Jeff Foxworthy’s Redneck Humor and the Boundaries of Middle-Class American Whiteness

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Abstract
Recent studies examine the use of rhetorical boundaries to produce intra-racial othering within whiteness. I expand this project by exploring the textual and social codes in Jeff Foxworthy humor that demarcate the boundaries between the redneck and the non-redneck. Such boundaries are complex, porous fault-lines that use symbolic pollution embedded in humor to stigmatize White outsiders. Social codes referencing symbolic pollution establish boundaries to define and insulate a normative, mainstream White identity from the intra-racial threat of redneck identity. This project provides a novel addition to whiteness studies by taking redneck humor analytically seriously and concludes by drawing comparisons between codes found in Foxworthy humor and those levied against rural Whites during the eugenics era.

Keywords
whiteness, redneck humor, pollution ideology, boundary theory, social constructionism

Redneck Identity and Redneck Humor

Popular culture has aided the reworking of a redneck discourse that historically signified poor rural White southerners (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Solidified by comedian Jeff Foxworthy in the 1990s, the term redneck has been reinterpreted as an identity salient to a mass audience (Hartigan, 1997). When redneck is used as a self-description or as a way of indicating otherness, it becomes a means of establishing identity boundaries. To expand research exploring the nuances of whiteness, this article seeks to illuminate how, and why, redneck identity is being constructed in this humor. Specifically, I seek to address three interrelated questions.

Research Question 1: How is redneck defined according to Foxworthy humor?
Research Question 2: How does this humor construct the boundaries between the redneck and non-redneck?
Research Question 3: Do the boundaries utilized in this humor help us understand the production and maintenance of a more normative, mainstream whiteness?

To address these questions, I conducted a semiotics-inspired narrative analysis of more than 300 Foxworthy redneck jokes derived from his comedy routine and posted on the Internet site Country Humor (Foxworthy, 1991, 2004). My analysis is organized around four broad themes that permeate these jokes: lifestyle and fashion, rural living, sex and gender, and poverty. I explore the textual and social codes used to define redneck identity and construct the boundaries between the redneck and the non-redneck. I locate this project within whiteness studies literature and conceptualize the analysis via boundary theory and the notion of symbolic pollution.

However, it is important to recognize that although Foxworthy’s redneck humor provides an important and influential interpretation of redneck identity, I am not suggesting that his humor should be viewed as the final, authoritative word on the issue. There are many facets to redneck identity and the term has a long history. Indeed, although it appears to have originated in the British Isles, the first known recorded use of the term in the United States was in an 1830 travel book by A. Royall, titled Southern Tour (Goad, 1998; Huber & Drowne, 2001; Webb, 2005). Royall used the term redneck to describe a group of Presbyterians in Fayetteville, North Carolina (Goad, 1998). By the 1890s, redneck was broadly used to describe rural White laborers in the American south, as it had become associated with the effects of long hours of laboring in the sun (Huber & Drowne, 2001;
Roebuck & Hickson, 1982). The term might have also been reinforced by a vitamin deficiency called pellagra, which causes the neck and other parts of the body to redden. Roebuck and Hickson (1982) state that rural southern Whites frequently suffered from ill health due to poor diets and a general lack of medical care. Pellagra was common throughout the southern United States, especially in the 1930s, when many believe that redneck became a nationally recognized term (Eisminger, 1984).

In states such as West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, southern Illinois, and Indiana, the term redneck also became synonymous with unionization and its radical politics (Huber, 1994). Rednecks would wear red bandanas around their necks as a sign of solidarity, particularly while striking. The term redneck was both embraced and used pejoratively to describe members of the United Mine Workers of America, as well as their rural background (Huber, 1994).

Redneck took on more currency in popular culture in the 1970s, particularly through the influence of country music. With songs including Johnny Russell’s Rednecks, White Socks and Blue Ribbon Beer, the Bellamy Brothers Redneck Girl, and David Allen Coe’s Longhaired Redneck, it entered America’s popular lexicon and began to transcend its association with a strictly southern rurality. When Foxworthy’s redneck humor first arrived in the early 1990s, redneck was a nationally recognized term, and this humor has no doubt had a significant impact on reshaping its meaning in the popular imagination. It is explicitly to that end that this article is focused. What kind of redneck is being constructed in this humor? What identity boundaries are being negotiated, and does this speak to mainstream whiteness?

**Whiteness, Boundary Theory, and Symbolic Pollution**

Whiteness studies are designed to examine and expose the “territory of white” to bring it under critical analysis (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Jacobson, 1999; Lipsitz, 1998, 2011; Painter, 2010; Perkinson, 2004; Roediger, 1991, 2006). The rapid growth of whiteness studies and the sheer number of disciplines impacted has been remarkable. Arnesen (2001) argues that “few branches of the humanities and social sciences have escaped the increasing gravitational pull of ‘whiteness studies’” (p. 4). The study of whiteness has been dominated by the “systemic racism camp,” which focuses on the role of power and structural inequality (Foster, 2009; Roediger, 1991). The systemic racism camp associates White identity predominantly with privilege and oppression (Harris, 1993; Lucal, 1996; McIntosh, 1989; Pence & Fields, 1999; Wiegman, 1999). Perhaps, the most ambitious analysis of whiteness in this tradition is Painter’s (2010) tome *The History of White People*. Painter (2010) ultimately roots the origins of whiteness—and by extension the “white race”—in the labels and perceptions of social elites, yet acknowledges the socially situational nuances of whiteness, particularly through how it has been impacted by class and gender. One of the fundamental assumptions of whiteness studies is that White racial identity and its associated privileges are largely invisible, particularly to White individuals. As Perkinson (2004) states, “White America is largely unconscious and mute, unable to address the question of its identity as white. Power does not normally have to give an account of its own basis of operation” (p. 1). As such, exploring White identity and exposing White privilege serves as foundational theoretical concerns in this field. Perkinson (2004) notes that such exposure must occur on multiple levels—from the operation of structural privilege, to the organization of cultural habit, to the face-to-face politics of personal power. With this focus on power and privilege, whiteness does not represent a color as much as it represents a condition “. . . a structured advantage that channels unfair gains and unjust enrichments to whites . . .” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 3).

