Fat, Drunk, and Barely There: Mapping Deviance, Obsolescence, and Unsophistication onto the Ethnic Redneck Subject in Jeff Foxworthy's Serialized One-Liner Comedy

Sarah Elsea
University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Recommended Citation
Elsea, Sarah, "Fat, Drunk, and Barely There: Mapping Deviance, Obsolescence, and Unsophistication onto the Ethnic Redneck Subject in Jeff Foxworthy's Serialized One-Liner Comedy" (2014). Undergraduate Honors Theses. 85.
https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/85

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Fat, Drunk, and Barely There:
Mapping Deviance, Obsolescence, and Unsophistication onto the
Ethnic Redneck Subject in Jeff Foxworthy’s Serialized One-Liner Comedy

Sarah M. Elsea
English Department Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended April 2, 2014

Thesis Advisor
Cathy Preston | Department of English

Defense Committee
Jane Garrity | Department of English
Reiland Rabaka | Department of Ethnic Studies
This thesis examines the construction, presentation, and revision of the redneck identity as manifest in Jeff Foxworthy’s “You might be a redneck…” jokes. Originally a derisive slur leveled against poor rural white males of the Southern United States, the contemporary definition of “redneck” has retained many aspects of this earlier stereotype. In order to combat this narrow definition of redneck within the context of a post-Civil Rights Movement America, Foxworthy presents the redneck as an ethnic identity based on shared culture rather than a narrowly defined statistical category with strict rules of race, class, or gender. By categorizing one-liners into similar motifs, this thesis argues that the redneck identity is characterized by its difference from dominant society on three different planes: deviance, obsolescence, and unsophistication. Although Foxworthy’s jokes often show the redneck subject’s active protest against dominant structural rules, the redneck identity remains a site of contradiction and liminality rather than a unified, assaultive front.
# Table of Contents

Abstract 3

I. Introduction 7

II. History of the Redneck 8

III. Jeff Foxworthy: the man, the comedian, and his jokes 16

IV. Redneck as Ethnicity: Defining “ethnicity” within the “ethnic revival” 19

V. Deviance 27

VI. Obsolescence 33

VII. Unsophistication and Excess 41

VIII. Conclusion 49

IX. Works Cited 52
I. Introduction

Once, when asked why she thought Southern writers have a particular “penchant for writing about freaks,” Flannery O’Connor replied: “it is because we are still able to recognize one” (O’Connor). Indeed, the South has long served as the real or imagined home for countless left-of-center figures. As one historian notes, “the prism of U.S. culture defines the South as the Other”; as such, the simultaneity of Southern heritage and an identification as ‘other’ make both characteristics all the more difficult to revise or remove from a single identity (Burton 12). People of both the North and South have spawned an almost innumerable list of terms to describe southerners of varying regions, class positions, and races; as a space defined by otherness, the people within it seem anxious to stratify their otherness as a means to retain some sense of dignity.

One of the most resilient terms borne from this southern caste mentality is “redneck.” The term has survived in American popular culture for almost two hundred years and has undergone a number of revisions, most notably, its spread from distinctly southern spaces into wider American society of all regions. It is used now as both a noun as both a positive self-identifier as well as an insult leveled toward bigots and racists. Furthermore, it has been reworked as an adjective to describe the redneck-cultural significance of an item, or again, as synonymous with the word ‘prejudiced.’

There is arguably no more important cultural actor in the term’s most recent revival than Jeff Foxworthy, the comedian famous for his “you might be a redneck…” one-liners. Foxworthy has become one the most financially successful comedians of all time with an estimated worth of $100 million (Warner 2014). Foxworthy has managed to merchandise his redneck comedy, as well as his own redneck image, in almost every conceivable form: license plates, greeting cards,
calendars, outdoor sporting equipment, and beef jerky, among others (Hauhart 271). The incredible profits Foxworthy has made from his products indicates that someone, somewhere actually buys any (or all) of it. As Hauhart explains, “market acceptance is a popular social indicator of resonance,” and as such, there must indeed be something highly resonant in the redneck identity that has lead to such earnings. Sadly, though, there is little academic research on the redneck identity in general and even less about Jeff Foxworthy in specific—the fields of finance, marketing, and economics produce much more redneck research than literary or folklore studies. This thesis was borne from the perception of this gap in redneck-focused academic research.

