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Dumping on White Trash

Etiquette, Abjection, and Radical Inclusion

> The trailer park has become . . . the only acceptable place to dump one's racist inclinations.
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> —Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto*

One February weekend in 2002, critical whiteness scholar and English professor Mike Hill infiltrated the fifth American Renaissance conference. The theme for that year's meeting was "In Defense of Western Man," and the three hundred conference attendees—all apparently white men—were gathered in the name of "white genetic solidarity."[1] In past years, the conference had focused on non-European immigrants and citizens of color in the United States. In 2002, its emphasis shifted to "the vicissitudes of white identity as it seemed to disappear before our eyes," with the goal of bringing about "the racial awakening of an Anglocentric nation in crisis."[2] Hill, a white man who edited *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* in 1997, attended the meeting with permission; he was given an invitation when he truthfully lied that he wrote on whiteness.[3] Unbeknownst to the American Renaissance organizers and attendees, Hill was at the conference as a spy on behalf of *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. His task was to write "a sort of antiracist exposé" for the journal, which he did for their Spring 2002 issue.[4] The American Renaissance Web site labels its approach to race as one of "race realism," and in noninflammatory ways explains that "race is an important aspect of individual and group identity. . . . Race and racial conflict are at the heart of the most serious challenges the Western World faces in the 21st century. The problems of race cannot be solved without adequate understanding . . . of all aspects of race, whether historical,

cultural, or biological."[5] But as Hill reports, the seemingly respectable title "American Renaissance" is in fact "the name of the most vicious collection of . . . racists who assemble every two years to discuss among themselves how blacks and other racial minorities are destroying Western civilization."[6] In the name of racial justice and in solidarity with black and other people of color, Hill felt that the American Renaissance's true mission should be exposed. For that reason, Hill was willing "to hold [his] nose and mix it up with people looking more or less like [him]," spending "three agonizingly isolated days among his own kind, mulling over a fantasy of whiteness now storied to be gone."[7]

The image of an academic playing the role of a spy is striking, and I can't help but wonder about the anxiety Hill must have experienced in situations when he was in danger of being found out. But what I find most significant about Hill's story is his description of moments of connection with American Renaissance members that made him profoundly uncomfortable. Hill writes of his irritation that the conference attendees kept bewailing what they called the death of the white race, and then he admits that what was even more irritating was that the weekend "turned out to produce certain moments of intimacy that I would have liked to let go unnoticed."[8] As the attendees generated excitement over the topic of whiteness, Hill "could not help making some unseemly comparisons closer to home" between their excitement and the exuberant academic "rush to whiteness" that Hill's edited volume helped create.[9] Another significant moment of closeness that Hill wished he hadn't experienced revolved around class. Many of the conference attendees were "remarkably well attuned to the plight of white working-class men," and Hill found himself identifying with the American Renaissance's "white guy next door" who is concerned about declining wages, corporate manipulations of the workforce, and the domestic crisis of the state more broadly.[10] Disturbed by repeated moments of sympathizing and identifying with American Renaissance (AR) attendees, Hill laments "while covering the AR story, I noticed how the same kinds of hopes and fears garnering whiteness its share (and then some) of academic attention were meshing too easily with the tortured hearts and twisted minds I mixed with at the AR conference."[11] Hill makes clear that his commitment to racial justice was never in question at the conference, but this is precisely why his experience was so unsettling. As he asks, "Who would really want to admit to the confusing prospect that opposing evaluations on the white majority's so-called death could mimic one another on class" and other issues?"[12]

"Tortured" and "twisted," American Renaissance members also are Hill's "own kind" whose views on class mirror his own. How could Hill, a white person committed to racial justice, find himself identifying with white supremacists? It seems that, by definition, this situation could not happen, and yet it did—hence Hill's painful cognitive dissonance and existential confusion. I bet that Hill's experience would not be unique, however. Many middle-class white people, me included, probably would have felt just as unsettled and disturbed as he did. My point in recounting this story is not to single out Hill, but to show how his experience reveals the commonplace assumption that there should be no points of contact, similarities, or shared interests between white supremacists and white allies. If there are shared interests between them, so the assumption goes, then this fact calls into question a white person's commitment to racial justice. This assumption is problematic because its denial of connections between white allies and white supremacists posits white supremacists as irremediably other, and as I will argue, this othering supports the very thing—white racism—that white allies are trying to combat.

