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What Is "White Trash"? Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the United States

Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray

"White trash" is, in many ways, the white Other. When we think about race in the United States, we often find ourselves constrained by categories we have inherited from a kind of essentialist multiculturalism, or what we call *vulgar multiculturalism*.[1] Vulgar multiculturalism holds that racial and ethnic groups are "authentically" and essentially different from one another and that racism is a one-way street: it proceeds out of whiteness to subjugate nonwhiteness, so that all racists are white and all victims of racism are nonwhite. Critical multiculturalism, as it has been articulated by theorists such as those in the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, is one example of a multiculturalism that tries to complicate the dogmatic ways in which vulgar multiculturalism has understood race, gender, and class identities.[2] A "white trash" identity is one that a critical multiculturalism should address in order to advance its project of reexamining the relationships between identity and social power. Unlike the

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"whiteness" of vulgar multiculturalism, however, the whiteness of "white trash" signals something other than privilege and social power.

The term *white trash* points up the hatred and fear undergirding the American myth of classlessness. Yoking a classist epithet to a racist one, as white trash does, reminds us how often racism is in fact directly related to economic differences. As a stereotype, white trash calls our attention to the way that discourses of class and racial difference tend to bleed into one another, especially in the way that they pathologize and lay waste to their "others." Indeed, "subordinate white" is such an oxymoron in the dominant culture that this social position is principally spoken about in our slang in terms like *white trash, redneck, cracker,* and *hillbilly.*

We don't say things like *nigger trash* precisely because "nigger" often implies poverty.[3] Are some African Americans "niggers" because they are black or because they are poor? There is no one answer to this one; it is difficult to distinguish between race and class when discussing the derogatory meanings of "nigger." In this way, *nigger* is a term like *white trash.* This conflation of race and class in America often is confusing, as are most ideologies that perpetuate injustice. When people are kept guessing about what kinds of social forces oppress them, they are less able to defend themselves. Naming the connections between race- and class-based inequalities, however, clarifies the overlapping interests of marginalized groups seeking recognition and social justice.

White trash needs to be considered in any analysis of whiteness, and our intention is not merely to critique the project of deconstructing whiteness; rather, we wish to extend it. We strongly agree with what we consider to be the motivation behind this project, namely, the recognition that allowing whiteness to remain invisible or unmarked makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop antiracist and anticlassist forms of white identity. However, we are suggesting that an alternative and as yet unexplored way to deconstruct whiteness is to examine the differences within whiteness. We thus argue for the necessity of breaking down whiteness by examining how, for instance, discourses of differences among whites tend to de-stabilize and undermine any unified or essentialized notion of white identity as the primary locus of social privilege and power.

Unlike unmarked hegemonic forms of whiteness, the category of white trash is marked as white from the outset. But in addition to being racially marked, it is simultaneously marked as trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance. Thus, white trash must be understood as both an external and an internal threat to whiteness. It is externalized by class difference but

made the same through racial identification. White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness.

Finally, the term *white trash* reminds us that one of the worst crimes of which one can accuse a person is poverty. If you are white, calling someone "white" is hardly an insult. But calling someone "white trash" is both a racist and classist insult. Why is this so? Perhaps the scar of race is cut by the knife of class, although this is not to say that race is in any way reducible to class. Clearly, the knife cuts both ways. Yet all too often in discussions of racial identity, class is ignored, dismissed, and left untheorized.[4] We argue that leaving class out of antiracist criticism not only creates a theoretical blind spot but also can lead to class prejudice. We cannot understand many types of social injustice without using theories that wed antiracist agendas to anticapitalist ones. Analyzing white trash is one way to begin launching, and ultimately popularizing, such theories.

SOME DEFINITIONS OF WHITE TRASH

The earliest recorded usages of the term *white trash* are found in references to "poor white trash" dating back to the early nineteenth century. Historical dictionaries of Americanisms typically ascribe the term's origins to black slaves. If we are to believe these dictionaries, the term originated as a black-on-white labeling practice and was quickly appropriated (by 1855) by upper-class whites.[5] Both terms appear to have remained in use by blacks and whites throughout the nineteenth century, and although today, *white trash* seems to be more widespread and to be used more frequently, the term *poor white trash* remains with us, a reminder that it is, after all, an explicitly economic as well as a racial identity.