This thesis grapples with 3 broad questions: how has the age of multiculturalism affected the birth and revision of ethnic and cultural identities? How are in-group and out-group identities defined and negotiated around a single cultural identity? And, finally, what are the boundaries that constitute what can and can not be considered a cultural identity? I modestly approach these questions through a close analysis of Jeff Foxworthy’s “you might be a redneck” one-liners, categorizing jokes into three main categories of difference that define the redneck identity: deviance, obsolescence, and unsophistication. Contrasting Foxworthy’s own efforts to present the redneck as an ethnic identity with the homogenizing effects of cultural serialization, I argue that the redneck identity remains a site of contradiction where the answers to the broad questions of cultural identities may be mediated.

II. History of the Redneck

A. Etymology
In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of “redneck” is divided into two parts, each defined by its time period of usage:

- Originally: a poorly educated white person working as an agricultural labourer or from a rural area in the southern United States, typically considered as holding bigoted or reactionary attitudes. Now also more generally: any unsophisticated or poorly educated person, *esp.* one holding bigoted or reactionary attitudes.

  (“Redneck”)

From this definition, a few key characteristics of the redneck stereotype can be noted. Across both time periods, the redneck is characterized as an illiterate person—although, in its contemporary use, illiteracy is exchangeable for a lack of sophistication. Perhaps as an effect of this insufficient education, the redneck is also considered (usually) to hold “bigoted or reactionary attitudes,” which could be more concretely described as having racist, sexist, homophobic, and/or xenophobic views. Clearly, the contemporary definition of “redneck” is less targeted than the original definition; however, the historical basis of the stereotype has concretized a number of prevailing ideas about the redneck in contemporary discourse. For example, though the term is no longer restricted to the South, the redneck’s location in real or imagined rural spaces endures, and what was once distinctly agricultural labor is now more generalized as hard, physical labor (“blue collar” work). Furthermore, the term’s original connection to whiteness prevails.

There are two main theories on the origination of the term “redneck,” both of which are distinctly linked to a fair (white) complexion. According to southern historian Patrick Huber, “red neck” was originally used by the southern elite as reference to “white dirt farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers” whose scarlet necks were the direct result of “working
fields, unprotected, under a scorching sun” (147). Another widely-circulating theory is that the phrase evolved from another slur for poor whites, “peckerwood.” Used primarily by African American slaves, the term was a folk inversion of “woodpecker.” Because of the woodpecker’s distinctive red throat, the association between the bird and white, sunburned laborers was drawn (Huber 147). In short, the “red” in “redneck” is understood to be a reference to the sunburned skin of a specifically white-raced, lower-classed person.

The markings of lower class status also remain in the contemporary definition through the description of the redneck as “unsophisticated or poorly educated” (“Redneck”). For poor rural whites of the South, the assumption of illiteracy has been twofold: first, illiteracy has been linked with a lower class status. Second, the rural South has been consistently tied to a more general sense of primitivism that certainly plays into the description of the redneck as “unsophisticated.” Furthermore, both of these details focus on a fundamental lack—a lack of education (or sufficient education) and a lack of sophistication; in this way, “redneck” remains an impoverished identity, whether in an explicitly economic sense or, as used in the more modern definition, in a cultural sense.

