Blue Collar Comedy Tour DVD has sold over 2.5 million copies. When the movie debuted on Comedy Central it was that channel's most watched movie to date (jefffoxworthy .com). Likewise, his widely popular "you might be a redneck if..." comedy album sold over 14 million copies, making it the highest selling comedy album of all time. Because of his widespread popularity, and his undeniably significant influence on modern redneck discourse, Foxworthy's depictions of rednecks warrant a close reading. As such both the 2003 release *Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie* and its 2004 sequel *The Blue Collar Comedy Tour Rides Again* will serve as examples of Foxworthy's redneck comedy for this chapter's analysis.

Music also plays a substantial role in the construction of redneck identity. Songs that fall under the rubric of country music often explicitly construct redneck identity. The term 'country music' itself makes reference to the imagined rural space in which rednecks reside. There are countless country music songs that make reference to rednecks. Three songs that will receive extended discussion here are "Redneck Woman" by Gretchen Wilson, "Redneck yacht club" by Craig Morgan and "Hick Town" by Jason Aldean.

Gretchen Wilson recently emerged as a country music superstar. Her success was fueled largely by her hit song "Redneck Woman," which topped Billboard's Hot Country

Songs chart for 6 weeks and propelled her debut album to number one on the Billboard country charts. “Redneck Yacht Club” climbed to number three during its more than 20 month stint in the top 20 Hot Country Songs chart during 2004 and 2005. At the same time, Aldean’s “Hicktown” enjoyed a similar tenure in the Billboard top 20. Because of their popularity these songs are important examples of the construction of redneck identity in entertainment media.

### **REDNECKS IN POPULAR CULTURE**

When read against the backdrop of normative whiteness, Wilson’s (2004) *Redneck Woman* operationally defines redneck in much the same way as the more negative characterizations discussed in the previous two chapters. The opening verse of the song, for example, reads:

Well, I ain't never been the Barbie doll type/No, I can't swig that sweet/  
Champagne, I'd rather drink beer all night/In a tavern or in a honky tonk or on a  
four-wheel drive tailgate/I've got posters on my wall of Skynyrd, Kid and  
Strait/Some people look down on me, but I don't give a rip/ I'll stand barefooted in  
my own front yard with a baby on my hip

Wilson’s (2004) lyrics clearly make references to many of the characteristics often attributed to rednecks in popular discourse. Her espoused aversion to champagne and affinity for beer consumed in the presumably rural settings where one finds “a honky tonk” or people drinking beer on “a four wheel drive tailgate” dovetails with the common placement of rednecks in rural settings and is indicative of the portrayal of class as lifestyle. Wilson (2004) further marks her distance from normative class privilege and behavior as the song turns to its chorus:

'Cause I'm a redneck woman/I ain't no high class broad/I'm just a product of my raising/I say, 'hey ya'll' and 'yee-haw'//And I keep my Christmas lights on  
On my front porch all year long/And I know all the words to every Charlie Daniels song/So here's to all my sisters out there keeping it country/Let me get a big 'hell yeah' from the redneck girls like me, hell yeah.

Though “high class broad[s]” would obviously be privileged in terms of class status, each of the subsequent characteristics that delineate the redneck constructed by Wilson from such women are framed in terms of culture and lifestyle.

In the verse that follows Wilson (2004) hints again at issues of class as the relate to the libidinous nature of the constructed redneck woman:

Victoria's Secret, well their stuff's real nice/But I can buy the same damn thing on a Wal-Mart shelf half price/And still look sexy, just as sexy as those models on TV/No, I don't need no designer tag to make my man want me/  
Well, you might think I'm trashy, a little too hardcore/But in my neck of the woods I'm just the girl next door

The second and third versions of the chorus that follow replace Charlie Daniels with Tanya Tucker and “ol’ Bocephus (Hank Williams Jr.) as country artists with whom redneck women would be familiar with, evoking the connection between rednecks and country music in the popular imagination.

Jason Aldean’s (2005) hit *Hick Town* also constructs the redneck woman (“redneck girls” specifically). The female rednecks mentioned in Aldean’s (2005) song are situated amidst pick-up trucks, beer drinking and “country boys.” They prepare for a night of fun through the charmingly out of date (read: obsolete) practice of “getting

pretty” by “sprayin’ on the White Rain.” It is plausible that the listener might assume that “redneck girls” have an equally out of date and obsolete hairstyle that would require notably copious amounts of firm hold-hairspray in order to maintain its shape. Aldean’s (2005) song also mentions the relation between class, space and culture in the imaginary rural town described in his song. “We hear folks in the city party in Martini Bars/And they like to show off in their fancy foreign cars” goes the final verse of the song, “Out here in the boondocks we buy beer at Amoco/And crank our Kraco speakers with that country radio”

The gender of the rednecks constructed in these two songs is noteworthy. Both specifically make reference to female rednecks. If rednecks in general mark difference from normative whiteness, then the idea of a redneck woman would implicitly construct normative white femininity.

