
Meredith Redlin
*University of Kentucky*

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Meredith Redlin

Book Review


Recent studies in Whiteness run the gamut from the desire to abolish the social/racial status of whiteness and its associated privileges to the desire to deconstruct a monolithic whiteness to bring forward its many levels of unprivileged white “others.” These books are representative of this breadth of study. In her book, Daniels foregrounds the existence of white privilege in relation to white supremacist movements and mainstream white ideology. She examines the images put forth in white supremacist literature as denying such privilege (in the careful crafting of white male victims) and argues that such images are correlated to “mainstream” ideologies which create the hegemony of that same (if denied) white privilege. In the collection of essays edited by Wray and Newitz, the “tainted” white status of white trash is pulled apart to reveal not just a class battle, but also an inherently racial battle within the construction of whiteness itself. Both books make passing, but strategic, reference to Murray and Herrstein’s 1994 volume *The Bell Curve* as the foundation of a “new” eugenics that supports not only white superiority over black inferiority, but also the distinctions within categorical whiteness itself. In both instances, whiteness, as is no surprise, emerges as something which must be carefully monitored and sincerely earned. It is no “natural” existence, despite the modern sociobiological arguments which provide its justification.

Daniels’ book is an extensive content analysis of publications from six different white supremacist groups, spanning from 1976 to 1992. As is clear in the reproduction of some of these revolting images, the ‘quality’ of these publications varies widely, as does the sentiment which they forward. Nonetheless, there remains, as Daniels makes clear, a particular uniformity of representation which distinguishes them as a group. “White Men Built this Nation—White Men are this Nation” declares Tom Metzger’s publication, *WAR* (White Aryan Resistance), and that theme is echoed throughout Daniels’ careful deconstruction of rep-
resentations of not only white men, but also white women, black men and women, Jewish men and women, and gays and lesbians.

The intention of Daniels' argument, however, is not to parade these images of white supremacist literature for their difference from mainstream representations of whiteness, but to parade their similarities. The 'family values' in Thunderbolt (J.B. Stoner's National States Rights' Party) have more than a passing resemblance to the classed and gendered heterosexual family values of the Republican party, as do the cries of 'reverse discrimination' which may have a gentler presentation in mass media, but share the same message as found in The Klansman. Similarly, the crude and hateful cartoon of "Today's young Coon" as displayed in WAR (White Aryan Resistance) is certainly no more offensive than the repetitive and cynical deployment of the face of Willie Horton. An additional point which I found most salient: Mass media condones the legitimacy of "debate" in a structure pairing a white supremacist leader and a respected office holder of the NAACP. Would such a construct be even considered, much less legitimated by structure, if the issue instead of "racial movements" was one of, say, "labor movements" and paired a radical anarchist with a top-ranking representative from an international corporation?

Overall, Daniels' book is a very effective, if painful, read. She is perhaps most convincing in her discussions of the hateful representations of blackness as the eternal other, although that may also be because that topic is, as could be imagined, a well-defined "area" of hate literature. Her discussion of class and its influences is a little sparse, dwelling most importantly on the demographic realities that the members of white supremacist groups reflect the general populace at levels of income and social class. The painful hatreds displayed and thoughtfully analyzed in this book are not the product of a few poor, uneducated, and disgruntled white males—all whites are implicated.

But what of those poor, uneducated and disgruntled whites? As mentioned previously, Murray and Herrstein have promoted an argument for a biological reason for the existence of generational poverty, not only amongst blacks but 'particular' whites as well. They argue, of course, that "white trash" is a sociobiological reality—a biological race within a race. In the introduction to White Trash, editors Wray and Newitz pull out the impact of The Bell Curve and its correlation to a recent media reporting of "white trash"—the "trashing" of America institutionalized by the popularity of Rosanne and the rise of a "hillybilly" president. There is clearly a threat of encroachment in the supposedly new visibility of white trash in middle class culture—or is it a threat of social resistance? This book of essays examines the impact of white trash from many different perspectives and disciplines, drawing out points of both class oppression and self-conscious parody as resistance.