Yet “redneck” is only one example of the much wider array of slurs targeting this particular demographic. Poor whites were historically branded with terms such as “clay-eater,” “corn-cracker” (or more simply “cracker”), “dirt-eater,” “hillbilly,” “poor white trash,” “wool hat,” “tacky,” “brush ape,” and “ridge-runner.” These terms were rooted in the group’s perceived cultural traits and socioeconomic situation; like “redneck,” some refer to working-class labor (“wool hat”), while others refer to economic impoverishment and its effectual scarcity (“clay-eater,” “corn-cracker,” “dirt-eater”) or infer wild or animalistic behavior associated with life in a rural environment (“ridge-runner,” “tacky,” “brush ape,” “hillbilly”).
Due to their common reference to poor whites, many scholars have noted that the terms are often used interchangeably. It must be made clear that the interchangeable use of these terms does not make them synonymous—despite the ever-widening usage of “redneck,” the term retains an undercurrent of offense that “hillbilly” does not, for example. Instead, through their substitutive relationships to each other, they become compatible. The discrepancies that emerge from a side-by-side analysis of two terms, such as “hillbilly” and “redneck,” presents a clearer image of the referent—not of poor whites themselves, but of their image in the public imagination. For this reason, this paper will draw upon research specific to other terms.

B. Historical basis of the stereotype

In order to understand the redneck stereotype in its contemporary usage, it is imperative to understand the American tradition of satirizing poor whites of the rural South. This trend can be traced back to the North/South feud that was both a cause and a continuing effect of the Civil War. Through the 19th century, the North continued to industrialize and urbanize; one effect of this quick and prosperous age was the advent of the publishing industry. In this way, from an early age, the country’s media output was weighted heavily in the North. In fact, by the 1850s, the South only housed one tenth of the nation’s publishing companies. The Northern influence on America’s burgeoning publishing trade could be seen in thoroughly negative portrayals of Southern subjects, an influence that, some scholars say, has created a resilient negative Southern self-image into the present day (Bernath 21). In effect, the South and the Southern subject reached a near-mythic status in the eyes of American cultural consumers. Jim Goad, author of The Redneck Manifesto, perhaps says it best: “in the War Between the States, the South attempted to make itself into a foreign land. The North didn’t permit the South to do so. The
North won the war. Ever since then, the North has made the South into a foreign land” (86).

Hence, the North’s majority control of the nation’s cultural and intellectual output during this period painted the South in terms of contrast—that the South was a definitively ‘other’ place, un-American by virtue of being non-Northern.

Further skewing the country’s perception of the South was the burgeoning interest in the Southern mountainous region of Appalachia. The region was cast into the cultural spotlight by late-1800s travel writers, also called “local color” writers, who wrote both fictional and non-fictional accounts of the area. The literature produced by these writers presented Appalachia, at best, as “a picaresque landscape [with] colorful, even quirky men and women oddly out of step with modern society” (Harkins 33). Yet, even at its most reverent, these works firmly established Appalachia as a zone of stark otherness. One of the earliest and most influential Appalachian travelogues, for example, was titled “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People.” Through the popular consumption of these marginalizing travel narratives, Appalachia became a metonymic representation of the larger South, what Jim Goad calls a “distilled South” (87). In contrast to the ever-developing North, the inhabitants of the region were seen as “cavemen in a modern world” (Goad 87-88).

The South’s loss in the Civil War branded southerners as weak and subservient to Northern ideals. When this prior understanding of the populace combined with the relatively unthreatening descriptions of Appalachian primitivism, the Southern stereotype was more or less positioned as that of a laughable fool character, both a negative exemplar that reinforced the benefits of industrial advancement and an eccentric local within the cultural tourist destination of

---

1 Although Appalachia is, today, mapped as a region spanning from the southern part of New York all the way down to northern Mississippi, the term is used here, primarily, to describe the Southern part of the region: Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.
Appalachia. It was not until the 1880s that another side of the poor rural white stereotype developed. During this time, violence came to characterize both Appalachia in specific and the South at large for a variety of reasons. Although lynching and other interracial acts of violence were committed at the time, it was actually the “twin evils of moonshining and feuding” that caused society to relabel the area “a land of lawlessness” (Harkins 34).