Hill's story also helps expose problematic assumptions about who white racists are. They often are thought to be members of an uneducated white lower class: their alleged stupidity is why they continue to think that white people are superior to nonwhite people. This assumption operates in the opposite direction as well: poor white people—so-called white trash, rednecks, and hillbillies—often are automatically assumed to be white racists, and if they aren't (yet) members of a white supremacist organization, then they are thought to be the best recruiting pool from which white supremacists can draw. As Jim Goad argues, "rednecks are fingered as the primary source of [racial] prejudice," so much so that "white supremacist" (or "overt white racist") and "white lower class" often are treated as synonyms.[13] This claim is confirmed by studies in cultural anthropology that demonstrate how "a comfortable conviction holds sway among middle-class whites that racism is concentrated in the lower classes—that it is certainly present in working-class whites, but bubbles up most vigorously from the hearts of poor whites, as allegorized in the cultural figure of 'white trash.' "[14]

In contrast to this stereotype of white racists, the men at the American Renaissance conference were not lower-class, poor, or white trash. They were members of a relatively upscale white middle class. This meant that they were Hill's own kind not just because they were white and male, but also because they were professionally dressed, well

educated, and well spoken. "We white racialists must put away our boots and put on our suits," as American Renaissance speaker Nick Griffin claimed, reflecting an unspoken dress code clearly in force at the conference.[15] With their coats, ties, and glasses of chardonnay, the American Renaissance conference was not a stereotypical gathering of big-booted white supremacists shouting near a burning cross in a muddy field. "Gathered in a gentlemanly way," many of the conference attendees possessed postgraduate degrees from leading universities such as Yale, Cambridge, University of North Carolina, Cal State Northridge, and University of London.[16] Hill's identification with them is unseemly, as he confesses, which is to say indecent, coarse, in poor taste—all the things that an educated middle-class person is not supposed to be and all things that are identified with white racism in a post–Jim Crow world. If the American Renaissance men can be simultaneously unseemly (because racist) and middle-class, then other middle-class white people, such as Hill, cannot be confident that their middle-class status prevents them from being racist.

In this chapter, I examine corrosive divides between classes of white people on which white racism depends, exploring how white trash are othered by good white liberals particularly through race-class etiquette and the resulting abjection of poor whites. If white people are going to figure out how to live their whiteness in ways that challenge racial injustice, then white middle-class othering of white lower classes must be confronted because it serves the interests of white domination. As I will argue, those interests can best be countered by a type of radical inclusion that involves white people of all classes—the "bad" white people as well as the "good" ones—in racial justice movements.

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Etiquette concerns conventional requirements or expectations for social behavior. The word originated in eighteenth-century France, meaning "ticket" or "label." Small cards—*les étiquettes*—were printed with instructions for how a person was to behave in court or how a soldier was to behave in his lodgings.[17] *Les étiquettes* ensured that a visitor to the king wouldn't offend him and that a soldier obtaining lodging wouldn't harm the property or disturb its owners or other lodgers. Today, of course, we use the word more broadly to refer to a variety of social situations and groups of people. But in all cases, etiquette means the regulation of relationships between individuals by prescribing and proscribing particular forms of their conduct with one another.

Bertram Wilbur Doyle's classic study of the etiquette of race relations in the U.S. South is useful not only for examining the role that etiquette played between white and black people in antebellum and Jim Crow America, but also for analyzing some of the general features of etiquette.[18] Etiquette is concerned primarily with personal relations, but its meaning and impact stretch far beyond the personal. At its heart, etiquette is a form of social control that defines and maintains social distances between people.[19] If a black person routinely steps off the sidewalk to let a white person pass, this act is more than merely a private matter between the two people. It embodies, repeats, and supports social expectations of black deference and subordination to white people. Even in a case involving two social equals, etiquette tends to regulate their behavior, including the degree of social distance that is supposed to exist between them. Thus, two academics at a conference might shake hands or kiss cheeks when greeting each other, depending on what country they are in (or what kind of philosophy they study). If one person refuses to do so, the breach of etiquette requires an explanation, such as having a bad cold and not wanting to spread germs, which has spawned new forms of etiquette such as the elbow bump. Absent an explanation, the breach of etiquette produces a rupture in social order—in this case, the person refusing the greeting asserts herself as superior to someone who was presumed to be an equal. This rupture in the social fabric leaves the offended party and those who witnessed the snub unsure of how to behave toward the person who violated a social code.

The emphasis on *social* distance here is important. Etiquette sometimes regulated physical distances between people, as the sidewalk example above illustrates. But the physical distances prescribed by etiquette were and are always in the service of the more crucial matter of social distance. Etiquette is what makes possible physical proximity and intimacy between social superiors and inferiors without collapsing their social status.[20] For example, racial etiquette allowed white masters and black slaves to work together side by side on the plantation and black slaves to tend to the most intimate matters of their white master's hygiene, all without any threat to the white person's status as superior. As long as both white master and black slave observed the appropriate rules of address and gestural codes of behavior—etiquette is a code that binds both the dominant and subordinate, after all—then significant social distances could be maintained in the midst of intimate physical proximities.[21] What the example of racial etiquette from antebellum America shows is that "far more than physical separation, white southerners wanted social distance."[22]

For Doyle, etiquette is a form of government, and we can under-
stand this term in a Foucauldian sense.[23] Michel Foucault understood
government not as a top-down form of state power, but as a horizontal
form of social control embodied in institutions such as schools, medical
facilities, and prisons. Governmentality combines strategies and tech-
nologies for influencing others with those of caring for or regulating the
self.[24] In a similar fashion, Doyle argues that the government provided
by etiquette is much more basic and extensive than that of legislation
or political bodies. Etiquette operates throughout virtually all of our
social relationships, and its "jurisdiction" often precedes and operates
alongside official legislation and then continues after laws and other
formal regulations have been abolished.[25] (This was the case after the
Civil War, when slavery-era etiquette between white people and newly
freed slaves continued even though slavery legally had been abolished.)
Etiquette governs informally, and this is precisely why its form of social
control is effective.