Redneck discourse has rich gender content. In their discussion of redneck as deployed in country music during the 1970’s and 1980’s, Jarosz and Lawson (2002) note that many songs constructed redneck identity by “[underscoring] the term as signifying a working man who is honest, upstanding, and masculine – the American individualist, the populist, the hardworking white man” (11). While, as Rowe (2000) points out, feminine identity is often constructed in the negative, *vis-a-vis* white masculinity (65), in the music of the Wilson and Aldean the female redneck is explicitly constructed. This identity’s relation to whiteness and normative gender roles provides an interesting intersection at which to examine the gender subtext of redneck discourse.

Crenshaw (1997) writes that “scholars must locate interactions that implicate unspoken issues of race (...) and investigate how these racialized constructions intersect

with gender and class” (254). Investigating the relationship between gender and redneck discourse requires one to tread on uneven ground. White women are empowered within the discursive formation of whiteness and simultaneously subjugated by patriarchy. As Rowe (2000) explains, “white women are racially privileged and gender subordinate” (64). Moon (1999) further explains the performance of white womanhood:

Whitewomen’s credibility within white communities is deeply intertwined with, and dependant on, their “respectability” or production as “good (white) girls.” In explicating the function of the politics of respectability, Higginbotham (1993) argues that the construct of respectability has served historically to “invoke whiteness by way of its appeal to bourgeois characteristics,” traits that all “good (white) girls,” regardless of objective class location, are encouraged to acquire (e.g. purity, temperance, industriousness, and refined manners) (p.14). Thus, any whitewoman, regardless of class position, can aspire to become a “good (white) woman” through acquisition of a racialized notion of bourgeois respectability based on racial loyalty. (...) Of course, this “empowerment” for whitewomen is accomplished by aligning themselves with white hegemony and supremacy. (182).

This gender component of normative whiteness – the performance of good white female identity – provides a center against which to situate the performance and construction of redneck womanhood.

The redneck women constructed by Wilson (2004) and Aldean (2005), however, might be viewed as engaging in counter hegemonic tactics. Both songs certainly portray being a redneck as a good, or at least excusable, thing. Do these songs celebrate the counter hegemonic lifestyle of big hair and beer drinking that these particular redneck

women engage in? Is the performance of redneck identity something that should be celebrated? The answer to these questions lies in a deeper analysis of the class content of redneck discourse. Toward that end, this analysis turns to a third country music song: *Redneck Yacht Club*.

Craig Morgan's (2005) hit *redneck yacht club* seems to speak to the heart of the class content of redneck discourse. The title itself draws upon this subtext, juxtaposing the poverty of rednecks and the opulence of a lifestyle that affords yachting as a hobby. The opening verse too is relevant to this tension, reminding the listener that the yacht club for rednecks has "no monthly dues." The chorus too seems to celebrate working class lifestyle by making reference to "basstrackers, bayliners and a party barge," rather than yachts, configured spatially "like a floating trailer park." As can be expected, the oversexed rednecks in Morgan's imaginary social organization will inevitably "be making waves in a no wake zone"

Presentations of rednecks in Morgan's (2005) song are consonant in many ways with the more negative frames discussed previously. They are, in relation to those with yachts, poor. They consume presumably homemade liquor from a jar. They are rambunctious and libidinous. Despite the similarities with more negative portrayals of rednecks, however, Morgan's song seems to celebrate, or at the very least excuse, being a redneck.

Observable in these three country music depictions of rednecks are the lack of education, hyper sexuality, lower class status as a function of lifestyle and rural residences indicative of the rednecks constructed in the more negative portrayals of them described in previous chapters. Conspicuously absent are references to the violent, racist



and bigoted behaviors so often exemplar of the rednecks constructed in other texts examined herein. Do confederate flags hang in the windows of the trucks these rednecks drink beer on? Are they white? Will they depart shortly to engage in premeditated racist or heterosexist violence? Will they return home to fornicate with their nuclear or extended family? Indicators of these redneck behaviors are not present in either song.

A similarly nuanced construction of rednecks can be found in the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy and his Blue Collar Comedy Troupe. Rednecks are constructed as poor and unintelligent. Rednecks for example “have a complete set of salad bowls and they all say cool whip on the side,” and “think a 401 K is [their] mother-in-law’s bra size”(Comedy Tour, 2003). Foxworthy suggests that you might be a redneck “if somebody tells you [that] you have something in your teeth and you take them out to see what it is” and “If you’ve ever been accused of lying through your tooth” (Comedy Tour, 2003). Aside from the ridiculousness of someone checking their false teeth in public by removing them casually, these jabs suggest the poverty of rednecks who cannot afford dental care.

The poverty experienced by the rednecks imagined by Foxworthy is a result of their educational and lifestyle choices. “If you missed 5<sup>th</sup> Grade graduation because you had jury duty,” it is suggested that “you might be a redneck.” Uneducated rednecks also might be expected to stare intently “at a can of orange juice because it said concentrate” (Comedy Tour, 2003). The reduction of class to lifestyle is perhaps clearest in a skit from the *Blue Collar Comedy Tour* (2003) DVD in which Bill Engval, a member of the comedy troupe purchases a remote controlled device that mimics the sounds of flatulence. Foxworthy remarks: “this man has made enough money to buy anything in the mall and he gets the remote controlled fart machine” (Comedy Tour, 2003).