Moonshining—the illegal practice of making and/or selling high-proof corn liquor—was a longstanding practice throughout the South. The practice of production and consumption was not only considered a “long-enjoyed right” by these Southern mountain farmers, but the sale itself was often a necessary supplement to the farmers’ “meager incomes” (Harkins 34). As Reconstruction drew to a close, the federal government became increasingly heavy-handed in its attempts to license and tax all moonshine distributors; these sellers, in turn, saw the federal government’s attempts as unwarranted intrusion in local affairs. These tensions reached a head in the 1890s, resulting in a series of organized—often violent—protests that drew even more attention from both the government and the media.

Already in the national spotlight, reports of southern interfamilial conflict rose rapidly around the same period, beginning in Kentucky. Most contemporary historians trace these conflicts back to the larger struggle of federally-driven modernization versus a locally-controlled traditional agrarian economy, essentially the same struggle as in the moonshine wars; however, news media across America ascribed the conflicts to locally-realized political power struggles and a result of the state’s “uniquely violent past” (Harkins 35). When the media’s focus shifted from Kentucky to Virginia, where even more conflicts were to be found, the public responded with condemnation, denigrating the feuds to nothing more than the fickle attitudes of a populace culturally and genetically predisposed to violence. In short, the South became a land of
lawlessness, a place where “outlaw culture” was enacted and even celebrated. As the term “redneck” spread outwards from the southern states, its rebelliousness spread with it. For example, outlaw culture surely lives on in Foxworthy’s redneck jokes, who claims, “You might be a redneck if…Most of your in-laws are outlaws” (*Biggest Book 4*).

The violence of southerners first witnessed in the media coverage of interfamilial feuds and moonshine protests were compounded and exacerbated by the country’s growing eugenics movement. Around the turn of the century, the U.S. Eugenics Records Office produced a number of family studies that sought to prove—“scientifically”—that certain members of American society were “genetic defectives” (Newitz & Wray 2). These studies are shown to have both class- and racially-based components. In their frequent targeting of poor rural whites, the studies traced these subjects’ lineages back to a source of defect, typically a racially mixed relative. In this way, blackness was further associated with deviance or defective humanity, and many black Americans were similarly targeted by the eugenics project. With poor blacks targeted as inherently defective and poor rural whites marked defective through genealogical evidence marking them partially black, poor rural whites became “a fascinating and exotic ‘other’ akin to Native Americans or Blacks,” separated from the ‘true’ whites of dominant society as “another breed” (Harkins 8, Carr 4). The accounts produced from these studies quickly gained a large public following, and were used to describe these lower-classed rural whites as “poor, dirty, drunken, criminally minded, and sexually perverse people,” a description that, not coincidentally, bespeaks a type of alterity grounded in ethnic difference (Newitz & Wray 2). For Jim Goad, the connection between the identity construction of the eugenics studies and contemporary popular representations of the redneck is all too clear: “rarely is there a motive behind redneck cinemetic violence….We’re to assume they’re just bred for violence” (98, emphasis original). In short, the
eugenics studies widened the distance between poor rural whites and dominant society by marking rednecks’ difference as *genetic difference*; because their deviance was often grounded in the black racial identity of an ancestor, poor whites were seen as racially mixed and, therefore, situated liminally between distinct white-ethnic or black-ethnic boundaries.