Another way of approaching etiquette's informality—and thus also
its effectiveness—is to understand etiquette as a form of habit. Habit is a
predisposition for transacting with the world in a particular way. Habits
operate on subconscious and sometimes even unconscious levels: they
are what we do "without thinking." This doesn't mean, however, that
habits necessarily are trivial or minor, as when, for example, a person
absentmindedly twirls a lock of her hair while reading. Just the opposite:
some of the most complex skills that human beings acquire—such as
playing the violin or driving a manual transmission automobile—are only
fully acquired when they have become habit. But even these examples
do not make the point about habit's ontological significance strongly
enough, for habit is constitutive of the self. The gendered, raced, classed,
and other patterns of transacting with the world that a person develops
help constitute who that person is.

Etiquette does not always take the form of habit. This is because
it sometimes is an act that a person consciously decides to engage in.
But when etiquette is at its most effective, it operates subconsciously or
unconsciously. Quoting William Graham Sumner and using Sumner's
"social ritual" as a synonym for "etiquette," Doyle explains that "ritual,
as Sumner points out, 'is not something to be thought or felt. It is
something to be done.' In fact, 'ritual is strongest when it is perfunctory
and excites no thought.'"[26] As in the case of all habits, etiquette can
become so engrained in the self that it can seem instinctual, as if it were
not learned behavior. This explains how black slaves sometimes appeared
"naturally" or "natively" deferential toward white people.[27] When it takes

the form of habit, etiquette allows people to engage each other with the least expenditure of energy required by conscious thought. In this way, it facilitates smooth and easy transactions with one's environment.

As it does so, however, the social order preserved by etiquette also exerts its most effective—and thus potentially most harmful—control.[28] While some contemporary white philosophers have argued that etiquette must be part of attempts to defeat racism and thus that etiquette has a transformative role to play in an oppressive society, the forms of etiquette they describe tend to be mere pleasantries between people that eliminate social tension but for that reason don't bring about any substantial change.[29] (I'm reminded of Martin Luther King's criticism of "the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.")[30] The primary function of etiquette remains the conservative one of protecting an existing social order by keeping people in different social groups in their "proper" place.[31] In the case of Jim Crow America, racial etiquette helped support white supremacy by securing racial hierarchy in situations of propinquity between white and black people; by regulating affect and emotional expression on the part of white and black people; and by reducing feelings of guilt on the part of white people about their domination of nonwhite people.[32]

During Jim Crow, racial etiquette was (and perhaps still is) a key method for training each new generation of white people into whiteness. With regard to white children, racial etiquette was "the closest thing to a 'core curriculum' that white southerners had," the main ticket to whiteness that white children needed to possess.[33] Learning habits of behavior with nonwhite children and adults that would last them a lifetime, white children were less likely to question legal, institutional, and other forms of discrimination against black and other nonwhite people. Racial etiquette's governance of interpersonal relationships thus had structural implications and effects. The central role that racial etiquette played in the education of white children also meant that racial etiquette had a special connection with white mothers, who were the primary source of their children's ticket to whiteness. Because of their key role in childrearing, white mothers were the main adults who taught white children how to use bodily gestures and forms of address to maintain social distance between themselves and nonwhite people. Teaching racial etiquette to white children thus amounted to "one of white women's chief forms of collusion in the maintenance of white supremacy."[34]

Racial etiquette doesn't just operate interracially, however. It also governs intraracial behavior across class lines. This probably is true for

most racial groups, but here I focus on intraracial white etiquette because it is one of the primary ways that white people experience race and shore up white racism.[35] As cultural anthropologist John Hartigan claims, "It is forms of etiquette—and importantly, their transgression—that maintain and reproduce the unmarked status of white identity."[36] White social etiquette crystallizes around the figure of white trash. White trash are the poor white people who fail to live up to middle-class expectations of white behavior, and their "failure" is at least threefold. First, white trash allegedly are uneducated and stupid. Epithets such as idiot, imbecile, and moron regularly are used to describe white trash, reflecting the influence of the eugenics movement on middle-class white people's views of race and class.[37] Second, the bodies of the white trash are problematic. They yell and shout, talking too loudly and coarsely. They are unkempt and unclean, often barefoot and always dirty. And they are sluggish and lazy, which is why they are poor (and perhaps also why they are unclean). Across the board, their "actions, smells, and sounds . . . disrupt the social decorums that support the hegemonic, unmarked status of whiteness as a normative identity in [the United States]."[38] Finally—and intimately related to the first two "failures"—white trash share too many similarities of speech, behavior, diet, and lifestyle with black people.[39] White trash are uncomfortably close to those whom they are supposed to be radically different from. Whether willfully or ignorantly, white trash fail to speak, eat, dress, and otherwise behave as proper (middle-class) white people are supposed to do, and their breach of white social etiquette threatens the boundary between white and nonwhite (especially black) people.