For this reason, white trash presents us with the possibility of a radical transvaluation of what it means to be white, poor, or both. For contemporary writers and activists like Dorothy Allison or Jim Goad,[6] white trash becomes a potent symbolic gesture of defiance, a refusal of the shame and invisibility that come with being poor. It also becomes a way to call attention to a form of injustice that is often ignored, given popular conceptions of the United States as a meritocracy. Even if calling oneself "trash" seems to smack of self-loathing, it nevertheless serves to reveal the prejudice against the impoverished in America. Sometimes it is better to be named something terrible rather than to have no name at all.

It is difficult to determine just exactly whom or what we are talking about

when we use the term *white trash*. The questions "How do you define white trash?" and "Whom are you talking about?" demand answers. These questions are basically ways of asking whether or not we think the stereotypical images of white trash America as violent, incestuous, and criminal are true. That is, most people understand white trash not as a clearly defined socioeconomic stratum or as a cultural group but, rather, as a complex set of social representations, an amalgam of well-known stereotypes. White trash as we know it is both an economic identity and something imaginary, or iconic.

When we talk about white trash, we are discussing a discourse that often confuses cultural icons and material realities and, in effect, helps establish and maintain a complex set of moral, cultural, social, economic, and political boundaries. To explore this discourse, we need to ask where its representations and stereotypes come from, what motivates them, how they are produced and taken up, and by whom. From this perspective, we can begin to see how the category "white trash" is used to blame the poor for both their poverty and their social problems, which can be found at all levels of the economic ladder. For example, stereotypes of white trash and "hillbillies" are replete with references to dangerous and excessive sexuality; rape (both heterosexual and homosexual), incest, and sexual abuse are supposed to be common practices among poor rural whites. Yet we know that sexual abuse occurs in all segments of the population. But white trash is associated with and blamed for the kinds of sexuality that people may experience no matter what their class background. This is likewise the case when poor whites are stereotyped as virulently racist in comparison with their wealthier white counterparts. As long as the poor are said to possess such traits, people can convince themselves that the poor should be cast out of mainstream society, that they deserve what they get.

Having established that we need to question these representations, it is important to return to the problem of just whom we think we are talking about. Even those of us who would lay claim to some white trash past (say, those of us from impoverished and/or undereducated white families or communities) might find it hard to claim this identity now, owing to the considerable social distances we have traveled to reach our various locations in the academy. How do we represent the material realities, the real-life experiences of poor, undereducated, and otherwise marginalized whites in our own discourses and practices?

One way to answer this question is to examine how we explain the marginal status of these whites. Is it genetic? People like Charles Murray and other proponents of the "bell curve" theory of intelligence believe that poor whites are poor simply because they are not as smart or as educable as their genetically

well-endowed fellow whites. Murray and his ilk are reviving an old idea about race dating back to the early-twentieth-century eugenics theory described by Nicole Hahn Rafter.[7]

More recently, other conservative cultural critics, known collectively as the "angry white males," have argued that impoverished whites are largely the product of misguided social policies. According to this view, government programs associated with the War on Poverty have failed the poor and have thereby led to generations of welfare-dependent whites. Affirmative action policies are singled out here as well, as these critics contend that they function as little more than racial quota systems that exclude the white underclass. The end result of these programs and policies, they conclude, is a growing class of poor, disenfranchised whites who share a culture of poverty that makes it nearly impossible for them to enter mainstream American life.

From our perspective, both of these explanatory models demonstrate the tendency of the social sciences and policy studies to pathologize certain behaviors or groups, thereby completely misdiagnosing the problem. For example, both liberal and conservative sociologists view poverty as a kind of sickness, a social ill resulting from either individual or cultural deficiencies (i.e., "the poor are just lazy" or "they live in cultures of poverty") or from the history of liberal welfare-state planning. In either case, poverty is not understood to be endemic to capitalist social relations. However, as is a Marxist commonplace, asymmetrical class relations and class exploitation—as well as the maintenance of a large reserve army of the unemployed—are structural aspects of any functioning capitalist order. A critique of capitalist social relations enables us to understand white trash as twofold: it is a way of naming actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and it is a set of myths and stereotypes that justify their continued marginalization.