The aim of this historical framework is to provide a better understanding of the redneck’s cultural context at the time of the term’s inception. Just as the redneck term has dualistic meaning from its two periods of usage—both a historically based narrow definition and a generalized contemporary definition—the redneck identity is a site where contradictions are constantly negotiated and, often, remain in almost impossible symbiosis. Historically, the redneck was posed as both a laughable fool and an evil villain; “quirky” and primitive as well as violent and angry (Harkins 33). The commonality between these two variant personas is that they are both characterized as ignorant or unsophisticated—not only different from, but inferior to dominant society. In a sophisticated society, unmotivated anger and violence are behaviors appropriate only for animals—as such, the violent, feuding, moonshining redneck is “another breed entirely” (Goad 98). On the other hand, the “quirky” primitivism of Appalachia and the South at large was seen as little more than a misguided defense against advancement—no one in their right mind would choose stasis over progress—and they could therefore be seen as ignorant. Furthermore, the redneck was also posed as an ethnic identity somewhere between black and white. The eugenics studies highlighted poor whites proximity to black ethnicity by highlighting the presence of black blood in the defective redneck’s genetic makeup. From this proximity, Gael Sweeney notes, whites are “perceived as ‘acting like Blacks,’ which in the language of racism is worse than being Black because it constitutes a degradation of ‘racially superior’ Whites” (252). In tracing these different facets of this stereotype, it is apparent that the
southern white rural poor have occupied a liminal space in the American public’s imagination: the stereotype has continuously moved between the realms of fiction and fact. This dynamic movement between two worlds informs our contemporary understanding of the “redneck” persona, particularly when viewed in the transitory nature of Jeff Foxworthy’s redneck self-identification.

III. Jeff Foxworthy: The man, the comedian, and his jokes

Jeff Foxworthy has performed as a stand-up comic and television persona for almost thirty years. One of the most commercially successful comedians ever, he is best known for his “redneck” comedy, most notably his “you might be a redneck” list jokes. Foxworthy is arguably the single greatest commentator on the redneck identity, and moreover, he self-identifies as a redneck: “…I have always admitted to being a redneck. To me, the definition of redneck is a glorious absence of sophistication” (“Double Wide” Track 3). It is interesting to note here that Foxworthy’s definition aligns almost perfectly with the OED’s more contemporary definition of redneck. The two main points of departure are, for Foxworthy, the redneck’s unsophistication is “glorious,” therefore celebrated; for this very reason, one can assume the “bigoted or reactionary attitudes” of the OED’s later definition are not explicitly in play in Foxworthy’s redneck identity construction.

Yet, Foxworthy also claims many aspects of the term’s more traditional markings, as well. First, Foxworthy is a Southerner, born and raised in Georgia. Foxworthy claims the small community of Hapeville, GA, as his hometown—yet, “calling it a ‘small town’ stretches reality,” notes Robert Hauhart, as the town lies less than seven miles south of Atlanta (271). Furthermore, Foxworthy has claimed that he “didn’t come from” money; he has said in interviews that his
current wealth is sometimes unsettling because “nothing in life prepared [him] to have money” (qtd. in Hallowell 2012). However, Foxworthy’s father was a longtime employee of IBM, and Foxworthy also worked for the company for a brief period, after obtaining a degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology (Hauhart 271). Quite simply, although Foxworthy may be able to claim a male identity and Southern heritage, his own redneck identity is more obviously aligned with his own more contemporary definition than the term’s historical underclass and rural underpinnings.

Foxworthy’s comedy is no doubt descended from a long tradition of list jokes in the conditional statement form, but unfortunately, there is a significant lack in this area of comedy research. Although the specific origins of Foxworthy’s “if x, then y” jokes remain unknown, these jokes arguably fit within the tradition of serialization. In her article on the serialization of folklore in a multicultural age, Kimberly Lau describes serialization as a product of commodity culture which “heightens the sense of desire and anticipation implicit” in the acquisition of commodities (70). In the context of multiculturalism, the commodities that consumers wish to acquire are cultural identities—specifically, the knowledge or understanding of a particular identity. Foxworthy’s corpus of redneck jokes may be considered a series due to the repetitiveness of the joke structure: while the identifying actions change in each joke, the punchline always ascertains the same, singular (redneck) identity.

As a series, Foxworthy’s body of redneck jokes attempts to “represent knowledge of [a] culturally different other in a manageable and confined way” so that cultural identities may be thus commoditized and collected (Lau 79-80). This attempt to dilute cultural knowledge into a “manageable” commodity is highly problematic as it relies on a singular, “metonymic representation” of identity to represent an entire culture (Lau 78). As neatly packaged
commodities ready to be collected, cultural identities are reduced and assimilated into “mainstream, middle-class American values” (Lau 81). If we are to view Foxworthy’s jokes through a lens of serialization, then the redneck identity he presents in his jokes is, at best, an essentialized mold of redneck cultural identity, even despite his self-described position within the redneck in-group.