This consideration of white etiquette brings out the bodily dimensions of class distinctions. While race often is examined in terms of bodily habits and behavior, class typically is not. Some critical philosophers of race even have claimed that "class is not inscribed on the body the way that race is."[40] But when etiquette has become sedimented into habit and operates without a person's thinking about its demands, then class has become part of the bodily self that one is. As Pierre Bourdieu's work in particular shows, "the body is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes. Bodies are the physical sites where the relations of class, gender, race, sexuality and age come together and are em-bodied and practiced."[41] In that case, class is not "just about the way you talk or dress, or furnish your home, it is not just about the job you do or how much money you make doing it; nor is it merely about whether or not you went to university, nor which university you went to. Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being."[42] Incorporated into the self via its habits, white

etiquette is constitutive of the self, in a complex dynamic relationship with raced, gendered, and other salient habits.

White social etiquette circulates within several race-class slurs for the white lower class, including "hillbilly," "redneck," and "cracker," but "white trash" carries a special significance. Unlike these other terms, which sometimes have been used to establish an antibourgeois identity, "white trash" generally has not been rehabilitated or reclaimed by the white lower class.[43] (Think here of the rehabilitation of "redneck" performed by Jeff Foxworthy's stand-up comedy and books, which focus on the one-liner "You might be a redneck if . . ."[44]) In contrast, white trash "carries an irreducible debasing connotation," and the few "attempts to regard 'white trash' positively, to redeem it as a cultural identity, reveal an active remainder of social contempt and loathing that cannot be fully expelled."[45] The word *trash* helps explain why the term has remained irredeemable. "More than all these other labels, [white trash] articulates exactly what is at stake in intraracial efforts to maintain white racial identity—it encapsulates the self-conscious anxiety among whites over threats of pollution that threaten the basis for belonging within whiteness."[46] White trash is whiteness's dirty garbage, its refuse, its waste product. It is that which threatens whiteness with pollution and contamination from within.

Of course, whiteness also experiences itself as threatened from without—witness so-called yellow peril, black peril, and all other sorts of "menacing" forces that other nonwhite races represent. Historically, miscegenation and immigration—the mixing of white and nonwhite "blood"—probably have served as the two greatest "threats" to the purity of whiteness. But especially with the rise of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century, the white middle class became increasingly concerned about the threat to whiteness posed by (some) white people themselves. These were and are the people who count as white but do not uphold "proper" standards of whiteness. The danger posed by white trash is particularly alarming because "the source of the threat is depicted as arising from the allegedly purest of Anglo-Saxon strains, rather than through transgression of the color line."[47] Policing the color line between whites and nonwhites thus wouldn't be sufficient to uphold white domination of nonwhite people, even when carried out by stronger means than racial etiquette, such as lynching. White social etiquette also was needed to internally discipline whiteness. White bodies and behavior had to be governed so that white superiority wouldn't destroy itself, and this meant "instilling [classed and raced] habits that are policed by concepts of disgust and embellished through ideas about pollution and dirt."[48]

Here we can see how white trash operate as the abject. As Julia Kristeva argues, the abject is crucial to societies and cultures that are based on rigid subject/object distinctions, but the abject itself is not an object completely other to the subject. The abject instead is what troubles sharp, clear boundaries between subject and object, self and other. The abject does have one, but "only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*."[49] The abject's opposition to the subject functions in a different way than that of the object. Put another way, the differences between abjection and objectification demonstrate how othering can take place in related, but different ways. Like the object, the abject is jettisoned from the subject, but "[the abject] lies there, quite close," threatening the dissolution of the bounded subject through its proximity.[50] In that sense, the abject is a different kind of threat to the subject than the definable object is. Even though the excluded object menaces the subject in its otherness, the sharp distinctions posited between subject and object provide a kind of safety and security for the subject. A gulf appears to exist between the subject and object that reassures the subject of its identity. Not so with the abject. The abject is uncanny, familiar in its strangeness. While the abject also safeguards the subject from its dissolution, the protection it offers is murkier, slipperier, and less firm than that which the object provides.

The division between white trash and proper white people also is slippery, revealing how white trash operate as whiteness's abject. White trash are opposed to the proper, white subject, but their opposition is troublesome because it isn't clear, sharp, or absolute. Like people of color and black people in particular, white trash are excluded from whiteness proper. But the othering of people of color and of white trash tends to happen in different ways. White trash lie uncomfortably closer to proper white people, threatening the dissolution of hegemonic forms of whiteness from within. Because of their whiteness, white trash threaten the coherence and identity of the proper, white subject in a related, but different way than people of color generally do. The presumed gulf between proper white people and people of color cannot be confidently assumed between proper white people and white trash. White trash are uncannily familiar to proper white people because of their shared race, and this murky point of contact is why white trash have to be forcefully expelled from whiteness. White trash thus become a "means of boundary maintenance through white identity operates, containing or expelling certain whites from the social and political body of whiteness."[51]