WHITE IDENTITY IN MULTICULTURALISM

For centuries, whites in and out of the United States have formed their identities in largely negative terms. That is, they have known themselves not to be savages like aboriginals; they have known themselves not to be foolish and emotional like women; and they have known themselves not to be decadent heathens like "Orientals." Their self-image was thus often formed from the lack of certain cultural or characterological traits—and the universality or "obviousness" of their moral righteousness. But in an era when "globalization" is occurring on all levels of social relations, from the economy to popular culture, whiteness has suddenly come to seem like the only identity not

associated with a rich and specific historical tradition or like some type of separatist space sanctioned as authentically white. In a multicultural, multinational global civilization, some whites—oddly enough—feel anachronistic and displaced.

We are not attempting a kind of crude psychologization of contemporary white identity, but merely suggesting that historical developments in social relations have now made it obvious to many people that there can be no universal identity as whites once described it. Furthermore, many postcolonial nations and oppressed minority groups have seriously undermined white confidence—and also white actions—associated with the idea that being good imperialists automatically makes them a morally superior group. Doubting, sometimes unconsciously, that universal superiority constitutes their character, some whites in the United States are beginning to use a different narrative to explain their identities. This narrative is borrowed from the very groups that whites once defined themselves against: those marginalized peoples who, taken together, are described as multicultural.

The rise of the term *white trash* in the mass media follows closely on the heels of highly publicized debates about multiculturalism and multicultural identity. As we see it, there are two principal reasons that a sudden interest in the idea of a white trash identity might be associated with a multiculturalist discourse. First, white trash can function as a politically conservative white protest against so-called multiculturalist agendas such as affirmative action, revisionist education, and social welfare programs. Second, white trash may represent the first wave of white assimilation to multiculturalist identity, since it is a way of articulating racial disempowerment and whiteness together. For some people, the category of white trash essentially brings into focus the way in which whites are interpreted to be the victims of racism and minoritization as much or in the same ways as their fellow multicultural U.S. citizens. Whether white trash is used to signal a breaking or a joining with the tenets of multiculturalism, it is principally a way of explaining white identity through narratives of victimhood.

As its critics have noted, a multicultural identity is often authenticated through stories about personal or historical injury at the hands of dominant groups. Indeed, as Cornel West points out in *Race Matters*, black identity is largely constituted by its relationship to potential racist oppression. "After centuries of racist degradation, exploitation, and oppression in America, being black means being minimally subject to white supremacist abuse and being part of a rich culture and community that has struggled against such abuse."[8]

Multicultural techniques of identity formation often are associated with the

so-called victim mentality decried by Charles Sykes in his *A Nation of Victims*,[9] in which he argues that U.S. citizens seem to feel that they all, no matter how privileged, deserve to be pitied—and compensated—as victims in some situations. In the terms of multiculturalism, being the victim of racism, sexism, and homophobia often grants you a special and even sanctified identity. We believe that this is what some whites may be seeking when they lay claim to the label *white trash* or, more generally, *white victim*.

One kind of white victimization narrative comes out of "white power," and it holds that affirmative action, immigrants' rights, and social welfare programs are racist attacks on whites. Generally conservative and reactionary, such stories are told by white groups that are marginal in their own right: skinheads, some Christian fundamentalist churchgoers, members of the Ku Klux Klan, and allies of politicians like David Duke. More mainstream versions of the white power story, such as California Governor Pete Wilson's antiaffirmative action policies or House Speaker Newt Gingrich's extolling the benefits of a welfare rollback, are less virulent but nevertheless demonstrate a trend toward whites finding their identities once again through lack. Because they lack multicultural cachet, whites allegedly endure social disempowerment. By painting themselves as the victims of multiculturalism, whites can go multicultural identity one better. As the victims of victims, whites can believe that they have the richest and most marginalized identities around.

Another type of white victimization narrative discovers in whiteness an identity that is capable of joining with multiculturalism rather than claiming to be its victim. The white trash identity as we know it in the late twentieth century—even as it complicates the idea of multiculturalism—has learned to talk about itself by hearing, reading, and seeing members of oppressed minority groups talk about themselves and their identities. In their longing for the kinds of coherent and strong identities that they see minorities presenting in the mass media or common culture, some whites try to make their own racial identities conform to models they find in multiculturalism. Certainly, many representations of multicultural people in the media are negative or incomplete. But Hollywood has recently had something of a romance with movies by and about African Americans.[10] Popular music forms like hip-hop and rap also are multicultural.