Moreover, Foxworthy’s redneck identity is partially suspended in his role as a standup comedian. Foxworthy occupies a liminal space onstage, where he is capable of both affirming and reexamining shared cultural beliefs. In his article on standup comedy, Lawrence E. Mintz describes how the standup comic takes on a two-pronged persona:

“Traditionally, the comedian is defective in some way, but his natural weaknesses generate pity, and more important exemption from the expectation of normal behavior. …Because he is physically and mentally incapable of proper action, we forgive and even bless his ‘mistakes.’ …In his role as negative exemplar, we laugh at him. …Yet to the extent that we may identify with his expression or behavior…[and] publically affirm it under the guise of ‘mere comedy’ or ‘just kidding,’ he can become our comic spokesman … leading us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogenous understanding and expectation.”

(74, emphasis original)

Foxworthy’s negative exemplar role is grounded upon the characteristics he ascribes to himself through his identification as a redneck; in essence, he is “defective” because of his redneck identity. Because it is the audience who perceives the comedian as defective and pities the comedian for his defects, one could assume here that the audience plays the role of dominant society—they are the subjects who determine the boundaries of “proper action,” who have the
power to “forgive and even bless” his social blunders. Once the forgiveness of Foxworthy’s abnormal or improper redneck behaviors gives way to the audience’s identification with such behaviors, Foxworthy switches over to his role as “comic spokesman.” Yet, although he might lead the audience in a celebration of community, he cannot participate in that community due to his first act as the negative exemplar. Furthermore, the “shared” aspect of the audience’s newfound community is not redneck identity, but the “homogenous understanding” of that identity. Indeed, through the experience of the standup performance, the “mainstream, middle-class American” audience collects the night’s particular redneck joke series; the celebration, then, is not for their own self-discovery, but rather, for the completion of the series and the acquisition of [revised] redneck cultural knowledge (Lau 81).

IV. Redneck as Ethnicity: Defining “ethnicity” within the “ethnic revival”

In order for a reading of serialization to stand, however, it is necessary to show how Foxworthy presents the redneck as an ethnic or cultural identity. This thesis argues that Foxworthy does, indeed, present the redneck identity as a distinctly ethno-cultural identity, and he does so for two major reasons: first, by constructing the redneck identity as an ethnic identity, Foxworthy attempts to revise away the original, narrow definition of “redneck” that still clings to the identity. Second, a redneck ethnicity provides the same benefits for southern whites that it does for other hyphenated American identities; that is, it combats against a classification of white racial privilege made clear from the discourses of the Civil Rights Movement, while also providing a sense of uniquity in the homogenized, postindustrialist era.
In his book *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, Elliott Oring dedicates one chapter to the discussion of distinctly *ethnic* folk groups and folklore, in which he presents a working definition of ethnicity as manifested in group form:

As currently conceptualized, members of an ethnic group, it is claimed, share and identify with a historically derived cultural tradition or style, which may be composed of both explicit behavioral features as well as implicit ideas, values, and attitudes. Furthermore, membership in an ethnic group is acquired primarily by descent. Finally, an ethnic group is conceived as part of a larger social system rather than independent and self-sufficient. (24)

From this description, we can note a few common characteristics of *all* ethnic groups, despite the wide variation between them. First, there is a focus on history and lineage in this explanation; not only is an ethnic group’s unique culture “historically derived,” but membership is largely determined by consequences of the family situation. Secondly, there is a sense of in-group cohesion here, in that members “share” their cultural tradition, and that their identification within an ethnic group places them in a unique subset of some “larger social system,” forming a niche community within a larger cultural sphere. Finally, Oring focuses on a third important facet of the construction and existence of ethnic groups not explicitly mentioned in his definition above; that is, the importance of *claim* to that shared culture, that a claim to ethnic identity must be made in order to place that individual within the identity. Not only does claim-making play a part in the delineation of an individual, but that ethnic groups, from a broad perspective, do not exist unless a claim is made for their existence (Oring 25).