The rednecks of Foxworthy's comedy are culturally obsolete, thinking "In-Sync" (The name of a pop music group) is where one might find dirty dishes. Foxworthy's "You might be a redneck" jokes are replete with constructions of rednecks as culturally different or deviant. Examples include: "If an episode of Walker Texas ranger changed your life," "If you take your dog for a walk and you both use the tree," and "If you think fast food is hitting a deer at 65 mph" (Comedy Tour, 2003). Foxworthy's rednecks are at times marked by far more deviant behaviors and might "keep a flyswatter in the front seat of the car so [they] can reach [their] kids in the backseat of the car." One might be classified as a redneck if their family includes criminals ("If your dad's cell number has nothing to do with a telephone") or they engage in bestiality ("If you think that silence of the lambs is what happens when Larry walks out to the barn") (Comedy Tour, 2003). Joke such as you might be a redneck "if you work without a shirt on and so does your husband," "If you wear a dress that is strapless with a bra that isn't" and "If you've ever worn a tube top to a funeral home" (Comedy Tour, 2003) suggest the differences one might expect to find between performances of redneck womanhood and normative white femininity.

Foxworthy and the Blue Collar comics make specific reference to the whiteness of rednecks in the opening montage of their debut movie. The stage show is immediately preceded by a skit in which fellow comic David Allen Greer, who is black, gives the redneck comics colorful suits identical to those worn by the stars of the all black *Original Kings of Comedy* film. When Greer returns to find them dressed Foxworthy, in his all yellow four button suit proclaims that there are "a lotta' white people in here 'dis evenin'" in a dialect clearly intended to evoke stereotypes of the way black people speak.

Another member of the troupe known as “Larry the Cable Guy,” who wears a pink suit asks repeatedly asks “where’s my whores?” (Comedy Tour, 2003).

In *The Blue Collar Comedy Tour Rides Again* (2005) one of Foxworthy’s redneck bits speaks directly to the straightness of redneck men. “My wife’s favorite TV show is the queer eye for the strait guy” Foxworthy muses, “I told by wife what I would like to see them do a flip flop that show and put it on The Outdoor Channel and let like five rednecks take the gay guy deer hunting for the weekend” (Comedy Tour Rides, 2004). Foxworthy describes such a scenario: while sitting around a campfire “Buddy-Wayne,” a redneck “pulled out his guitar and played some country songs and then Eric,” the gay man being treated to a weekend of straightness, “jumped up on the table and sang its raining men and a medley of Cher hits” (Comedy Tour Rides, 2004). Though they tolerated such stereotypically queer behavior during the evening, the narrator of the show (as portrayed by Foxworthy) reports that “then we came back in the cabin where Eric slept on the couch and the five of us locked ourselves in the bunk room and pushed the chest-er-drawrs against the door.” Despite the clear heterosexism, if not homophobia, in the bit, Foxworthy follows the line excerpted above with the disclaimer “trust me I am not homophobic.” Rather than warranting his claim of not being homophobic though, he merely uses the statement as a segue into another markedly heterosexist bit about similarities between gay men and men married to women (Comedy Tour Rides, 2004).

In much the same way as the country music songs described above, the comedy of Foxworthy and the Blue Collar comedy troupe plays off of the redneck stereotype as commonly constructed in print media and popular culture. They mirror the redneck caricatures observed in the second and third chapters of this project. They are white,

southern, poor, uneducated, excessive drinkers, toothless and culturally deviant or different. Even so, the most negative characteristics often attributed to rednecks such as violence, sexism and racism are not present. And though one of Foxworthy's skits plays directly off the common understanding of rednecks as homophobes, he assures the audience that he, a self described redneck, is indeed not homophobic.

Though many negative characterizations of rednecks remain in these popular cultural artifacts of which they are the subject, their image is softened significantly. Rather than scheming violent racists, the rednecks of Wilson (2004), Aldean (2005), Morgan (2005) and Foxworthy's Blue Collar Comedy (2003; 2004) are more benign and comical. Rather than the vicious guardians of white privilege, these caricatures are lovingly gullibly and charmingly outdated. The latest manifestations of American redneck discourse, it might be argued, are rehabilitating the image of rednecks, making them palatable and even acceptable. Foxworthy himself vouches for rednecks, telling the audience that his "definition of redneck (...) is a glorious absence of sophistication." He even includes himself among the rednecks he discusses claiming: "I always felt like you couldn't talk about rednecks unless you are one and I are (sic) one" (Comedy Tour, 2003). Even the data presented in chapter two points to the ability of constructions such as those found above to soften the redneck in the public eye. Often as discussions of Foxworthy's comedy in the sample increased in prevalence the mean number of articles coded as negative frames dropped attendantly.

### **REWORKING THE REDNECK**

It may be tempting to celebrate the reworking of the term redneck seen in the popular texts discussed above as a laudable and even counter-hegemonic move. One

might argue that if redneck indeed has existed as a slur, then the softening of the popular image is a good thing that might even offer to empower downtrodden individuals as it did for the populist reformers in Mississippi and the miners in West Virginia at the beginning of the century. Such a celebration, however, would be premature and fails to take into account the subtle strategic rhetoric imbedded in redneck discourse.