Multicultural products like movies and music appeal to a mainstream white audience in part because their characters or contents can express a deep and enduring sense of community and purpose forged by racial or ethnic ties. Often, the positive aspects of identity in multicultural productions are represented as inextricably linked to the experience of racial injustice. Calling

themselves white trash is one way that whites can see themselves as both racially marked and oppressed, and it also is a way to begin excavating a uniquely white version of what Cornel West calls "a culture and community that has struggled against [racist] abuse."[11]

A growing number of mainstream products and representations offer whites (and nonwhites) a version of white identity that can be integrated into a multiculture, either by choice or through social marginalization. A recent and highly popular film about multicultural drag queens on a road trip, *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), is about how the citizens of a rural "redneck" town visited by the drag queens are able to cross both racial and gender lines in order to form bonds of friendship and gain strength. In this movie, whiteness and maleness are not privileged in the usual sense and are indeed most seductive when they seem mixed up with nondominant forms of identity.

In addition, we are currently witnessing something of a resurgence of stories about impoverished whites who are degraded and traumatized by the dominant culture. Fiction and autobiographies by E. Annie Proulx, Carolyn Chute, and Harry Crews address what it means to be white and marginal. Likewise, self-identified "Okie" Roxanne Dunbar, like many critics of whiteness, discusses her own life experiences in the context of historical migrations of poor whites from farmlands to industrial factory towns. Dunbar creates a personal and political history that calls attention to poor whites as part of a community with a complex background of oppression and subversive practices.

TRASH IN THE MASS MEDIA

As we have repeatedly argued, one thing that separates trash from the rest of white people is class. But class in the United States has always been a tricky category, often used metaphorically to designate forms of pathology and taste rather than literally to designate economic position. In the popular imaginary, there is often a confluence between white poverty and white criminality, deviance, or kitsch. Tobe Hooper's famous 1974 cult horror movie *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* portrayed poor, rural whites as cannibalistic, deformed, and homicidal. Another cult director (who has since gone mainstream), John Waters, got his start making satirical movies about the kitschy, disgusting habits of Maryland white trash. *Pink Flamingos* (1972), one of his best-known art-house hits, is named for the lawn ornaments in front of protagonist Babs's trailer park home, a cliché fixture of white trash living. Played by cross-dressing actor Divine, Babs and her family vie with another couple to earn the title of "the

filthiest people alive." Being filthy, in Waters's movie, means being poor, stealing, raping, engaging in bestiality, enjoying tacky clothes or furniture, and generally embodying many of the stereotypical attributes of "white trash." Babs finally wins the contest by exuberantly killing her competitors and then eating dog shit while making "yummy" noises.

During the 1980s and 1990s, white trash stories went mainstream. This was at roughly the same time that the essentialist identity of 1970s politics was giving way to new ideas about social constructivism in the academy and multiculturalism was becoming a staple of mass media discourses on liberal education and minority concerns. Two "celebrity" stories of these decades seem to us to epitomize the way that white trash has come to be understood as a marginalized white identity that nevertheless is reluctant to disclose its own class-based origins and experiences of injustice. The stories we refer to are those of the infamous victim of castration, John Wayne Bobbitt, and popular TV star Roseanne.

During the summer of 1993, Bobbitt made headlines—and punch lines—in the United States and beyond. After he allegedly raped and physically abused her for years, his wife Lorena cut off his penis with a carving knife while he was sleeping. She then drove off in their car and, at an intersection, tossed her husband's penis out the window. Found a few hours later by police, Bobbitt's severed penis was taken on ice to the hospital, where it was sewn back on him. Much of his reconstructive surgery was paid with funds raised during a cable television special hosted by "shock jock" and author Howard Stern. A year later, Bobbitt decided to appear as the star of a pornographic movie called *John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut* (1994), essentially to prove that he was still potent despite Lorena's surgery. The movie is largely unremarkable regarding pornography; rather, its entire appeal seems to depend on its audience's fascination with Bobbitt's reattached penis.