The need to expel white trash demonstrates how white trash are considered to be repulsive, even as they, like the corpse, simultane-

ously can be considered horrifyingly fascinating. As Jim Goad argues, middle-class white people tend to have a "steaming liberal revulsion for white trash."[52] But this revulsion reveals more about middle-class white people than it does about any so-called objective features of white trash. Since white trash are not absolutely other to proper white people, the proper white person who attempts to jettison white trash from whiteness can never do so completely. As the proper white person expels white trash, she also expels herself. As Kristeva explains about abjection more generally, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish '*myself*.' . . . 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death."[53] For Goad, images of disease, as well as death, implicitly help illuminate white middle-class revulsion for white trash: "To the white elite white trash must seem like a disease in remission inside *all* whites, one that might flare up again given the right circumstances. When white blue bloods are repulsed by white trash, they are uncomfortably reminded both of what they used to be and what they may yet become."[54] White trash is not me—the proper white subject—and yet it is not safely not-me either. Like death and disease, white trash is what threatens proper whiteness with nonexistence. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust: what I used to be and what I might yet become is the dirty white trash that I am and the dirty white trash to which I shall return.[55]

The biblical reference to dust, or dirt, is particularly fitting for abjection since the abject often manifests itself as the unclean. Filth, waste, and excrement are common instances of the abject: "the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck."[56] As Kristeva documents, the Judeo-Christian Bible is permeated with strategies for managing the unclean and impure: certain foods, dead bodies (both human and nonhuman), diseases such as leprosy, and even speech.[57] But it is not the case that there is something "naturally" unclean or menacing to human health that then is repelled because of its "natural" threat. It may be that dead bodies can spread disease, for example, but this is not why they are considered abject. It is the ability of dead bodies, and other abject beings, to erase borders and boundaries that makes them repulsive. In Kristeva's words, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."[58]

Above all—more than corpses, rotting food, or disease—what greatly disturbs identity, system, and order is the maternal body.[59] This is why the incest taboo is central to societies who found the subject on sharp subject/object dichotomies. "Abjection preserves what existed in

the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."[60] The other body from which I separated in order to be is the maternal body, which is a space (*chora*) where "I" did not yet exist as a distinct subject but was ambiguously merged with a being who was both me and not-me. The maternal body—and women more generally, along with menstrual blood and pregnant bodies—is what the (male) subject used to be a part of and what he may yet again become enmeshed with if he tries to return to it. Thus, incest, especially between mother and son, is prohibited. Sexual relations between mother and son are repulsive and improper not because of a genetic health risk to any offspring they might produce, as we might try to explain the scientific reasons for prohibitions against incest. Rather, they are repulsive and improper because human existence inside the womb is a time of nonsubjectivity that should never be returned to, on pain of dissolution of human subjectivity as we know it.

We don't have to follow psychoanalysis all the way to the oedipal complex to appreciate the way that the incest taboo functions in the abjection of white trash. Perhaps more than anything, white trash are considered repulsive and are objects of ridicule because they allegedly have sex with all sorts of improper beings. Pointing out how rednecks and their hillbilly and white trash kin are seen as intrinsically rapist, murderous, and otherwise violent, Goad sarcastically jokes, "The hillbilly . . . serves all the function of a modern American scapegoat. And in the hillbilly, we receive an extra added bonus—a scapegoat who also *fucks* goats."[61] Even more often than nonhuman animals, however, the improper beings that white trash allegedly have sex with are their own nuclear family members. The alleged stupidity of white trash is due to the fact that they breed with each other; white trash is "inbred, degenerated, momma-impregnating vermin and scum." As two of Jeff Foxworthy's jokes go, "You know you're a redneck if your state's got a new law that says when a couple get divorced, they are still legally brother and sister," and "You might be a redneck if your family tree doesn't fork."[62] Goad claims that "the topic of inbreeding occurs with such frequency among white-trash stereotypes that its symbolic function begs analysis,"[63] and while I agree with him about the frequency of the stereotype, I think it benefits from, rather than begs the (psycho)analysis of abjection.[64] It's not merely that proper white people "*need* to see hillbillies as stupid" in order to distinguish themselves as smart, as Goad rightly claims.[65] It's also that the alleged incest on the part of white trash threatens fundamental structures of binary divisions out of which white subjectivity

is formed. Inbred white trash don't just assure proper white people of their intelligence. They also threaten the identity of proper white people because they show proper white people that whiteness is no guarantee of subjectivity clearly distinguished from stupidity.

White trash also reveal that whiteness is no guarantee of subjectivity clearly separated from people of color, and black people in particular. As mentioned earlier, white trash do not speak, eat, dress, and otherwise behave as proper white people are supposed to do, and their breach of white social etiquette threatens the boundary between white and nonwhite (especially black) people. The geographical origins of white trash, and other related figures such as the redneck and the hillbilly, help explain the powerful ability of white trash to efface boundaries between white and black. First circulating in popular discourse in the North of the United States in the 1850s and 1860s, the term *white trash* was used to bolster antislavery sentiment.[66] "White trash" captured the effects of slavery on poor whites living in the South. Because black slaves were used as laborers on Southern plantations and farms, the poor white Southerner was denied the opportunity to develop the ability and willingness to work. The result, as one nineteenth-century Northern scholar wrote, was a class of white people who were "degraded, half-fed, half-clothed, without mental or moral instruction, and destitute of self-respect and of any just appreciation of character."[67] An outgrowth of the enslavement of black Americans, white trash was "a uniquely southern phenomenon."[68]