The lexical tug and pull in the construction and negotiation of redneck identity calls attention to redneck discourse and related texts as *sites of struggle*. Brummett (1994), elaborates on this idea, noting that both texts and subject positions can be sites of struggle that inform one another. “Texts yield rhetorical influence because of the meaning they support” he writes, but “because texts can mean different things, they are often sites of struggle over meaning” (68). Put simply, texts do not produce meaning in a vacuum, rather their deployment into popular culture informs popular meaning, and popular meaning guides and constrains interpretation of texts. Brummett’s (1994) analysis makes assumptions about popular culture similar to those of Ohmann (1996). Specifically, he acknowledges the transition in the United States from an oral culture to a mass culture and recognizes the reflexive relationship between texts and culture. This new relationship between texts and audiences presents a challenge for critics of rhetoric in that “the clear imposition of a hierarchical relationship that is present in the experience of public speaking is much less apparent in today’s signs” (Brummett, 1994: 54).

Ohman (1996) argues that mass culture itself was largely an invention of the masters of production in order to sell culture in market flooded with low cost, high quality goods. With the advent of mass culture, people were no longer sold products but instead sold cultures: constructed personal and social identities with which one could be

associated through the purchase of commodities. Further, as identities constructed in mass culture resonate with audiences they are divided into market segments. Products can then be marketed and sold to them as a means of marking this identification, or confirming the image with which they identify (Ohman, 1996).

The emergence of mass culture dramatically changed the way texts deployed within it function. “Mass culture,” writes Ohmann (1996), “developed, like everything else in this society, from the search for profit” (31). Further, the development of mass culture was influenced by material realities of capitalism, “people needed it when they began to live in cities, and could no longer get entertainment and news face-to-face” (31). Ohmann (1996) explains that the logic of late capitalism that provides the architecture of modern society is also the architecture of popular culture. Popular culture is a hegemonic sub-system of western liberal capitalism. In this light, identification with, performance of, interpretations of, and reactions to popularly constructed subject positions are often complicit with dominant systems, rather than counter-hegemonic.

Ohmann (1996) is clear that participation in mass culture occurs through (or is at least mediated by) commodities, but he does not provide the mechanism through which people come to understand consumption of commodities as participation in culture. Here, Burke’s concept of identification can be integrated with the methodology articulated in this project to shed light on this process. Burke writes in *Rhetoric of Motives* that “if men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for a rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (Burke, quoted in Herrick, 2005:223). But in the disassociation that is attendant in interaction with one another through mass culture, identification with a commodified identity is not only a method of participation in culture, but also a self-

selection of one's place within culture: of ones *community*. Though not assumed by Ohman (1996), Burke (1969), paid special attention to "identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. 'Belonging' in this sense is rhetorical" (28). Thus, much of the appeal of redneck discourse as it manifests in popular music and comedy likely comes from its function as a strategic rhetoric. Identification with redneck identity proves audiences with a reference point for identity that can dually function to mark or obfuscate class privilege.

Constructions of redneck identity as they appear in the music and comedy discussed above invite identification with a sterilized redneck lifestyle. The bigoted, sexist, violent and most deviant characteristics often attributed to rednecks are placed under erasure. These elements are driven from the foreground of redneck discourse to make redneck identities more palatable, appealing and marketable. These characteristics, however, are not rejected outright or condemned. As such, it is impossible to separate the caricature of the redneck as deployed in the comedy and music that celebrate it from the broad cultural understanding that rednecks are bigoted and violent by nature.

Contemporary redneck discourse re-integrates the once alienated redneck into the boundaries of acceptable performances of whiteness. Being a redneck is celebrated in the texts of popular culture discussed in this chapter. These texts encourage identification with the redneck construct. Rather than celebrating the inclusion of an imaginary marginalized group, however, it is important to consider the ideological function of redneck discourse and identification with it. Redneck discourse offers the opportunity to "eat the other" as hooks (1992) explains:

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power -- over intimate relations with the Other. (1992: 23)

Through identification with constructed redneck identity, consumers can align themselves with a discursively marginalized group. Such identification assuages any guilt that might come with white privilege, as rednecks are on the outside too. At the same time bigotry and violence, the as of late unmentioned underbelly of constructed redneck culture, remain only as a subtext that allow for a simultaneous affirmation of white power through the same discourse that functions to exclude rednecks from the system of class privilege mainstream white America enjoys.

Take Morgan's (2005) *Redneck Yacht Club*. Viewed in light of this analysis, identification with the presumably poor rednecks of Morgan's (2005) song allows those who own Basstrackers and Bayliners (both very expensive boat lines) to erase their class privilege and affirm their identity as the "hardworking white man" (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Just as the portrayal of class as lifestyle allows the poor to be blamed for their poverty, it allows the bourgeoisie to take credit for their class privilege.

Redneck as the label is deployed by Foxworthy, the comedians associated with him, and the country music stars mentioned above, does not exist in a vacuum separate from its meaning as negotiated in the rest of public discourse. Ultimately, each of these



somewhat unique ways of constructing rednecks come together in American culture to form a total redneck discourse. Each axis of meaning exerts influence on other axes of meaning. Through this tension redneck discourse functions strategically and hegemonically in the service of normative whiteness, marking and enforcing its boundaries in terms of race, class, sexuality, living space, and culture. Redneck discourse, in fact, relies on this tension to maintain its polysemic nature and to work in the service of whiteness even while appearing as a tactical rhetoric on face.