Of course, whiteness studies are not without critics. The most well-known critique of whiteness studies comes from historian Eric Arnesen (2001). Arnesen argues that whiteness studies scholars in general, and labor historians working within the framework of whiteness studies in particular, engage in serious methodological and conceptual flaws—particularly conceptual inflation, conceptual substitution, and analytical overreach (Arnesen, 2001). Arnesen argues that whiteness studies scholars inaccurately equate whiteness with White supremacy, but that the two concepts are not necessarily equivalent. Arnesen (2001) worries that whiteness studies scholars “. . . reduce a complex, many faceted racialization process to the matter of ‘becoming white’” (p. 17). However, the claim that whiteness studies scholars are oversimplifying a complex process is not a fair or accurate accusation, for exploring complexity and nuance in racial identity is a significant feature of whiteness studies. Jacobson (1999) perhaps put it best when he noted,

> The contest over whiteness—its definition, its internal hierarchies, its proper boundaries, and its rightful claimants—has been critical to American culture throughout the nation’s history, and it has been a fairly untidy affair. (p. 5)

One of the many interesting discoveries of whiteness studies scholars is the historical flexibility of White racial identity. For example, throughout much of U.S. history, many light-skinned immigrants of eastern and southern European descent, the Irish, and even poor rural Whites, were often not viewed as fully White and did not always receive the benefits of whiteness (Painter, 2010). Roediger (2006) notes how in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, southern and eastern European immigrants in particular were frequently racialized as “in-between” peoples; they neither experienced the full racism of people of color, nor experience full inclusion as White Americans. Yet, many scholars have concluded that the epistemological and ontological
assumptions of the systemic racism camp in whiteness studies have greatly limited the study of White identity (Ching & Creed, 1997; Eichstedt, 2001; Giroux, 1997; Winders, 2003). Recent work within a stricter social constructionist tradition has challenged the systemic racism camp for its tendency to reify and essentialize whiteness (Bonnett, 1998; Eichstedt, 2001; Foster, 2009; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Trainor, 2002; Weis & Lombardo, 2002). Twine and Gallagher (2007) argue that whiteness studies are moving toward a “third wave,” seeking to unify salient aspects of both the systemic racism and constructionist approach. They state,

While whiteness often is synonymous with regimes of terror, genocide and white supremacy, a third wave perspective on whiteness rejects the implicit assumption that whiteness is only an unconditional, universal and equally experienced location of privilege and power. (Twine & Gallagher, 2007, p. 7)

A core conceptual distinction between the systemic and constructionist approach centers on the boundaries of White identity. In the systemic approach, whiteness is believed to be primarily or even exclusively established through a confrontation with blackness (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Lipsitz, 2011; Perkinson, 2004). However, many constructionists are now exploring how factors such as geographic region, gender, and socio-economic status establish gradations within White identity. For example, the labels White trash and hillbilly highlight the stratified social terrain of White identity by illustrating a tradition of contempt and intra-racial othering (Harkins, 2004; Hartigan, 2005, 1997; Mason, 2005; Wilson, 2002; Winders, 2003). By analyzing how these labels are used to mark certain White identities as Other even as they remain White as such, we can broaden our conceptual understanding of the formation and maintenance of White identity. It is precisely this process of intra-racial othering that this article seeks to explore through the boundaries constructed in this humor.

In the redneck humor of Jeff Foxworthy, certain Whites are marked as Other through the use of symbolic pollution. Max Weber (1946) was the first prominent social theorist to note how individuals occupying lower statuses are often perceived as dirty and that interacting with members from lower status groups can lead to impurity. However, Mary Douglas (1990) was the first theorist to explore thoroughly the symbolic construction and use of the concept “dirt.” Douglas (1990) argues,

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as a matter out of place . . . It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order . . . This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up of symbolic systems of purity . . . In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (p. 155)

Because the notion of social disorder is important for understanding symbolic pollution, the application of symbolic pollution to a social group implies their challenge to some normative aspect of that social order (Bean, 1981; Douglas, 1966, 1990). As Smith-Rosenberg (1990) argues, “People who hold dangerously ambiguous roles are seen as antisocial: ‘dirt, obscenity, and lawlessness’ characterize them” (p. 165). I contend that redneck identity is a dangerously ambiguous identity because it is a low status identity occupied by Whites. This ambiguity poses an intra-racial threat because it challenges important assumptions and beliefs related to normative whiteness, including White supremacy, American individualism, and meritocracy. Beliefs and values about dirt, garbage, or trash are consistently used to make claims and counter-claims about the character of one’s status and identity (Douglas, 1966; Hartigan, 2005), and thus, the accusation of being dirty is “ . . . itself a weapon” for clarifying and strengthening social structure (Douglas, 1966, p. 107). Redneck identity is associated with symbolic pollution because it stands outside of conventional whiteness and, thus, threatens cherished concepts important to mainstream White identity. In the course of this intra-racial othering, symbolic pollution becomes the principal means of establishing boundaries between us/them, and in the process racializes the White Other via similar mechanisms used to racialize minorities (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). In this unique contribution to the study of redneck identity and White intra-racial othering, I argue below that it is through frequent reference to symbolic pollution that Foxworthy humor actually constructs a particular type of pop culture redneck identity. Through this analysis, I will locate these references to symbolic pollution and explore what they mean for the construction of contemporary redneck identity as well as whiteness.

Data and Method

The data consist of Foxworthy redneck jokes posted on the website Country Humor. Jeff Foxworthy released the comedy album You Might Be a Redneck If . . . in 1993, ushering in a new era for the social construction of redneck identity. Foxworthy and Foxworthy-inspired redneck humor are cultural narratives articulating norms, values, beliefs, and lifestyles about this identity (Foxworthy, 1991, 2004). With material spanning over 25 years, Foxworthy has become the largest selling comedy recording artist in history. At the time of this analysis, Country Humor had 300 of Foxworthy’s You Might Be a Redneck If jokes derived from his stand-up and printed material. I employed narrative analysis and incorporated semiotic concepts to give denotative and connotative readings of these jokes, exploring both literal, “common sense” references in this humor as well as the humor’s more symbolic meanings. My denotative and connotative readings explore specific codes embedded in these jokes.
Communication is in part composed of employing and interpreting culturally available codes (Barker, 2003; Chandler, 2002). Codes serve as a key, or set of instructions, for translating a message (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Chandler, 2002; Jameson, 1977; White & Taket, 2000). They often take the form of binary oppositions that structure both the pragmatic use and symbolic meaning of language (Chandler, 2002). Codes help simplify phenomena to make it easier to communicate experiences (Gombrich, 1982). Although codes might not directly determine the meaning of a text, they do constrain meaning so as to push for a preferred reading (Hall, 1980). Different types of codes can be important for different levels of analysis (Merrill, 2007). Indeed, most texts have a multitude of interacting codes, and analysis often involves considering these codes and their inter-relationships (Jakobson, 1971).