The distinction between white trash and hard-working, "respectable" poor whites was and is difficult to maintain. This is because of "the lack of fixed, distinguishing criteria" between the two groups and "the intense concerns generated by the need to keep whiteness and blackness distinct."[69] No matter how hard one works, a poor white person is at risk of being viewed as lazy, ignorant, and morally deficient. Unlike the black person who likely experiences racial discrimination in education and the labor market, a poor white person has no way to account for her poverty and related moral "failures." As one middle-class white person dismissively remarked to cultural anthropologist Kirby Moss, "For White people there is really no excuse [for poverty] because they are not treated differently because of their race."[70] Whether mental, moral, or financial, a poor white person's impoverished situation must be the result of her own failure: her refusal to work, her lack of intelligence, and her failure to adopt a proper work ethic. As Moss explains, to many middle-class white people in his study, "poverty was [merely] a ploy, an individual's excuse to not contribute to the progress of society."[71]

Occasionally, the liminal position of white trash has been used to support, rather than condemn a white person for his or her perceived proximity to blackness. Writing about then-president Bill Clinton's 1998 impeachment due to the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, Toni Morrison infamously claimed that Clinton was being attacked because of his blackness. As Morrison argued, "White skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas."[72] I'll set aside the question of whether Clinton is blacker than Barack Obama, who was elected to the U.S. presidency in Morrison's lifetime. What's important here is that Morrison is not trying to slander Clinton by emphasizing his trashiness. Reversing the usual valence given to blackness, Morrison's comment is sympathetic to the president. Even more germane is that it's not the case that Morrison sees Clinton's blackness as resulting from his particular views on race or white racism. As Morrison explained in the wake of Obama's 2008 election, her 1998 claim "was deploring the way in which President Clinton was being treated . . . I said he was being treated like a black on the street, already guilty, already a perp. I have no idea what his real instincts are, in terms of race."[73] What Morrison's remark underscores is the blurring of boundaries between black and white that white trash represents. Clinton's perceived blackness comes from being white trash: white-skinned and poor, with crude culinary tastes, and raised in a defective family in the South.

The seemingly small detail concerning Clinton's Southern roots is significant. Just as white trash and poor whites often are conflated, the distinction between white trash and Southern whites also tends to be blurry and difficult to maintain. The geographic origins of "white trash" continue to impact the connotations of the term: simply to be a white person from the South of the United States is to risk being considered white trash. As the old joke goes, "You can tell a Southern virgin . . . when you see a girl who's running faster than her father and brothers."[74] The joke doesn't have to specify that the Southern virgin is a white woman; the trope of inbred white trash conveys that message by itself. The joke also says nothing about the Southern virgin's economic status. Regardless of whether one is poor, to be a white person from the South is to be in an at least somewhat abject relationship to proper whiteness.

This too is the product of a distinctively Northern perspective on the legacy of black slavery. White Southerners generally were seen as

being too close to black people. Whether poor or not, white Southerners were in closer physical proximity to black slaves than white Northerners were, and they shared (too) many regional characteristics with them: similar accents and styles of speech, similar tastes in food, and similar sensibilities and lifestyles.[75] We can see this perspective at work in 1940s and 1950s Detroit, where the label "hillbilly" was applied by Northern whites in an unrehabilitated way to white people who transgressed white middle-class mores. "Hillbillies" began arriving in Detroit from the South in large numbers in the 1920s, and they soon were blamed for the decline in living conditions for working-class whites in the city.[76] In Detroit, the term *hillbilly* was used to "shor[e] up an imperiled sense of white identity that was challenged by the way shared traits of white and black southerners undermined northern convictions of a qualitative difference between the races."[77] In a similar fashion, Chicago complained of being invaded by Southern hillbillies, as the national publication *Harper's* documented in 1958: "The city's toughest integration problem has nothing to do with the Negroes. . . . It involves a small army of white Protestant, Early American migrants from the South—who are usually proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife."[78] Like white trash, hillbillies were seen by white Northerners as embodying characteristics that had been exclusively associated with blacks. Admittedly, Southern heritage did not ensure that one would be called a hillbilly, and the term sometimes was used for non-Southern whites who transgressed standards of proper whiteness.[79] Transgression of whiteness is what is central to the figures of the hillbilly and white trash, in other words. But Northern anxiety over that transgression was intensely focused on white Southerners, making white transgression and white Southernness difficult to untangle. It was white Southerners' cultural and physical proximities to black people that tended to trouble Northerners' understanding of the color line between white and black people.