## CHAPTER 5: THE REDNECK ASSEMBLAGE

This project surveyed contemporary redneck discourse. It articulated and reported on three closely related studies of popular redneck discourse, each born out of an overarching perspective grounded in critiques of culture, capitalism and whiteness. The content and textual analysis presented herein contribute significantly to both the project of mapping the parameters of redneck discourse and to the goal of further developing theoretical models of whiteness.

From its earliest uses to deride poor southern whites, to its contemporary uses, redneck has always been a label that carries implications in terms of class, race, space and lifestyle. Even its uses as a label with which one might identify rely on the negative subtext of the term in constructions of redneck identity. Some might argue that to compartmentalize the functions of redneck discourse as this project has is shortsighted. Such an objection is reasonable as the discourse of redneck space certainly plays a role in the cultural construction of redneck class and lifestyle. Likewise, gender and race identities inform each other. Each of these functions informs and affects one another. Further, constructions of redneck discourse in popular texts can hardly be understood to *determine* the cultural meaning of redneck.

These texts, however, must be understood in the context of American culture and the identification with and performance of redneck identity. The spatial, racial, classist and cultural realms of redneck discourse work together to construct normative whiteness and (re)produce dominant relations of power. Redneck discourse, in this sense, is an assemblage.

Broadly speaking, the term redneck is polyvalent and functions strategically in the construction and maintenance of whiteness, consumer culture, classism and capitalism. Redneck can be deployed in different ways in different situations and thus encoded with different meanings. Redneck seems to carry significantly different connotations to the authors of various texts discussed during the course of this project. While in Roger Ebert's (1992) view the subjects of redneck discourse are racist "ignorant redneck crackerhead[s]," rednecks, in Gretchen Wilson's (2004) view, are laudable characters clinging to a simple and desirable rural lifestyle. Indeed, redneck can mean different things to different people. It should not be assumed, however, that these meanings do not inform one another. They work together, in fact, in a remarkably consistent way when viewed through the critical lens articulated and adopted in the first chapter of this project.

Despite its polysemic nature, modern redneck discourse consistently operates strategically in all of the contexts discussed herein. The long history of the negative caricature of the redneck exerts influence on those uses that employ only parts of the common caricature such as the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy and the music of Gretchen Wilson. If hooks' (1992) analysis is accepted as on-point, then the common understanding of redneck as a slur may well contribute to the appeal such identification-friendly versions of redneck discourse have for bourgeois white audiences.

### **Redneck discourse in the service of whiteness**

Redneck discourse persistently functions in the service of whiteness. By marking difference from normative whiteness in terms of class, culture, configuration of living space and bigotry, redneck discourse implicitly and insidiously constructs normative whiteness. Redneck discourse also works in the defense and maintenance of normative

whiteness, by explaining away white privilege through the use of poor rednecks as proof that wealth and class status are earned. It does this too, as suggested by Jarosz and Lawson (2002), by serving as a foil for racism in that rednecks are often constructed as racists, in contrast to *normative whites*, who are not.

The difference drawn between rednecks and the normative white referent, however, works in a much more nuanced way to entrench and strengthen whiteness through the management of white guilt. Redneck discourse operates strategically to reify normative whiteness when used as a slur. It does so in different ways when adopted as a self-identifier, though its use as a slur is also integral to this function as well. Tactical rhetorics, or rhetorics *perceived* as tactical have a certain seductive appeal. One of the authors of the Nakayama and Krizek (1995) study explains his own experience with whiteness, commenting that “there is another side to being culturally invisible. When I started realizing that other people were able to articulate and appreciate aspects of their cultural heritage, I began to feel uncomfortable about being transparent” (292). Self-alignment with a race specific slur that carries with it overtones of difference in terms of lifestyle and culture may provide privileged whites a means of having their cake and eating it too. That is to say, identification with commodified redneck discourse simultaneously marks inclusion in whiteness and inclusion in a marginalized group. Through redneck discourse whiteness thus manages the guilt (in the Burkian sense) aroused by exclusion from tactical rhetorics while still working strategically to reify normative whiteness.

The second author of the Nakayama and Krizek (1995) study remarks that he does not “believe that [his] identity is continuous with white’s invisible power, and [he is]

searching for those discontinuities as meaningful cultural experiences” (292). It is indeed difficult for whites aware of their systemic privilege – this author included – to critically engage the possibility one’s own position and discourse may indeed work to maintain the silent power of whiteness. Identification with the neatly packaged commodity of redneckness, complete with its derogatory overtones, offers a means of assuaging the guilt of white privilege. The construct of rednecks as a relic of a bygone time, or as inhabitants of rural (read: underdeveloped) spaces lays forth a stockpile of seemingly authentic white (yet not *too* specifically so) cultural markers. Through identification with redneck identity, these markers can be adopted as a “meaningful cultural experiences” (292). Redneck’s very status as a slur makes the label an ideal tool for managing this guilt, as its discursive distance from normative white privilege allows it to avoid the critical gaze more explicit alignments with white power are subject to. The assemblage of redneck discourse, taken as a whole, is one component of the assemblage of whiteness that operates in a manner exemplary of the whiteness’s movement “between invisibility and universality” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995: 294) to maintain its insidious power in discourse.