One type of code is the textual code (Chandler, 2002). Textual codes help to facilitate literary or communicative traditions. For example, some textual codes that can help structure the narrative genre include destinatory/receiver, subject/object, and assistant/traitors (White & Taket, 2000). While textual codes can provide structure so as to conform to a particular genre, the text might also contain other codes that reflect the narrator’s cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and practices. These codes can be referred to as social codes (Chandler, 2002). Social codes convey bodily, behavioral, verbal, and commodity-based dimensions of social life (Chandler, 2002). Hence, textual codes are more specific to genre structure, whereas social codes communicate broader aspects of collective existence.

Textual and social codes help inform this analysis in two ways. First, I focus on the textual code subject/object because this is a fundamental component of Foxworthy’s redneck humor. The code subject/object is essential to understanding what does and does not constitute redneck identity in this humor. Also, this code is important because it highlights how Foxworthy jokes can be viewed as elementary narratives. Narratives often follow an initial state → disruption → new state sequence (Franzosi, 1998), and Foxworthy jokes unfold in a similarly linear pattern. The typical structure of a Foxworthy redneck joke is,

*If you [pause] have a half-built truck engine in the front yard of your trailer home [pause] you might be a redneck.*

Therefore, you can be determined to be the subject, a *half-built truck engine in the front yard of your trailer home* a composite of social codes, and *redneck* the object. The humorous message of the joke is partially predicated on the collapse of the code subject/object. The initial state of the linear narrative sequence is the absence of a redneck identity, which can be viewed as the preferred state. The disruption occurs during the gist of the joke, which presents a culturally compacted image of redneck identity referencing one or more social codes. The new state of the narrative is the association of oneself, one’s relatives, friends, acquaintances, or at least a generalized other, with this new identity of *redneck.* When the binary collapses, threatening either your or another associate’s identity, the juxtaposition of incompatible ideas has occurred and laughter ensues (Meyer, 2000).

Social codes referencing symbolic pollution (i.e., pollution codes) also provide important elements of the humorous message. This particular type of social code is important for understanding the cultural connotations found in this humor. Pollution codes establish symbolic boundaries between types of people. Such pollution codes often take form in the binaries cleanliness/dirtiness, civilized/uncivilized, ordered/unordered, moral/immoral, and others. For example, the pollution code cleanliness/dirtiness is signified when a joke states that you might be a redneck if the Salvation Army “declines your mattress.” In this particular example, the pollution code cleanliness/dirtiness is used to construct redneck identity as dirty, and then, it becomes associated with all the negative connotations such dirtiness entails. Therefore, pollution codes specify the multitude of ways in which status hierarchies are being implicitly constructed in redneck humor. These pollution codes generally focus on one of two patterns: excess or inappropriate juxtaposition. These two patterns conform to what one would expect concerning the nature of humor (Gross, 2007; Lengbeyer, 2005; Shifman, 2007). Through the two patterns of excess and incongruent juxtaposition, these pollution codes contaminate common systems of classification in modern, mainstream, White American social life. As illustrated below, the operation of these two patterns of humor use divergent paths yet arrive at the same destination, the marking of redneck identity as a polluted identity outside the realm of normative whiteness.

**Analysis: Pollution Codes in Foxworthy Redneck Humor**

Through exploration of pollution codes implied in Foxworthy redneck humor, this analysis illuminates but one way intra-racial othering occurs within White identity formation. There are four expansive themes permeating these jokes: lifestyle and fashion, rural living, sex and gender, and poverty. These themes and the pollution codes found therein are offered as representative of the themes and pollution codes found throughout this humor.

**Lifestyle and Fashion**

Foxworthy humor establishes boundaries to convey the character of redneck identity. This humor often employs cultural and biological differences to separate rednecks from normative whiteness. Employing many pollution codes simultaneously, these codes intersect and fuse so that any one joke can signify multiple means of pollution. Associating redneck identity with lack of hygiene occurs in the jokes below in
part through an association with the codes culture/nature, cleanliness/dirtiness, and cultivated/trashy. As revealed in these jokes, rednecks are constructed as prone to bodily infestation by insects, animals, and/or diseases.

You might be a redneck if:

- Chiggers are included on your list of top 5 hygiene concerns.
- Birds are attracted to your beard.
- You have ever bathed with flea and tick soap.
- You think that Campho-Phenique is a miracle drug.

Because the human body is a key component of racialized rhetoric, it is often a site of contention over definitions of civilized/uncivilized (Hartigan, 2005). These particular jokes take the culture/nature binary to the level of the physical organism; the living body is constructed as the site that is polluted. However, it is not simply nature’s infestation of the body that threatens the boundary between culture and nature. We also see bodily excretions and waste threaten this boundary. Human excrement is tabooed in all cultures because it threatens the fundamental distinction between “me and not me” (Keskpaik, 2001, p. 315). Urine, feces, grease, and spittle emerge in this humor as human excretions associated with redneck identity. We see these references as well as others in the jokes below.

You might be a redneck if:

- Someone in your family says “Cum’n heer an’ lookit this afore I flush it.”
- Exxon and Conoco have offered you royalties for your hair.
- You use lava soap more than three times a day.

These jokes illustrate the intersection of pollution codes in this humor. The association of rednecks with feces and grease is clear in these jokes, thus connecting redneck identity with human excretions. Yet, in the first joke, it is not simply the reference to human excrement that identifies the redneck, it is also the speech pattern. This speech pattern intersects with those pollution codes associating redneck identity with laziness, rusticity, and a lack of education. We also see the intersection of human excretions, a lack of education, and immorality in the jokes addressing redneck tobacco use.

You might be a redneck if:

- You keep a spit cup on the ironing board.
- Your family reunion features a chewing tobacco spit-off.
- You participate in the “who can spit tobacco the farthest” contest.
- Redman Chewing Tobacco sends you a Christmas card.

The focus on redneck spittle highlights the dirty, disgusting behavior of redneck tobacco use. Instead of simply associating redneck tobacco use with secondhand smoke, the focus on chew spotlights disgusting, tobacco-laden saliva. This focus unifies human excretions with poor lifestyle choice, irresponsibility, and immorality. Below, we also see a more direct relationship between rednecks and dirt through jokes portraying the unclean living conditions and habits of rednecks.