These proximities weren't problematic in the same ways for white Southerners, but this is not because Southerners were less racist than their white Northern counterparts were. An African American folk saying, still repeated today, captures the difference: "In the North, they don't care how high you get, as long as you don't get too close. In the South, they don't care how close you get, as long as you don't get too high."[80] The particular role of racial etiquette in the South is crucial to these regional differences. Southern racial etiquette maintained both white domination and white Southerners' sense of racial superiority as blacks and whites mingled together in the South. Admittedly, sometimes etiquette was not enough to manage physical proximities between whites

and blacks, and then legislation was needed to keep the color line in place. Mississippi's 1865 vagrancy law, for example, declared, "All white persons assembling themselves with freemen, free Negroes, or mulattoes, or usually associating with freedmen, shall be deemed vagrants, and on conviction thereof shall be fined."[81] In this case, merely gathering with free or light-skinned black people legally transformed a white person into a shiftless vagrant—into white trash, in other words. But generally Southern racial etiquette worked to ensure that physical proximities and cultural similarities did not collapse racial hierarchies in Southern society. When proper etiquette was observed on all sides, black slaves could serve white masters their food, for example, and it could be the same type of food from the very same pot, without blurring the boundary between master and slave. (Eating that food together was a different story. Racial etiquette made that act taboo during the days of slavery and Jim Crow.)[82]

Likewise today, as long as the proper forms of address are used and appropriate gestures are embodied, the black "help" can work in the kitchen side by side with her white employer, preparing the Southern foods that they both love, without any serious threat to white racism. The taboo against interracial eating also has dissolved. But social rather than proximal distance between white and nonwhite people continues to be important in the postbellum South. Keeping black people "in their place" is and has always been "more behavioral than spatial in nature. . . . Valuing hierarchy more than they feared propinquity, whites casually rubbed elbows with blacks in contexts that sometimes startled northerners. Yet the requirements of caste . . . were zealously enforced" in the South nonetheless.[83] As a legacy of their proximity to black slaves, white Southerners generally have available to them more nuanced—which is *not* to say less racist—forms of interacting with black people than white Northerners do. Those nuances tend to allow for more intimate encounters between black and white people without troubling white Southerners' sense of the color line between them.

There exists "a nebulous but enduring sense of cultural difference between northern and southern whites," and that difference expresses itself in Southern and Northern perspectives on white trash.[84] White Southerners use somewhat different characteristics than white Northerners to distinguish who counts as white trash. First and foremost— and somewhat obviously—for Southerners, the sheer fact of being a Southerner isn't relevant to distinguishing proper white people from white trash. Nor is sharing certain cultural traits with black Southerners, such as having a Southern accent, embodying a relatively slow pace of

speech and movement, and enjoying Southern food. For Southerners, these traits do not indicate stupidity, laziness, or a boorish sense of taste.[85]

But this doesn't mean that Southerners don't worry intensely about hierarchical divisions between white and black or the blurring of racial lines that white trash perform. For Southern, as for Northern middle-class whites, white trash are those white people who "embod[y] a degraded form of whiteness—that is, whiteness without key forms of individual supports (striving for upward mobility) or institutional ones (from homeownership to political activity)."[86] For example, proper whiteness includes an appreciation of the aesthetics of restoring historical homes, including and perhaps especially ones from the antebellum era. In contrast, black people often are perceived as uninterested in or even hostile to the activity of historical restoration—and perhaps for good reason since this activity often involves an inchoate desire to restore an era of slavery or Jim Crow.[87] Thus, for a poor white person to be unable or unwilling to restore a historic home is for her to embody a degraded form of whiteness that shares problematic characteristics with blackness. White trash represent the threatening possibility that a white person could slide into blackness, which would mean for her to lose her racial status by means of losing her class status. Whether a white Southerner's regional identity increases the likelihood of this threat depends a great deal on whether one takes a Southern or Northern perspective on the question.

The tendency of middle-class white people to distance themselves from white trash to maintain their whiteness might seem to make class reducible to race. We might think that protecting their whiteness ultimately is what matters to middle-class white people and thus that their class status merely is an interchangeable means toward that end. On the other hand, the tendency for middle-class white people to distance themselves less from middle-class black people than from poor white people might seem to make race reducible to class.[88] From that perspective, race might seem incidental to the ultimate white middle-class goal of protecting class status. In my view, however, both of these perspectives are misleading because of their reductive character. Class differences within the group of white people make a meaningful difference to their race, and this is a constitutive, not an additive difference. Class differences aren't lumped on top of a homogenous whiteness; they instead help constitute whiteness differently for poor and middle-class white people. But the constitutive difference that class makes to race doesn't mean that race has been collapsed into class. While different from people of color in different ways, white trash and middle-class white people still are raced

as white. And it tends to matter to white middle-class people that they are white, not just that they are middle-class. For example, while the amount of money varies, white people consistently respond in scientific studies that they would require a significant amount of money to agree to be switched to or born as a black person.[89] For many white people, becoming black would be a loss of something valuable that deserves compensation.

Another way to appreciate the complex, irreducible "threat" that white trash pose to middle-class white people is to compare white trash to middle-class black people. With respect to middle-class white people, the black middle class could be considered the inverse of white trash: while white trash are similar to middle-class white people in terms of race but different in terms of class, the black middle class is similar to middle-class white people in terms of class but different in terms of race. White trash and the black middle class thus would seem to be equally like and unlike white middle-class people, albeit in reverse ways. Why then do white middle-class people often prefer to socialize, work with, and otherwise commingle with middle-class black people more than with poor white people?[90] Why don't middle-class black people threaten the white middle class as white trash do?