The Bobbitts' story and Lorena's and John's subsequent trials for assault and rape, respectively, focused almost entirely on issues of gender and race. John Bobbitt was often represented as a "macho man," and Lorena, as his timid, Venezuelan bride who naively married him in her pursuit of the American dream. A *Vanity Fair* article about the couple is typical, describing John as "a martial-arts buff who would sign in at the apartment pool as 'Jean-Claude Van Damme.' "[12] Accompanying this somewhat tongue-in-cheek account is a picture of Lorena in a pool, hands clasped under her chin, hair wet, with eyes gazing upward at the camera in a position that makes her appear prayerful and seductive at once. She looks like a travel ad for Latin America—all Catholic innocence and Latin sexiness.

Underlying these representations of the tough guy and his demure Third World bride is an implicit discussion of lower-class behavior in America, especially among men. Bobbitt met his wife at a Virginia club frequented by enlisted men. A marine, he made so little money that their honeymoon consisted of breakfast at a Bob's Big Boy restaurant. They then moved into a studio apartment with no furniture, where they lived with one of Bobbitt's cousins, a drug addict. Bobbitt himself was often drunk and was fined several times by the Marine Corps for showing up late to work. After leaving the marines, Bobbitt held nineteen different jobs in two years, according to Lorena's lawyer. He often beat his wife and flaunted the fact that he was having affairs with other women. Bobbitt's life story reads like a textbook case of white trash; incapable of holding a job, he turned to boozing, promiscuous sex, and wife beating.

During their marriage, Lorena worked at a nail salon, from which she stole thousands of dollars because Bobbitt spent the family income on alcohol and parties. At the same time, Lorena admits she was trying to get money so that she could have the middle-class life she had seen on American television when she was growing up in Venezuela. One of the things she bought with this stolen money was a satellite dish. If we look at the Bobbitts' marriage through Lorena's eyes, we see John as low class and hence a failure—he provided her with so little and hurt her so much that she was forced to steal.

Much of the coverage of the Bobbitt case focused on so-called feminist reactions to it. Television and the newspapers talked about women who showed up at court to cheer Lorena on or who proclaimed her violent act as a victory for women in the war between the sexes. There were no stories about men championing John Bobbitt or even feeling sorry for him (unless it was in the context of comedy, such as the Howard Stern special). Ultimately, Lorena was the victim and John was the joke.

As much as we might want to, however, it would be foolish to think that the "pro-Lorena" stories were a result of some kind of feminist consciousness raising, for other factors aroused much glee in women and men alike when hearing about John's predicament. Instead, we suggest that part of this glee came—perhaps unconsciously—from a sense that Lorena's blow was struck not for women but for the middle class, against underclass men.

Antiwelfare critics such as Charles Murray and George Gilder describe the "rogue male" as one of the major problems produced by the welfare state.[13] The rogue male is essentially a counterpart of the "welfare mother," dependent on government checks or underemployment—and socially destructive as a result. Bobbitt embodies the myth of the rogue male exactly: incapable of

committing to a job or a family, he becomes a criminal or a public nuisance. If we see him in this light, we might understand the Bobbitt jokes and "feminist" celebrations of Lorena as something far more vicious and sinister than they appear on the surface.

Rather than a skirmish in the sex war, Bobbitt's unelected surgery was a casualty of the class war in America. Public fascination with the Bobbitts might then be associated with a middle-class distaste for underclass physicality, sexuality, and supposed inability to conform to the "work ethic." As a manual laborer and marine, Bobbitt's masculine body was his source of work and income. Cutting off his penis therefore symbolically robbed him of his identity as a member of the (potential) working class. Interestingly, once his penis had been restored, Bobbitt was again able to get work, starring in *John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut*. Because Bobbitt's class position is so closely bound up with his gender and sexuality, it is all too easy to confuse our laughter at his compromised machismo with a snicker at the weaknesses and inferiority of the white male underclass.

"WHITE TRASH WITH MONEY"

Whereas Bobbitt's castration and subsequent fame represent lower-class white identity in connection with sexual victimization and humiliation, the 1980s and 1990s success story of TV star Roseanne offers an image of white trash identity as hinging on marketable style rather than economic class. Roseanne's smash hit television show *Roseanne*, along with shows like *Married with Children* and, more recently, *Grace Under Fire*, helped make white trash a new form of chic. Roseanne is a star who openly identifies herself as white trash (contrast this with John Bobbitt, who identified himself as "Jean Claude Van Damme," a movie star). Indeed, Roseanne's former husband Tom Arnold once described himself and Roseanne as "America's worst nightmare: white trash with money."