You might be a redneck if:

- You keep a can of RAID on the kitchen table.
- The Salvation Army declines your mattress.
- Going to the laundromat means cleaning out the back of the truck.
- You clean your fingernails with a stick.
- You prefer car keys to Q-tips.

In these jokes we see dirty, pest-infested living conditions intersecting with poor behavioral habits and lack of intelligence, or at least common sense. Poor hygiene and squalid living conditions stand in symbolic opposition to cleanliness, which is associated with order, civilization, and morality (Bean, 1981). Order, civilization, and morality are challenged by another stereotype that targets the moral fabric of redneck identity: excessive alcohol use. The image of a drunken and abusive redneck demonstrates how immorality and excess serve as a central explanation for their misfortune. In the jokes below the use of alcoholic imagery solidifies the relationship between immorality and redneck behavioral patterns.

You might be a redneck if:

- You actually made a pyramid of cans in the pale moonlight with Alan Jackson.
- You’re a lite beer drinker, because you start drinking when it gets light.
- You’ve ever parked a Camero in a tree.
- You’ve ever put a six-pack in a casket right before they closed it.

The first joke in this set combines alcoholism with a dominant theme: rurality. The lyrics of famous country musician
Alan Jackson serves as a bridge between alcoholic excess and rural Americans. In addition, the jokes discussing drinking when it is light and getting into drinking and driving accidents illustrate how this excessive, polluted behavior is a lifestyle choice that can lead to dire consequences. The last joke illustrates how this poor lifestyle choice then transitions into an unsavory death ritual.

You might be a redneck if:

You can’t take a bath because beer is iced down in your tub.

Jack Daniels makes your list of most admired people.

You ever got too drunk to fish.

Your beer can collection is considered a tourist attraction in your home town.

The first joke in this set illustrates how alcohol interrupts important purity rituals. The denotative reading is that the redneck is unable to clean themselves; the beer is literally in the way. A connotative reading can relate cleanliness to purity, and the redneck’s inability to bathe symbolically references how alcohol serves to pollute redneck identity. Yet, in the jokes above, it is not simply the consumption of alcohol that serves as a means of pollution; it is the association of redneck identity with excessive alcohol use. It is not the content of the joke but rather the relationship between the content and a proclivity toward excessiveness that is key here. The proclivity toward excessiveness proves to be a fundamental way of differentiating the redneck from the non-redneck in much of this humor. This supports Zuesse’s (1974) contention that it is gradations within categories rather than between categories that often differentiates the socially acceptable from the symbolically polluted.

Another example of this emphasis on gradations within categories involves hunting and fishing. As per the jokes below, it is not the act of hunting and fishing that marks one’s identity as redneck; it is taking behaviors associated with hunting and fishing to bizarre extremes. An emphasis on excess draws the recipient of the joke’s attention to a lack of self-control. A lack of self-control is associated with childishness, primitiveness, and immorality and helps explain why rednecks make poor lifestyle choices. Therefore, this humor suggests that although a redneck/non-redneck might engage in the same activity, redneck behaviors lack taste and self-control.

You might be a redneck if:

You have the local taxidermist’s number on speed dial.

You owe the taxidermist more than your annual income.

You’ve ever filled your deer tag on the golf course.

You own a homemade fur coat.

You’d rather catch bass than get some (if you can’t guess . . . )

We also see the intersection of the pollution codes poor/rich, pre-modern/modern, and virility/impotence in the jokes above. To illustrate, rather than hunting for sport or hunting big game, these jokes construct rednecks as hunting for utility, such as producing clothing, or hunting small game for decoration. Hunting for utility and hunting small game (raccoons, rabbits, possums) symbolically pollutes redneck identity by associating it with pre-modern living conditions, poverty, and/or a lack of style. The third joke also confounds civilized/uncivilized by implying that the redneck went hunting and shot a deer on a golf course, or was golfing, had a gun, and shot a deer in the process. In either instance, the collapse of the boundary between golf, which is traditionally viewed as an upper-middle- or upper-class sport, and hunting provides a key source of the humorous message. The suggestion is that rednecks do not know how to support or maintain important social boundaries—in this case, the boundary between upper-class golf and hunting. In addition, the last joke above draws redneck sexuality and virility into question, a theme that will be explored later, after we take a closer look at rurality.

Polluted Rural Spaces: Living in the Outskirts

In the code culture/nature, the rustic character of redneck identity is directly connected with nature. This connection locates redneck identity outside of civilization, as made explicit in the following jokes.

You might be a redneck if:

Directions to your house include “Turn off the paved road.”

Getting a package from your post office requires a full tank of gas in the truck.

Rustics live “out” in the countryside, boondocks, boonies, sticks, and so forth, rather than “in” the city (Ching & Creed, 1997). The association between the binary in/out and the binary urban/rural draws our attention to the connection between rusticity and outness. Living in figurative outness is living external to the bounds of modern society, external to contemporary cultural norms (Ching & Creed, 1997). In the culture/nature binary, this humor uses nature as a means of symbolic pollution. Yet, outside of this humor the reverse is often true, where civilization is constructed as dirty or corrupt and nature as pure or pristine. There is much scholarly work that deals with the ideological implications of this binary for the American political system and public policy (Davis, 1988; Dyer, 1987; Furedi, 2008; Haer, 1952;
Thomas Knoke & Henry, 1977). However, this ideological battle often misses some broader implications of the culture/nature binary. Kaika (2004) notes how the struggle between “good water” and “bad water” is analogous to the difference between “good nature” and “bad nature.” Good water is clean, processed, controlled, and commodified. Bad water is dirty, gray, metabolized, non-processed, and non-commodified. Bad water is found in rivers, streams, creeks, rainwater, sewage, and so forth, and is understood as deleterious to the human body if consumed. Good water occurs through a process of technological and cultural transformation. Good water is used for drinking, cleaning, swimming, and religious services. Water is “good” after it has been transformed by human technology and culture (Kaika, 2004). Likewise, only after nature has been transformed—for example, from a dangerous wilderness to a national park—does it provide enough safety and security to be enjoyed as “pristine.” Associating an identity with “good nature” or “bad nature” is one means of marking status in modernity (Kaika, 2004). Members of higher statuses might enjoy “good nature” by going to a ski resort, or taking a weekend fishing trip to a public or private lake. Good nature is good because it has the semblance of order; it is under the will and domain of humankind. However bad nature is unwieldy and dangerous; it violates boundaries and is void of culture.