### **Redneck discourse in the service of capitalism**

Contemporary redneck discourse works in the service of capitalism as well. By working to mask class privilege redneck discourse bolsters late capitalism’s appearance as a pure performance based meritocracy: a level playing field on which anyone willing to work hard can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The role of real material inequities and access to education and information play as barriers to success is minimized. The spatial character of redneck discourse plays a specific and pragmatic

role in the service of capitalism. Jarosz and Lawson (2002) suggest that redneck discourse mirrors international development discourse as it marks spaces as un/underdeveloped or obsolete and in need of reconfiguration. The discourse of undeveloped redneck spaces, however, can also mask the nature of the development that takes place in many rural areas (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Development practices such as clear-cutting timber and strip mining have yet to serve as the butt of a Jeff Foxworthy joke.

It is notable that relatively few of the uses of the term redneck discussed herein were leveled at actual specific people. Instead they were leveled at racists, southerners or those who lived in rural areas in general. Often in comedy and music the term refers to no specific group of people, but rather to an imagined redneck living a buffoonish (as in Foxworthy's comedy) or rowdy (as in the music of Wilson, Morgan and Aldean) lifestyle. Redneck discourse does not *rely* on the derision of actual people. Instead it constructs an imaginary other through negative difference. This difference is drawn from, and thus constructs, normative whiteness. The recent rehabilitation of redneck discourse through music and comedy is a *repackaging* of redneck discourse. By placing the racism, violence and sexism often associated with rednecks in discourse under erasure, popular media of late have bolstered the market value of redneck identity.

Both the material privilege enjoyed by many whites and the discursive privileging of whiteness are tied closely with the development of consumer culture. Ohman (1996) explains well the way popular texts mediate the relationship between consumers and industry. Popular media emerged as a means of *selling culture*. Periodicals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sold their audiences narratives of middle-class identity. The commodities

advertised in this context are presented as trinkets that mark inclusion in and identification with narratives of identity. Texts that invite identification with redneck identity make no overt mention of the racism, sexism and poverty associated with rednecks. Thus, the case could be made by a self-proclaimed redneck that they are not a racist. Racists, however, have not been explicitly excluded from the realm of rednecks by this recent turn in discourse either. As such, commodified redneck identity maintains any appeal it might have for racists who self-identify as rednecks in a subtle gesture of white power. The seemingly wide open meaning of redneck makes it perfect as a marketable identity that excludes no potential audience.

Jarosz and Lawson (2002), observe that, deployed derisively, the label redneck reduces the class of those to whom it is applied to a measure of lifestyle, rather than actual material and social inequities. This, however, can be read as a two way street in the context of Ohman's (1996) analysis of mass culture. The reduction of class to lifestyle may also provide another valence of appeal for redneck as a self-identifier. Class privileged individuals are offered the opportunity to place their privilege under erasure through self-identification with the redneck construct.

This is not to say that all who would self-identify as rednecks are racists. Nor is it to suggest that they are all class privileged. Instead, redneck discourse has been stripped of any specific discrete meaning in terms of class and culture. As a commodified identity, redneck remains wide open to purchasing publics. The subtext of its more negative uses has been recast to encode the label with an auspicious measure of charm. For many, narratives of redneck life may serve as valuable and meaningful heuristics for self identity. Even so, redneck discourse remains consonant with the systems of consumer

capitalism and white privilege that exert influence on its meaning. Deployment of redneck discourse, however well meaning, is managed in such a way by the hegemony of the status quo that is rarely a threat. Further, encoded with the strategic discourse of whiteness, the seemingly harmless popular uses of the term actually work to reify the race-neutral and class privileged normative center of whiteness

The question remains as to whether redneck discourse can be reconfigured in a constructive way that calls attention to social inequity, sexism and racism. A project to rework or dismantle redneck discourse is not necessarily a productive one. Redneck discourse is a sub-network of discourse that operates in the service of both strategic whiteness and capitalism. These powerful systems of discourse will continue assert ideological influence on culture and texts for the foreseeable future. As such, a critique that calls simply for redneck discourse to be silenced would leave the systems of white privilege that discourse reinforces intact. Spivak (1976) elaborates that such an aim is analogous to simply removing an offensive word from a text, rather than choosing to let the word remain and be subject to critique:

“Would not then the crossing [out] (...) of the line necessarily become a transformation of language and demand a transformed relationship to the essence of language?” As a move toward this transformation , Heidegger (...) lets both word and deletion stand. (...) It is necessary to use the word since language cannot do more. (...) Heidegger is working with the resources of the old language, the language we already possess, and which possesses us. To make a new word is to *run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved*. (...) This transformation should rather involve “crossing out” the relevant old terms



thus liberating them, exposing “the presumptuous demand that [thinking] the solution of the riddles and bring salvation” (xiv-xv, emphasis added).

Redneck discourse, thus should be viewed as a site of struggle; a place at which to reveal and critique whiteness and capitalism.