The idea that white trash can have a lot of money and yet still somehow remain "trash" seems contradictory, particularly when we consider that trash are marked by their position at the bottom of the white socioeconomic ladder. However, "trash with money" is precisely the way in which white trash have been made accessible to Americans as a kind of cultural group with whom they might like to identify.

For example, Roseanne's work demonstrates how white trash identity comes across simultaneously as a form of class consciousness and a campy, stylized set of consumer items or taste preferences. Both Roseanne's early comedy act and her self-publicized autobiography emphasize her status as poor, vulgar, and

proud.[14] In an HBO comedy special, Roseanne poked fun at middle-class white culture by stressing that she felt left out of it: "There's Malibu Barbie, but there's no abused trailer park Barbie," she commented. Her sitcom, centering on the working-class Conner family, is likewise notorious for featuring issues associated with the working class, including episodes dealing with the characters' unemployment, financial difficulties, and lack of education. Recently, the show has concentrated on the economic fates of the Conner daughters, one of whom, Becky, has moved into a trailer park with her husband while the other, Darlene, is going to art school on a scholarship. In one episode, Roseanne expresses sadness that she was unable to help her daughters "get a head start" and blames herself for Becky's living circumstances. At the same time, proud but ironic references to their status as white trash—or to their community as white trash—are common on the show.

Of course, Roseanne is not the only celebrity to claim a white trash identity as a form of personal style. "Alternative" and grunge rock musicians such as the late Kurt Cobain (of Nirvana) often perform a kind of camp white trashiness even if they do not overtly claim the label. As if to underscore the connection between campy "trash" performance and a more familiar camp tradition, Cobain was often photographed in drag wearing white trash rayon, floral-print dresses. These costumes, coupled with his much-discussed childhood in the industrial ghost town of Aberdeen, Washington, gave Cobain what can only be described as an air of "white trash chic."

The hugely successful Nirvana album *Nevermind* not only revolutionized alternative rock but also changed youth fashion. Featured on MTV in torn jeans, thermal underwear, faded flannel, engineer's boots, and thrift store "unstyle," Nirvana and other alternative bands like Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, and Dinosaur Jr. popularized a kind of "trash drag" style known as *grunge*. White trash identity was packaged as a series of commodities that one could buy at Urban Outfitters, The Gap, or Tower Records. *My So-Called Life*, a short-lived but critically acclaimed TV series about middle-class high school students in the mid-1990s, consistently dressed its heroine Angela in bulky work boots, several layers of flannel, and faded T-shirts. Certainly, this was the show's attempt to represent youth fashion accurately, and indeed it did. Like teenagers across America, Angela was dressing up like someone who might be a manual laborer and "getting grungy."

Although "dressing down" in grungewear does feed class stereotypes, this particular fad also acts out the middle class's confusion regarding the origins of class identities. One might read the grunge craze as an example of how the middle class interprets poverty as a consumer choice rather than an economic

condition of scarcity and deprivation. If a popular TV star like Roseanne can be white trash with money, then it would seem that money could buy white trash culture and style. Dressing up in white trash drag is a strategy of denial that allows the middle class to think about class difference in terms of images rather than material realities. If the middle class can buy white trash style, then class is merely an image, and real impoverished people can be understood as happily hip or even secretly members of the middle class in trash drag. White trash cultural commodities are in many ways an appropriate ideological development for post-Reagan America, in which the Republican party line is, in effect, that the poor want to be poor and could recover if they really tried. That anyone can choose to look like trash seems—illogically—to prove their point.

MAPPING WHITE TRASH AMERICA: CLASS MATTERS

Understanding the social structures and the processes of representation that produce a group of people is difficult. As cultural materialists, we hold that economic structures and conditions are crucial to shaping and forming identities of individuals and groups. Certainly, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences all are deeply embedded in class formation. But these notions of difference, so often foregrounded by postmodern social theorists, often serve as a means for talking about class difference without actually using a language of class analysis.[15]

Put in another way, class difference is often read through these other discourses of difference, and vice versa. This is not to say that class is the principal determining structure of domination in American life. But it is all too often neglected and ignored by some academics, activists, and public intellectuals in favor of discussions and movement building around other forms of difference. The result of this neglect of class has been to overlook the workings of capitalism as a system of domination and oppression. And to the extent that identity-based political movements and social theory have not been consciously critical of capitalism, they have reproduced and perpetuated capitalist structures of domination.