In Foxworthy humor, the breakdown of the culture/nature and order/disorder binaries also occurs through the breakdown of the inside and outside of the home. Living conditions is a prominent means of associating redneck identity with symbolic pollution. The jokes below highlight the distinction between culture/inside and nature/outside.

You might be a redneck if:

You have to go down to the creek to take a bath.

You have to go outside to get something ‘out of the fridge.’

The best way to keep things cold is to leave ‘em in the shade.

Your classes at school were canceled because the path to the restroom was flooded.

The unification of civilization with order and nature with disorder is most visible in jokes referencing the redneck home. Kaika (2004) argues that “the idea of the house as a means of separating the inside from the outside, nature from human beings, the public from the private sphere, has existed since antiquity” (p. 265). In the process of imbuing the home with cultural and ideological meaning “nature” is extracted and then selectively allowed back in after being produced, purified, and commodified (Kaika, 2004). In Foxworthy humor, the breakdown of the binaries inside/outside and culture/nature serves to pollute redneck identity.

You might be a redneck if:

You’ve ever raked leaves in your kitchen.

You’ve ever used a weedeater indoors.

Going to the bathroom at night involves shoes and a flashlight.

You have flowers planted in a bathroom appliance in your front yard.

This binary culture/nature, and rurality more broadly, also serves as an important explanation for another commonly assumed redneck characteristic: racism.

You might be a redneck if:

There is a sheet hanging in your closet and a gun rack hanging in your truck.

Jarosz and Lawson (2002) argue that middle-class Whites associate extreme forms of racism with rural Whites in an attempt to free themselves from being implicated in institutional racism. By insisting that racism is a core quality of rednecks, middle-class Whites disassociate themselves from racism by locating it in the primitive and pre-modern aspects of White American culture. This reinforces the notion that racism is only a problem because of a particular kind of White identity. Therefore, rednecks free normative middle-class whiteness of its complicity in racist practices (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Moreover, the lack of education, being pre-modern, a primitive lifestyle and ensuing racist sentiments all intersect with an association to southern regionalism.

You might be a redneck if:

You are still holding onto Confederate money because you think the South will rise again.

You have started a petition to change the national anthem to “Georgia on My Mind.”

More than one living relative is named after a Southern Civil War general.

The construction of redneck identity as pre-modern, rustic, out-of-touch, and often racist and regionalist creates a polluted identity that establishes boundaries for a more mainstream White identity. Yet, although the racist and regionalist sentiments associated with redneck identity help quell a more normative whiteness’s complicity in racist practices, there is perhaps no better theme that illustrates the construction of degenerate whiteness than themes involving sexual and gender taboo. I now explore how taboo sexual and gender behavior represents a major dimension of regressive whiteness in this humor.
**Polluted Sexual and Gendered Practices**

Taboos are important means of boundary work, giving form to formlessness and explicitly delineating the divine from the human elements of social life (Levine, 1986; Zuesse, 1974). Taboo sexual behavior is particularly threatening to multiple culturally valued boundaries (Davies, 1982). In popular culture, rustic sexual expression often takes the form of homosexual rape, incest, or bestiality (Ching & Creed, 1997). In this humor, homosexual rape manifests in reference to the 1972 film *Deliverance*. Hartigan (2005) argues that the film *Deliverance* unfolds in a narrational tension between nature and culture. In one particular scene, the viewer witnesses the homosexual rape of one of the main characters. The rape was committed by one of several poor, rural Whites, all of whom were carrying firearms. Below, this homosexual rape reemerges to serve the purpose of polluting redneck identity.

You might be a redneck if:

You think the mountain men in *Deliverance* were just “misunderstood.”

This particular joke also seems to poke fun at political correctness. Stating that the mountain men were simply misunderstood, combined with quotations indicating irony, suggests a sarcastic play on the notions of cultural relativism and/or cultural sensitivity. Such irony is often meant to imply the opposite: that, this violent, homosexual rape is indicative of something more essential, be it cultural, or individual pathology. However, incest is a much more prevalent taboo in this humor than is homosexual rape. In popular culture, incest is understood as typical redneck behavior and, therefore, rednecks are perceived as coming from a gene puddle instead of a gene pool (Goad, 1998). Indeed, incest serves as a key biological explanation for why redneck identity fails to conform to the standards of a more normative whiteness, and this biological explanation is one of the most transparent ways redneck identity is racialized. Following this tradition of racialization through an emphasis on incest, sexuality is constructed as a “family affair” in this humor.

You might be a redneck if:

You view the next family reunion as a chance to meet girls.

You can’t get married to your sweetheart because there is a law against it.

You stand under the mistletoe at Christmas and wait for Granny and cousin Sue-Ellen to walk by.

You go Christmas shopping for your mom, sister, and girlfriend, and you only need to buy one gift.

These jokes suggest not only do rednecks freely engage in incestuous relations but also such relationships are common, culturally acceptable, and even expected. By transgressing the incest taboo, the redneck is violating both the understanding of what helps make one human as well as what helps connect humans to the divine (Levine, 1986; Zuesse, 1974). In this way, the actual sex act is one means of pollution, its outcome (inbred offspring) is another means of pollution, and the culture that supports this behavior is perceived as dysfunctional, degenerate, and immoral.

You might be a redneck if:

Your brother-in-law is also your uncle.

Your family tree doesn’t have any branches.

Your gene pool doesn’t have a “deep end.”

You dated your daddy’s current wife in high school.

You have to scratch your sister’s name out of the message: “for a good time call . . . because you feel guilty about putting it there.”

The use of incestuous relationships as a means of polluting redneck identity offers a much-needed explanation for the very existence of such an identity. Why are there White people who are poor and live in rural areas? Why are they not moving out of these areas and out of poverty? Their very existence challenges the legitimacy of American meritocracy. Their inability to conform to White middle-class norms demands explanation and incest offers a powerful one. This biological explanation conferring genetic weakness combines to reinforce, and be reinforced by, poor behavior and lack of self-control to explain the existence of such an identity.

Another common theme concerning redneck sexual behavior is a lack of male romance and chivalry. As Davies (1982) notes, the strength of taboos often lies less in content than in structure, in the separation of categories and in the keeping apart of like and unlike elements. While associating redneck sexuality with homosexual rape or incest is more extreme than lack of male romance or chivalry, it is still used as a means of polluting redneck identity. Male sexual behavior and mating patterns are constructed as uncultivated, insufficiently romantic, and trashy.