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## Appendix 1 – List of papers in population

Agweek	Bangor Daily News (Maine)	Advocate (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), The	African Connection Newspaper
Associated Press State & Local Wire, The		Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Alameda Times-Star (Alameda, CA)
Bismarck Tribune, The	Berkshire Eagle (Pittsfield, Massachusetts), The	Associated Press State & Local Wire, The	Albuquerque Journal, The
Capital Times (Madison, WI)		Atlanta Daily World	Albuquerque Tribune, The
Chicago Daily Herald	Boston Globe, The	Atlanta Journal and Constitution, The	Amarillo Daily News
Chicago Daily Law Bulletin	Boston Herald, The	Augusta Chronicle, The	Anchorage Daily News, The
Chicago Jewish News		Baltimore Sun, The	Argus (Fremont, CA), The
Chicago Lawyer	Boston Review	Birmingham News	Associated Press State & Local Wire, The
Chicago Sun-Times	Brattleboro Reformer (Vermont)	Birmingham Times, The	Austin American-Statesman, The
Cleveland Scene (Ohio)		Broward Daily Business Review	Bakersfield Californian, The
Columbus Dispatch, The	Buffalo News, The	Capital (Annapolis, MD), The	Black Scholar, The
Copley News Service	Connecticut Law Tribune	Capital Outlook	Business Press / California, The
Crain's Chicago Business		Carolina Peacemaker	Cal-OSHA Reporter
Crain's Cleveland Business	Connecticut Post (Bridgeport, CT)	Chapel Hill Herald	California Journal
Crain's Detroit Business	Crain's New York Business	Charleston Daily Mail	California Supreme Court Service
Crain's Small Business-Chicago		Charleston Gazette, The	City News Service
Crain's Small Business-Detroit	Daily News (New York)	Chattanooga Times Free Press	Colorado Construction
Daily Reporter (Milwaukee, WI), The	Daily Record of Rochester (Rochester, NY), The	CityBusiness North Shore Report (New Orleans, LA)	Colorado Springs Business Journal (Colorado Springs, CO)
Dayton Daily News		Commercial Appeal (Memphis), The	Columbian (Vancouver, WA), The
Ethnic News	Delaware Law Weekly	Community College Week	Copley News Service
Finance & Commerce (Minneapolis, MN)		Cox News Service	Corpus Christi Caller-Times
Illinois Legal Times	Ethnic News	Daily Record (Baltimore, MD), The	Cox News Service
Indiana Jewish Post & Opinion	Evening Sun (Hanover, PA), The	Deep South Jewish Voice	Daily Camera
Indiana Lawyer, The	Hartford Courant, The	Dolan's Virginia Business Observer (Norfolk, VA)	Daily Journal of Commerce (Portland, OR)

Indianapolis Business Journal, The	Herald News (Passaic County, NJ)	Ethnic News	Daily News of Los Angeles, The
Kansas City Daily Record (Kansas City, MO)		Florida Times-Union, The	Daily Review (Hayward, CA), The
Legal Ledger (St. Paul MN), The	Intelligencer Journal	Florida Underwriters	Dallas Observer (Texas)
Lincoln Journal Star (Nebraska)	Lancaster New Era	Fulton County Daily Report	Denver Post, The
Midwest Construction		Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), The	Denver Westword (Colorado)
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, The	Lebanon Daily News (Pennsylvania), The	Herald-Sun, The	Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City)
Minnesota Lawyer (Minneapolis MN), The	Legal Intelligencer	Hill, The	East Bay Express (California)
N'DIGO	Long Island Business News (Long Island, NY)	Insight on the News	Enterprise Record (Chico, California)
National Jewish Post & Opinion		Jackson Advocate	Ethnic News
News-Sentinel, The	Lowell Sun (Lowell, MA)	Jewsweek	Eureka Times-Standard (California)
Omaha World Herald	Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, The	Kentucky Jewish Post & Opinion	Fresno Bee, The
Pantagraph, The		Knoxville News-Sentinel	Herald American
Pitch Weekly (Kansas City KS & Kansas City MO)	Middle East Quarterly	Ledger (Lakeland), The	Hispanic News, El
Plain Dealer, The	Morning Call (Allentown), The	Louisiana Contractor	Houston Chronicle, The
PR Newswire		Maryland Gazette	Houston Press (Texas)
Riverfront Times (St. Louis, Missouri)	New Jersey Law Journal	Messenger-Inquirer	Idaho Business Review (Boise, ID), The
South Bend Tribune	New York Law Journal	Miami Daily Business Review	Idaho Falls Post Register
St. Charles County Business Record (St. Charles, MO)		Miami Herald	Inland Valley Daily Bulletin (Ontario, CA)
St. Louis Daily Record/St. Louis Countian (St. Louis, MO)	New York Observer	Miami New Times (Florida)	Jewish Bulletin of Northern California
St. Louis Post-Dispatch		Mississippi Link	Journal Record (Oklahoma City, OK), The
Star Tribune (Minneapolis MN)	New York Post, The	New Orleans CityBusiness (New Orleans, LA)	Journal Record Legislative Report (Oklahoma City, OK)
State Journal-Register (Springfield, IL), The	New York Sun	New Times Broward-Palm Beach (Florida)	La Prensa San Diego
Telegraph Herald (Dubuque, IA)	New York Times, The	News & Record (Greensboro, NC)	LA Weekly
Topeka Capital-Journal		News and Observer, The	Las Vegas Review-Journal
Wisconsin Law Journal (Milwaukee, WI)	New Yorker, The	Palm Beach Daily Business Review	Lewiston Morning Tribune