As minority groups enter the middle class, markets targeted specifically at African Americans, women, Latinos, and the like have been very successful. Clearly, engaging in capitalist consumer culture and, by extension, enjoying a standard of living that helps perpetuate class difference are not activities limited to white people. In her recent *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It,* power feminist Naomi Wolf encourages women who feel marginalized

in public life to embrace capitalism as a form of empowerment. She urges women to get in touch with their "will to power," and by this she means their desire to take control over "the weak," just as white men historically have done. Like other procapitalist members of minority groups, Wolf promotes one form of liberation—specifically, feminism—by encouraging a system of economic inequality that marginalizes a large proportion of the population. In other words, freedom for racial, gendered, or sexual minority groups does not necessarily equal freedom for everyone, especially the underclasses.

Another obvious and persistent form of economic domination can be seen in the global geography of uneven capitalist development. The massive and widening gap between rich and poor countries is a direct result of long histories of colonial and imperialist exploitation of the Third World by industrialized First World nations. Historically, the rise of capitalism as a global phenomenon has been marked by this uneven development, by both territorial expansion and contraction, bringing economic booms and busts to different geographic regions at different times.

Similar patterns of uneven development have shaped U.S. history and society. The long post-Depression boom that gave U.S. industrial workers a chance to lead middle-class lifestyles of relative luxury is just one example of the cyclical movement of capital involving tremendous regional and even national economic growth. During this time, hundreds of thousands of American workers left home to find good-paying jobs in heavy industries in northern cities like Chicago and Detroit and western cities like Oakland and Los Angeles. These vast internal migrations of millions of mostly white American workers, prompted by the new flow of capital from the economic restructuring of the 1930s, resemble in many ways a twentieth-century American working-class diaspora.

Often, the idea of a diaspora has been used effectively to describe how racial groups find themselves scattered across the globe in contemporary life, unbound to the country or continent of their origin (perhaps by many generations as well as many thousands of miles). Scholars and critics who describe postcolonial racial and religious identities use the term *diaspora* as a way of articulating the sense of homelessness and loss felt by minority groups who find they have no extended communities or places to call their own.

These diasporic identities are forged in the fires of capital—Asian immigration to the United States throughout the twentieth century, for example, was largely a response to economic opportunities of the sort that mobilized the white working-class populations already living here. Certainly, African American populations in the United States were forcibly created in order to support

the southern agrarian economy. Furthermore, without the imperialist expansion associated with the early stages of capital accumulation, the United States would not have been able to obtain an African slave population in the first place. Because it requires class division and uneven development to function, capital is a social system that encourages formerly whole communities to become diasporic, like capital itself. If workers wish to stay afloat on the seas of economic change, they must be prepared to follow capitalist wealth from region to region or country to country.

In keeping with our understanding of whites as a racialized group and our desire to understand the economic and social construction of different forms of whiteness, we see these economically driven internal white migrations, these poor white diasporas, as important to the shaping of white identities. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, generations of white (usually male) workers have left their families and communities in search of jobs and the promise of economic prosperity, following the dispersal of capital and establishing new identities, communities, and families in faraway regions and distant states. As economic restructuring brought previously separate and distinct groups and communities into contact with one another, as southerners met northerners and new white immigrants met white "natives," new tensions and conflicts began to form. Out of these tensions, new prejudices and new stereotypes arose. White trash was just one of the many hateful names given to those who seemed out of place, who seemed to pose a threat to the existing economic and social order.

The Dust Bowl migrations of poor whites from Oklahoma and the Southwest to California's agricultural fields and the subsequent wave of "defense Okies" who flooded California's burgeoning defense industry in the 1940s are prime examples of newly arriving whites who became scapegoats for unwanted changes created by both economic boom and bust. To this day, many of our most familiar stereotypes of poor white trash emanate from this historical period and these places. In this way, these migrating white workers have had a profound effect not only on California's political and social life (to this day, in the minds of many Californians, "Okie" is synonymous with "white trash") but on the nation as a whole.[16]

Currently in the United States, this inconstant geography of capitalism we have been describing has caused tremendous pain and suffering for those left in the wake of this capitalist growth. The Rust Belt cities of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Gary, and, above all, Detroit are tragic examples of the effects of the deindustrialization that began in the early 1970s. Capital and new production technologies have proved to be far more mobile than the auto and steel workers

for whom the "American dream" of a middle-class lifestyle has quickly turned into a living nightmare.[17] Whole communities that bloomed around regional growth centers have withered as corporations, struggling to maintain profitability in the face of increasing global competition and productivity, have abandoned those same communities, locales, or regions in their ceaseless search for new resources, new markets, and new labor pools.[18] Workers of all races have found themselves physically dislocated from their homes, used as cheap labor, and abandoned.