You might be a redneck if:

Your idea of talking during sex is “Ain’t no cars coming, baby!”

After making love you ask your date to roll down the window.

“Honey? Are the lights out? Is the door locked? Is the parking brake set?” is what you hear right before you and your wife/girl make love.
These jokes pollute redneck identity by attacking their chivalry toward their partners. Courting and romance can be seen as an important means of separating the civilized man from the primitive man. Such jokes imply that rednecks are not really “men” because they lack the desire, the means, or the knowledge to properly court their partners or engage in romantic love making. Attacking the romantic virtue of “primitive males” has deep historical roots. For example, African American male sexuality was constructed as primitive and lacking in chivalrous virtue by the antebellum southern aristocracy (Bay, 2000). Considering the historical association of the term redneck with the American south, such jokes might reflect deeply embedded attitudes that established boundaries between southern gentlemen and unrefined rednecks.

Nonetheless, in contemporary popular culture, redneck identity is also understood as a traditional and masculine identity. The masculinity of redneck identity often intersects with alcoholism, an abusive disposition toward women, and the support of traditional gender roles.

You might be a redneck if:

You think “loading the dishwasher” means getting your wife drunk.

In this humor, masculinity is more often constructed as a characteristic of redneck women. Redneck women are constructed as grossly masculine and lacking in feminine virtue. Indeed, rather than focusing on redneck identity as a means of enforcing traditional gender roles, most jokes focus on how the feminine is polluted by the masculine in redneck identity. Femininity is polluted by constructing the wife as a manual laborer, as well as through behavior traditionally viewed as unbecoming of women.

You might be a redneck if:

Your wife can climb a tree faster than your cat.
Your wife wants to stop at the gas station to see if they’ve got the new Darrell Waltrip Budweiser wall clock.
Your wife’s best pair of shoes is steel-toed Red Wings.
Your wife’s job requires her to wear an orange vest.

Symbolic pollution is often associated with mundane, physical work, and materiality (Bean, 1981). These last two jokes specifically focus on how being working class and working in manual labor pollutes the feminine in redneck identity. These jokes expressly address “your wife,” and then associate “your wife” with a masculine trait. Therefore, you know you might be a redneck if “your wife” possesses overtly masculine, working class traits. Consequently, this humor uses “symbolic touching” (Levine, 1986, p. 982) to pollute male redneck identity by associating it with redneck femininity. In addition, while working class manual labor pollutes redneck femininity, so does an association with what is beautiful versus what is ugly. Polluted appearances are unattractive and tacky. Because redneck identity is a polluted identity, and redneck femininity is polluted by working class masculinity, then redneck women are, through symbolic touching, unattractive.

You might be a redneck if:

Your wife’s hairdo has ever been ruined by a ceiling fan.
Your wife weighs more than your refrigerator.
Your wife has a beer belly and you find it attractive.

The lack of self-discipline and being old fashioned are also sources of pollution. The first joke establishes a sense of the redneck woman’s “big hair,” an old fashioned hairstyle taken to an extreme in this particular joke. Likewise, in the second joke all the cultural stereotypes associated with being overweight serve to pollute redneck women, such as being lazy, lacking self-discipline, and being immoral. Also, the last joke in this set offers a good example of how most jokes targeting redneck women are often still geared toward a male audience. It is not just that your wife has a beer belly—a stereotypically male phenomenon, and that the belly pollutes her identity. It is also that you find it attractive. In other words, feminine identity being polluted by masculine identity is not the only pollution code. It is also polluting those men who choose such women, and it is often the men who are the primary targets of the joke. Therefore, the impact of these pollution codes is dependent upon a firm dichotomy between man/woman and masculine/feminine. Any acts or characteristics that threaten these binaries are a menace to culturally valued boundaries, and thus, can serve as possible sites of pollution.

Another means of polluting redneck femininity with masculine traits is by associating redneck femininity with tobacco use and alcoholism.

You might be a redneck if:

Your mom gives you tips on how to sneak booze into sporting events.
Your mother doesn’t remove the Marlboro from her lips before telling the State Trooper to kiss her ass.
Your mother keeps a spit cup on the ironing board.
The tobacco chewers in your family aren’t just men.

Such jokes challenge redneck femininity by associating redneck women with two characteristics that strongly define
redneck masculinity: alcohol and tobacco use. Yet, these jokes also pollute redneck femininity by implicitly challenging the redneck woman’s ability to perform a most cherished traditional cultural role, that of mother. Tobacco and alcohol are not only a masculine redneck trait, excessive alcohol and tobacco use are seen as immoral regardless of one’s gender. The sneaking of alcohol into sporting events implies a disposition toward criminality, drunkenness, or both. Likewise, the three jokes discussing tobacco use also entail an uncouth disposition and criminality. Such jokes imply that masculinity is not the only danger associated with redneck femininity. Redneck femininity is also dangerous to a man’s ability to form and/or maintain a wholesome family life. And, this highlights an interesting component of Foxworthy’s redneck humor that I would like to make explicit: namely, the unspoken gender scripts related to work and family life. This humor operates with restrictive and traditional gender role assumptions. It is essentialist, as the masculine/feminine exists as an innate, natural binary. This humor is predicated on the notion that femininity is inherently soft and emotive. It presupposes the existence of clear boundaries and scripts that are rooted in very traditional and conservative perceptions of gender. These traditional and conservative perceptions might reflect the educational distance and class-based assumptions of redneck and mainstream whiteness, because it is through their working class jobs, alcohol and tobacco use, and comfort or embrace of violence, that redneck women transgress acceptable gendered boundaries. As such, the transgression of these boundaries not only pollutes their identity but also pollutes the identities of those redneck males associated with them.

Last, I conclude this analysis of Foxworthy redneck jokes by exploring how poverty, education, and status intertwine and serve as a primary means of polluting redneck identity.

The Pollution of Poverty

Trash is related to poverty both literally and figuratively. Trash is related to poverty literally because poverty often forces people to exploit what others have discarded as “trash.” Poverty is figuratively associated with trash through labels such as White trash and other rhetorical means of symbolic pollution. Trash is physically relocated to the periphery of civilization, marking the boundary where civilization ends and nature begins (Keskpaik, 2001). Similarly, by associating redneck identity with literal and figurative trash, rednecks are symbolically removed from mainstream culture.

You might be a redneck if:

- Your coffee table used to be a cable spool.
- Your stereo speakers used to belong to the Drive-in Theater.
- You come home from the garbage dump with more than you went with.
- You buy your wife tube socks at the flea market.
- You think “taking out the trash” means taking your in-laws to a movie.