The book opens with essays constructing a geography of identity, of sorts, of white trash. This section is very effective. It begins with Berube's reminiscences of growing up gay in a New York trailer park, and moves to Hartigan's examination of inner-city Detroit and the identity conflicts between "poor white," black and "white trash." Lockley contributes a historical analysis of the relations between black slaves and non-property holding whites during the antebellum period, and Dunbar closes with a narrative of life as an "Okie" who married up. All of these articles keep the goal of identifying the material existence of white trash, while at the same time contributing an insight of the ramifications of social location—knowing their "place" even as these authors have personally and professionally felt social pressure to transcend it.

The second group of essays on "white trash pictures" is, for me, far less effective. These essays attempt to deconstruct white trash depictions but, in the end, more often concretize them. The mutant assertiveness of the performance of White Trash Girl is intellectually interesting and amusing, but artist Jennifer Reeder doesn't seem to truly examine the roots of her critique. In the interview with Laura Kipness, there is a self-conscious attempt to "(pro)claim" an authenticity (from being raised by a middle-class manager of the White Castle company) that is in clear contrast to the thoughtful examinations of identity which proceed it. Articles by Henley, Newitz and Hill all examine cinematic representations of white trash brutality and excess for its role in propelling up middle-class conceits of sexual control and class security. Indeed, they may be right in their interpretations of, for example, the homicidal white trash character in Kalifornia, but their articles seem to serve that same function. The careful deconstruction of these images keeps them in their "place."

However, just as I was beginning to think that intellectual approaches to a social identity reliant upon the rejection of intellectualism were all doomed to a hopeless internal contradiction, the strong third section of this book renewed my faith. The close and careful analyses of the production and consumption of poor whites and poor white culture in the concluding essays displays, like the first section, a more satisfying combination of narrative voice and cultural critique. Particularly strong is Matt Wray's "White Trash Religion," and its biographical and critical exposition of the importance of fundamentalist faith in both supporting and undermining his childhood community. Similarly, Barbara Ching's "Acting Naturally" is able to achieve the dissection of self-parody and class resistance in country music that White Trash Girl couldn't reach in her adoption of stereotypical representation.
White Trash, as a whole, is an important contribution, despite the variable effectiveness of its "parts." One question remained relatively untouched, however. In every essay in this book, White Trash is described as related to "rurality" and hicks, rubes, hillbillies, etc. and their undisputed and necessary lack of urban sophistication and accompanying ignorance of urban mores which maintain both their worthlessness and position as perpetual outsiders from the middle class urban sensibility. Yet the question of rurality and rural identity is never discussed as more than an incidental point (with the exception of Barbara Ching's article), despite its continuous appearance. In the very urbanized sensibilities which drive many of these articles, the rural is theoretically untouched and critically taken-for-granted. In that sense, there is much more work on the cultural and social deconstruction of white trash to be done.

David E. Magill

Book Review

Most essay collections achieve what the name suggests: they collect essays together on one subject. E. Nathaniel Gates's collection, however, collects important essays on race from past and present in order to bring about new dialogue on the cultural critiques of race mounted by prominent writers and scholars of the past twenty years. Gates includes 19 essays in this volume, drawn from the fields of sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and literary criticism. He reproduces important essays by Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, as well as seminal essays by Michael Omi and Howard Winant and Lucius Outlaw, to name just a few. Each essay quotes, discusses, and rewrites other essays, producing a space of critique.

In his introduction, Gates notes "the power of metaphor to reproduce or reinforce a socialized order of dominion" (vii). He outlines the processes by which racialized order is stated linguistically and demarcated physically, neatly summarizing current views on the cultural construction of race. As Gates notes, however, "modern social history suggests that there is often a considerable lag between the abandon-

David E. Magill is a member of the disClosTure editorial collective and a graduate student in English at UK.
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