As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her book *Fear of Falling*,[19] the arriviste American middle classes are generally fearful about losing whatever level of status and economic privilege they have gained, and Americans facing economic decline are especially anxious about the threat of downward mobility. This fear and dread of falling into the lower classes is, she argues, what lies behind many of the stereotypes of and prejudices against poor Americans.

Images of the poor are used in mainstream culture as repositories for displaced middle-class rage, excess, and fear. These images and representations are then sold to the public as the real poor whites, thus effectively hiding who the actual poor people are and what their struggles might be. Because images of the poor in the media seem so rich and fascinating, the social causes of poverty and economic neglect are easily overlooked. We are left with provocative stereotypes, stripped of their historical and social context. White trash is clearly one such stereotype, and from this perspective, it should not surprise us that images of and fantasies about low-class whites are enjoying such popularity at this particular juncture in American history. During times of economic uncertainty or downturn, poor white trash is the ghastly specter that haunts the white middle class.

NOTES

1. *Vulgar multiculturalism* is a term we (along with our colleagues on the *Bad Subjects* electronic mailing list) coined to refer to essentialist multiculturalism and racial theory, which posits that whites are a monolithic and unified group wielding absolute, racist power across lines of class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of difference.

2. See David Theo Goldberg, "Critical Multiculturalism," in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and the Chicago Cultural Studies Group.

3. If conservative African American media entrepreneur Ken Hamblin has his way, "black trash" could become a household word. He uses it frequently in interviews and on his syndicated radio show, making explicit the class dimensions of racist slurs. See Hamblin's exchange with filmmaker John Singleton, "Who Will Save the Black Man?" *New York Times Magazine*, December 4, 1994, pp. 16–24.

4. Various critics, such as bell hooks and Cornel West, have discussed race in terms of class, but whiteness and class are not their main concern. Race and class have been connected principally in studies of African Americans.

5. According to one dictionary, "poor white trash" dates back to 1833: "The slaves themselves entertain the highest contempt for white servants, whom they designate as 'poor white trash.' " For other references to these terms, see Mitford Matthews, ed., *A Dictionary of Americanisms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

6. See, for example, Dorothy Allison's preface to her *Trash* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988); also see Jim Goad's "Statement of Intent," in his *ANSWER Me!: The First Three* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1994).

7. Like IQ theory, eugenics states that certain "characterological deficiencies" are a result of biological inheritance; for example, a tendency toward poverty or manual labor might be genetic. On this, see Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877–1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

8. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 25.

9. See Charles Sykes, *A Nation of Victims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

10. Nearly all of Spike Lee's movies, *Menace II Society* (1993), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), and *Straight out of Brooklyn* (1991); and Asian Americans *The Joy Luck Club* (1993).

11. West, *Race Matters,* p. 25.

12. Kim Masters, "Sex, Lies, and an 8-inch Carving Knife," *Vanity Fair,* November 1993, pp. 168–72.

13. George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1981). Murray offers slightly different accounts of the kinds of men produced by welfare, but in both works, they are characterized as animalistic, violent, uncontrollable, and connected to mothers on welfare. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

14. In her biography, Roseanne discusses her history of poverty and abuse. She then explains how she recovered from drug and spousal abuse but continues to enjoy the "trash" culture that she associates with her life as a poor white. Roseanne Arnold, *My Lives* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

15. As anthropologist Sherry Ortner puts it: "Class is central to American life, but it is rarely spoken in its own right. Rather, it is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race, and so forth." See her "Reading America: Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture," in Richard Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 1991).

16. For an extended analysis of Okies, see James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

17. See Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1986).

18. For an excellent discussion of post-Fordism and economic globalization, see Andrew Sayers and Richard Walker, *The New Social Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

19. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle-Class* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).

WHITE BODIES