Wisconsin State Journal	News & Notes	Palm Beach Post, The	Long Beach Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)
	Newsday (New York)	Post and Courier (Charleston, SC), The	Los Angeles Times
	Northeast Power Report	PR Newswire	Lynwood Press
	Patriot Ledger, The	Raleigh Extra	Marin Independent Journal (Marin, CA)
	Pennsylvania Law Weekly	Richmond Times Dispatch	Metropolitan News Enterprise
	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	Roanoke Times (Virginia), The	Modesto Bee
	Pittsburgh Tribune Review	Roll Call	New Mexico Jewish Link
	Portland Press Herald	Sarasota Herald-Tribune	New Times Los Angeles (California)
	Post-Standard (Syracuse, NY), The	Southeast Power Report	News Tribune (Tacoma, Washington), The
	PR Newswire	St. Petersburg Times	Northwest Construction
	Reconstructionism Today	Star-News (Wilmington, NC)	Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA), The
	Reconstructionist, The	Tampa Tribune, The	OC Weekly
	Record (Bergen County, NJ), The	Times-Picayune, The	Oregonian, The
	Sentinel & Enterprise (Fitchburg, Massachusetts)	Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA), The	Oroville Mercury Register (California)
	Sunday News (Lancaster)	Washington Post, The	Overhaul & Maintenance
	Telegram & Gazette (Massachusetts)	Washington Report on Middle East Affairs	Pasadena Star-News (Pasadena, CA)
	The Providence Journal	Washington Times, The	Phoenix New Times (Arizona)
	Times Union, The	Washingtonian	PR Newswire
		Washingtonpost.com	Press Enterprise, The
		Winston-Salem Journal	Press, The
			Press-Telegram
			Pueblo Business Journal
			Recorder, The
			Rocky Mountain News
			Sacramento Bee

Tribune-Review	Salt Lake Tribune, The
Union Leader, The	San Antonio Express-News
Village Voice, The	San Bernardino Sun (San Bernardino, CA)
York Dispatch (York, PA), The	San Diego Union-Tribune
Associated Press State & Local Wire, The	San Francisco Chronicle, The
	San Gabriel Valley Tribune (San Gabriel Valley, CA)
	San Mateo County Times (San Mateo, CA)
	Santa Fe New Mexican, The
	Seattle Post-Intelligencer
	Seattle Times, The
	Seattle Weekly
	SF Weekly (California)
	Southwest Contractor
	Spokesman-Review, The
	Telegram-Tribune
	Texas Construction
	Texas Lawyer, The
	Texas Monthly
	Tri-Valley Herald (Pleasanton, CA)
	Tulsa World, The
	Vallejo Times-Herald (California)
	Vancouver Business Journal (Vancouver, WA)
	Ventura County Star (Ventura County, Ca.)
	Wave East
	Wave Northeast

Wave West

Whittier Daily News  
(California)

Wyoming Tribune-Eagle,  
The

**Appendix 2 – number of items and double coded items per region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Hits</b>	<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>Total Double Coded</b>
Western	1990	69	14	3
Western	1991	83	17	3
Western	1992	100	20	4
Western	1993	88	18	4
Western	1994	202	40	8
Western	1995	317	63	13
Western	1996	391	78	16
Western	1997	523	105	21
Western	1998	521	104	21
Western	1999	621	124	25
<b>Region</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Hits</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>2X CODE @ 20%</b>
Mid-West	1990	38	8	2
Mid-West	1991	33	7	1
Mid-West	1992	111	22	4
Mid-West	1993	111	22	4
Mid-West	1994	145	29	6
Mid-West	1995	240	48	10
Mid-West	1996	234	47	9
Mid-West	1997	216	43	9
Mid-West	1998	214	43	9
Mid-West	1999	281	56	11
<b>Region</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Hits</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>2X CODE @ 20%</b>
Northeast	1990	92	18	4
Northeast	1991	80	16	3
Northeast	1992	81	16	3
Northeast	1993	98	20	4
Northeast	1994	147	29	6
Northeast	1995	230	46	9
Northeast	1996	252	50	10
Northeast	1997	322	64	13
Northeast	1998	300	60	12
Northeast	1999	354	71	14
<b>Region</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Hits</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>2X CODE @ 20%</b>
Southeast	1990	179	36	7
Southeast	1991	264	53	11
Southeast	1992	272	54	11
Southeast	1993	296	59	12
Southeast	1994	513	103	21
Southeast	1995	835	167	33
Southeast	1996 1/1 -			
Southeast	6/1	431	86	17
Southeast	1996 6/2-			
Southeast	12/31	617	123	25
Southeast	1997	902	180	36
Southeast	1998	892	178	36
Southeast	1999	984	197	39



**TOTALS**

**Western Region Totals**

Total Hits:	2915
Total Sample:	583
Total Double Code:	117

**Mid-West Region Totals**

Total Hits:	1623
Total Sample:	325
Total Double Code:	65

**Northeast Region Totals**

Total Hits:	1956
Total Sample:	391
Total Double Code:	78

**Southeast Region Totals:**

Total Hits:	6185
Total Sample:	1237
Total Double Code:	247

**ALL REGIONS:**

Total Hits:	12679
Total Sample:	2536
Total Double Code:	380