In the first four jokes above, we see how the boundary between literal and figurative trash often breaks down in social practice. The first three jokes connect redneck identity with literal trash, things that have been discarded. The first two jokes can also be read in reference to immoral and/or criminal behavior, because the cable spool and speakers might have been stolen. The connection between redneck identity and literal trash also associates redneck identity with figurative trash. The transition from literal to figurative trash is complete in the last joke relating trash to “in-laws.”

Things that are socially and symbolically “discarded” are also “physically relocated” (Keskpaik, 2001, p. 321). Material objects that are physically relocated to special sites become trash. For example, the placement of a computer next to a garbage bin designates that computer, no matter how new or functional, as “trash,” again highlighting how pollution leads to infection through contact (Levine, 1986). Trash is on the periphery, and similarly trailer parks are on the periphery of American culture. The trailer park, as a social code, is so polluted that U.S. culture has a unique term for individuals who live in trailer homes: trailer trash. The jokes below show how redneck identity is polluted by an association with trailers and trailer trash.

You might be a redneck if:

- Yer mom calls ya over t’help, cause she has a flat tire . . . on her house.
- You own a home that is mobile and 5 cars that aren’t.
- You replace a flat tire on your truck with a tire from your house.
- Your richest relative invites you over to his new home to help him remove the wheels and skirt.

The theme emphasized in these particular jokes is the dichotomy between home and mobility. Because trailer trash live in “mobile” homes, they lack roots in community, and hence are placeless. The mobile home replaces having deep roots in a community with being a vagabond or tramp. In the jokes above, we also see the juxtaposition of mobile homes and broken down vehicles. The cultural image of the redneck lawn littered with broken down vehicles is a powerful one. Trash marks the external boundaries of culture (Keskpaik, 2001) and the association between redneck identity and trash often occurs through this focus on the state and character of redneck vehicles. We see the connection between redneck identity and trash more explicitly in the jokes below through the direct focus on the pitiful state of redneck vehicles.
You might be a redneck if:

There are four or more cars up on blocks in the front yard.

Fewer than half of your cars run.

You have a rag for a gas cap (on a car that does not run).

You have a color coordinating rope that ties down your car hood.

This literal and figurative association makes special sense considering the impact automobiles have had on American culture over the course of the 20th century. Automobiles are symbols of American freedom and individuality, and the type and state of one’s vehicle can be viewed as a status symbol. For the redneck, the automobile serves as a prime example of their polluted, lowly status.

You might be a redneck if:

The blue book value of your truck goes up and down depending on how much gas it has in it.

The taillight covers of your car are made of red tape.

Your vehicle has a two-tone paint job—primer red and primer gray.

You have a Hefty bag on the passenger side window of your car.

The image of the redneck trailer home on the outskirts of town and physically resembling a junk yard uses two important American cultural symbols, the automobile and the home, as a means of polluting redneck identity. This utilizes the often porous boundary between literal and figurative trash, and in the process establishes a polluted identity that conflates poverty with lifestyle choice, laziness, and immorality. This conflation marks redneck identity as a low status.

Yet, some jokes deal specifically with status by focusing on the boundary between high culture and low culture, and connecting redneck identity with low culture. The low status of redneck identity is explained in part by cultural primitiveness. The redneck’s lack of cultural refinement speaks directly to their low social status as they are constructed as having base interests and base cultural knowledge. These particular jokes highlight how rednecks lack economic, social, and cultural capital. Redneck cultural knowledge is understood as limited, base, and inadequate. The jokes below are structured with an explicit schism between high culture and low culture.

You might be a redneck if:

You consider pork and beans to be a gourmet food.

You think a turtleneck is a key ingredient for soup.

You think the French Riviera is a foreign car.

You think that Dom Perignon is a mafia leader.

You consider a six-pack and a bug-zapper high-quality entertainment.

In these jokes, the juxtaposition of incongruent cultural objects or knowledge is used to elicit humor. Cultural objects such as turtlenecks or Dom Perignon are falsely associated with food and people. These jokes reinforce the claim that status is associated with bodily dimensions (Elis, 1994; Hartigan, 2005) because redneck cultural knowledge is constructed as base knowledge, related to food, the human body, and generally vulgar entertainment. This is not surprising considering that tabooed behavior frequently clusters around base activities that are “most in need of ‘culturizing’ and humanizing” (Zuesse, 1974, p. 493).

Redneck poverty is also explained by lack of education, which is often associated with the lack of innate intelligence. Redneck breeding patterns are seen as having created an identity that lacks a “genetic deep end.” “Bad breeding” has been a consistent theme explaining rural White poverty since the eugenics era at the turn of the 20th century (Hartigan, 2005; Wray, 2006). Through a focus on genetic deficiency and bad breeding, redneck identity moves away from an individual lifestyle choice and instead becomes a reflection of broader systemic degeneracy based in family structure, family behavior, and biology. The jokes below touch upon themes of degenerate family structure and irresponsible family behavior.

You might be a redneck if:

The most commonly heard phrase at your family reunion is “What the hell are you looking at, Shithead?”

You were shooting pool when any of your kids were born.

Your Junior/Senior Prom had a Daycare.

You’ve ever climbed a water tower with a bucket of paint to defend your sister’s honor.

You think that the French Riviera is a foreign car.

You think that Dom Perignon is a mafia leader.

You consider a six-pack and a bug-zapper high-quality entertainment.

The lack of innate intelligence and educational attainment is constructed as a cause and consequence of redneck degeneracy. Genetic inbreeding and limited education become confounding factors that explain both why redneck identity exists and how it is fundamentally different from a more normative, mainstream whiteness. For example,

You might be a redneck if:

Your dad walks you to school because you’re in the same grade.

You think a subdivision is part of a math problem.
Idiocy—rooted in an innate deficiency and a lack of educational attainment—is the common theme in this humor. This lack of intelligence and common sense produces and then is reinforced by poor parenting skills on the part of both redneck mother and father. As explored in the previous section, the redneck woman is constructed as a danger to the traditional family because she is overly masculine, uses alcohol and tobacco, is potentially violent and/or criminal, and lacks acceptable parenting skills. We see such themes recurring in jokes more specifically targeting redneck parenting skills.

You might be a redneck if:

Your kids take a siphon hose to “Show and Tell.”

Your kids are going hungry tonight because you just had to have those Yosemite Sam mudflaps.