The answer might seem to be that class status, not race, ultimately is what really matters to middle-class white people, but I think comparing white trash and the black middle class demonstrates instead the different ways that class and race function in relation to each other. In the case of white trash, class makes race (whiteness in particular) unstable and slippery. Class differences within the group of white people fracture whiteness at the same time that they are used by the middle class to protect their whiteness. The fracturing of whiteness makes the supposedly firm differences between white and black people potentially unstable as well, resulting in the possible loss of whiteness. This fracturing and instability is the slipperiness of abjection, which establishes boundaries between self and other that always leak, bleed, and threaten to collapse. In contrast, the relationship of the white and black middle class is more like one of objectification. The division between subject and object that it creates tends to reassure the (white) subject of its identity, rather than trouble it. In this case, race (whiteness in particular) is not destabilized by class, which means both that whiteness is not fractured by class similarities between blacks and whites and that perceived racial differences between blacks and whites are not eliminated by their class similarities. With regard to the black middle class, we could say that class similarities with the white middle class rely on or assume firm racial

differences in order to operate. The assumed firmness of racial differ-
ence is why class similarities with the black middle class generally are
not threatening to middle-class white people. Class similarities generally
allow middle-class white people to be comfortable interacting with black
middle-class people without risking a loss of their whiteness.[91]

Beyond not threatening whiteness, the black middle class some-
times is even perceived by good white people as moral validation of the
(white privileged) liberal world in which they live. White trash do not
and cannot provide such validation. This is illustrated by the experience
of Kirby Moss, who is African American. Moss recounts a conversation
with a white middle-class woman in his anthropological study in which
the woman was criticizing white people on the other side of town for
being "kind of trashy." When Moss followed up on her comment, the
woman replied that she never really thought much about class differenc-
es, but instead she hung out with "people who are doing things and are
pretty successful. People like *you*!"[92] As Moss explains, at that moment
he realized that he had become "the pivotal go-between representation"
for this woman and many other white middle-class participants, revealing
"the way [his class/education] privilege coupled with his Blackness served
the unintended purpose of empowering the very middle-class Whites
[he] met." As Moss continued to reflect on the interview, he saw that

> in their contact with me, [the white middle-class participants]
> in a way expanded their own representation of themselves
> (in particular, self-described liberals or radicals like Carol
> [another white woman in the study]) as being open and
> accepting. They (the dominant culture) were the ideal and
> I was the product of their ideals, a product, in their eyes, of
> the meta-ideology of productivity and success in the rhetori-
> cal land of opportunity. . . . In this situation, my Blackness
> made privileged Whites more complete, and privilege was not
> really a commodity for me because they already possessed it.[93]

Good white liberals tend to use the fact of a black middle class (some-
times unconsciously, but other times explicitly and consciously) to affirm
their belief that the basic structure of liberal society is just and fair.
In contrast to the black middle class, however, the existence of white
trash threatens both white liberal ideals of opportunity and white liberal
assumptions of openness to and acceptance of people who are different
than oneself. White trash are not able to perform the same reassuring
roles for white liberals as the black middle class, and so white liberals

can tend to be more comfortable around black middle-class people than they are around white trash.

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The public sphere in the United States and other white-dominated countries would look much different than it does today if hierarchical class divisions between white people were dismantled or even just reduced. It would look different both in terms of who is included as a rightful member of that sphere and in terms of what topics and issues are seen as important problems for the public to consider. In particular, if abjected white people could participate meaningfully in public conversations and other creative activities that shape the public sphere with regard to race, racism, and white domination, those conversations and activities likely would unfold in different ways than they tend to do today. I think the participation and inclusion of abjected white people is important to racial justice movements, and so I want to explore here some of the implications of that inclusion. I will call it a form of radical inclusion since it aims to include white trash, white racists, white supremacists, and other white people who typically have been cast as unwanted in conversations about racial justice and as incapable of shaping a society's views on race and white racism in helpful ways. It's also a radical form of inclusion in that it does not restrict control of the terms of participation to the white middle class.[94] Such tightly controlled "inclusion" turns out to be another form of exclusion in disguise. In my view, racial justice can be achieved only if every group that is party to racial oppression is allowed to be involved in its elimination, and thus inclusion in the name of racial progress should not rely on other forms of exclusion, such as those based on class (and other exclusionary divisions, such as gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and religious affiliation). This means that even the white people with whom good white liberals often don't wish to talk must not only have a seat at the table, but also help decide if sitting, standing, stomping, or spitting is the best way to proceed. They cannot be written off in advance as too stupid, racist, or violent to participate meaningfully in the public sphere. As Goad colorfully puts the point, "If you're going to argue that rednecks simply don't have the "'right stuff'—that they breed violence, stupidity, and other undesirable character traits—you're wandering into a eugenical argument and undermining any pretense toward liberalism or egalitarianism. If you embrace equality, sooner or later you'll be forced to hug white trash, and don't blame me if you can't handle the smell."[95]