Your father encourages you to quit school because Larry has an opening on the lube rack.

Redneck degeneracy is understood as the natural outcome of limited parenting skills, intelligence, and education, coupled with cultural primitiveness and baseness. This in turn justifies the low status and poverty associated with redneck identity. The social construction of rural Whites as degenerate is not a new phenomenon. Many of the pollution codes in this humor that are used to construct the image of the degenerate redneck are similar to the pollution codes used to construct the image of the dangerous rural White during the eugenics era. This stigmatized identity was infused into mainstream White understanding of the rural White Other.

Discussion

I have offered a semiotics-inspired narrative analysis of the social construction of rednecks in Foxworthy and Foxworthy-inspired humor. I conducted this narrative analysis with a focus on three interrelated research questions. First, how is this concept redneck defined according to this humor? Second, in the process of defining redneck identity, how are the boundaries between redneck/non-redneck being negotiated? Last, does the rhetorical boundary redneck help us understand the production and maintenance of normative, mainstream whiteness? This humor uses pollution codes to construct redneck identity as degenerate and primitive. Pollution codes such as cleanliness/dirtiness, civilized/uncivilized, ordered/unordered, and moral/immoral establish the boundaries necessary to articulate how rednecks exist on the “outside,” in conflict with mainstream, White American middle-class identity. The boundary between the redneck and the non-redneck is at times a complex, porous fault-line that defines a normative whiteness by using pollution codes to stigmatize White outsiders through the use of humor. By constructing this boundary between the redneck/non-redneck and marking redneck identity as polluted this more normative, mainstream whiteness is insulated and protected from intra-racial threats. For example, the very existence of poor rural Whites threatens any lingering attitudes of White supremacy, and therefore, these poor rural Whites must be accounted for and their social condition justified. Likewise, a persistent underclass of poor rural Whites challenge cherished notions of American individualism and meritocracy, and therefore, the existence of a persistent underclass must be explained away with behavioral or biological factors. Finally, enduring institutional racism also threatens American individualism and meritocracy, and therefore, redneck identity serves as a necessary scapegoat for many Whites who try to reconcile a “color-blind” society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) with the continuing existence of racism in the United States.

In the end, the most striking and profound means of polluting redneck identity in this humor comes by way of the code culture/nature.

The line demarcating culture/nature, and the association of poor rural Whites with nature, is an old association. For example, a series of studies in the early 20th century by the U.S. Eugenics Records Office (ERO) sought to demonstrate scientifically that a large number of rural Whites were genetically defective (Wray & Newitz, 1997). This eugenics movement was perhaps the most influential outgrowth of Social Darwinism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and greatly influenced social policy and popular attitudes (McReynolds, 1997; Rafter, 1992). Family names such as “The Jukes” and “The Kallikaks” entered popular culture to illustrate the poor, dirty, alcoholic, and criminally and sexually perverse nature of many rural people (Wray & Newitz, 1997; Rafter, 1992). Eugenics ideology at the turn of the 20th century interpreted the White underclass as either a direct revolt against, or simply the lack of, civilization (Hartigan, 2005; Wray, 2006). While focusing on the presumed genetic deficiencies of rural society they supported “aggressive interventions to stop further declines in the quantity and quality of rural people” (McReynolds, 1997, p. 300). In eugenics ideology, the concept of biological “fitness” was associated with class and status distinctions, so that poor gene pool quality created a discernable qualitative difference between urban and rural people (McReynolds, 1997, pp. 306-307). The eugenics movement was modernist and urban, and the White underclass represented a racial poison threatening both the purity of the White race as well as modernity itself (Hartigan, 2005). Stereotypes of rural poor Whites as incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid remain to this day (Wray & Newitz, 1997, p. 2). While during the eugenics era the degeneracy of poor
rural Whites threatened the legitimacy of White supremacy and the perceived future of the White race, today poor rural Whites continue to serve as instruments in the construction of a mainstream, middle-class whiteness. Today, redneck humor is infused with pollution codes that create social distance between the redneck/non-redneck rooted in these bodily and behavioral distinctions. These pollution codes are the practical work of boundary production, and although the outcome of their use is less “dangerous” to poor rural Whites than during the eugenics era, they still signify a process of intra-racial othering within White identity formation. Over the course of the 20th century, the response to poor rural Whites who threatened modernity and its normative, White middle-class identity went from a project of forced sterilization to a humor industry.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that Foxworthy’s redneck humor helps police the boundaries of mainstream American whiteness by targeting and polluting the redneck other. However, like much complex social phenomena, humor can serve multiple, sometimes contradictory functions simultaneously (Meyer, 2000). Although beyond the scope of this article, an interesting question to consider is what other functions might this humor serve? Can it be viewed as transformative or even liberational for rural White Americans? Can it provide ample social room to introduce “play” into the social imaginary, allowing serious social issues to be addressed in non-threatening ways? The fact that this humor is often predicated not on content, but explicitly on excess, might actually be the vehicle by which it can be viewed as liberating to rural Americans, as they can be assured that their “moderation” saves them from potential stigmatization. Perhaps this humor even serves to alleviate the status anxiety of upwardly mobile rural Americans? Although these questions are outside of the purview of this particular analysis, they all provide interesting potential avenues for future research into redneck humor.

In conclusion, my analysis adds to the literature exploring the stratified terrain of whiteness via a novel analysis of pollution codes imbedded in Foxworthy redneck humor. Lahiji and Friedman (1997) argue that modernity emerges from the belief that man is fundamentally a clean body. Accordingly, the pre-modern man is an unclean body. I argue the rhetorical boundary demarcating the redneck from the non-redneck is, in the end, the line between a modern, middle-class whiteness and a pre-modern White rusticity. We see references to the poor breeding habits of individuals who live in rural areas. Sexual and gendered deviance lays the groundwork for dysfunctional families that in turn reinforce immoral and trashy behavior. In this way, a normative, mainstream whiteness is co-constructed alongside redneck degeneracy by targeting the redneck as a White Other. This White outsider fails to live up to the socio-cultural expectations of modern American whiteness, thus distinguishing and protecting modern American whiteness from intra-racial threats to its normative identity. The boundaries between rednecks and non-rednecks call into question the popular assumption that White identity is a homogeneous identity, constructed solely in opposition to racial minorities (McIntosh, 1989; Morrison, 1992; Winders, 2003). Instead, whiteness is also constructed in opposition to “redness” (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002), a status identity coupled with those negative characteristics associated with pre-modern rusticity.

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