Traditionally, poor rural whites have been characterized as having “strong kin connections,” a characteristic that Foxworthy makes mention of in a variety of both coded and
explicit ways. His implicit mentions of lineage signify his assumption of the audience’s prior understanding of this family-minded facet of the stereotype. Often, Foxworthy claims his own redneck ethnicity as inherited from his predecessors, naming his immediate family as the primary source for his redneck material:

When I first started doing redneck material as part of my stand-up routine, my mother asked, ‘Where on earth do you come up with that stuff?’ Gee, Mom, I don’t know, but have you looked around you lately? Our family has more nuts than Planters. (*Biggest Book* 1)

In this passage, Foxworthy ascertains his own redneck identity through the redneck identities of his family members. In essence, his knowledge of redneck culture—and moreso, his own membership within that culture—is obtained through proximity to redneck subjects in his personal family network. His redneck jokes extend this quality of historical rootedness out to his audience, in turn, by repeatedly mentioning the past generations of the “you” subject in his “you might be a redneck” criteria: “You might be a redneck if…your sister is the third generation of women in your family to conceive a baby because of an alien abduction,” for example (*Biggest Book* 44). When the criterion for redneck identity rests in the redneck behaviors of family members, then the subject’s historical rootedness is affirmed. Hence, Foxworthy’s comedy imagines the redneck as a historically rooted ethnic identity.

The shared aspect of ethnic identity is clearly in play throughout Foxworthy’s comedy; the most explicit example, of course, is the very form of the jokes. Acting as redneck criteria, or requirements that affirm redneck identification, these jokes manifest as conditional statements:

---

2 Interestingly, Foxworthy tells a similar story eight years later in his stand-up special, “Them Idiots,” with Larry the Cable Guy asking almost the same question (“where do you come up with this stuff?”) and Foxworthy answering in kind (“[S]adly, the answer is: all I do is go to family functions.”)
“If you have ever been too drunk to fish, [then] you might be a redneck” (*Double Wide* Track 1).

In short, these jokes work to create a division between the redneck in-group and out-group: if you can relate to the redneck jokes, you are a part of that shared culture. Furthermore, Foxworthy himself plays a major role in solidifying the shared quality of the culture as a redneck comedian and self-described “connoisseur of redneckism” (qtd. in Hauhart 272). As presumed redneck subjects, the audience partakes in the redneck culture Foxworthy shares via his comedy. By sharing that specifically redneck cultural material, however, Foxworthy also implies the culture’s shared qualities by *declaring* those qualities to be shared.

This brings us to the third aspect of ethnic identity writ large: the group’s claim of existence. Although Foxworthy does make public claims for the existence of a redneck ethnicity, he does not act alone. Indeed, this third point is perhaps most strongly advanced by Foxworthy’s redneck audience. Similarly, to the audience’s collective claim of identity is Elliott Oring’s example of the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County in North Carolina. The Lumbee Indians are a fascinating case study and relevant here due to their personal attempts to declare their unique standing as a group distinct from both blacks and whites in racially conceptualized South. Despite the fact that the group refers to themselves as “Indians,” an outsider might consider them white—the members of the group have white skin and mostly white ethnic physical characteristics. Yet, over almost two centuries, the group went head to head with the North Carolina state legislature in order to forge—and later, revise—a liminal ethnic status. In a similar fashion, Foxworthy’s fans proclaim their redneck identification through public assertion of their own unique identity apart from the dominant, overarching category of whiteness. Whereas the Lumbee Indians petitioned the state legislature for recognition of their ethnic identity, Foxworthy’s redneck fans petition society through their purchase and display of redneck
merchandise in the form of clothing, books, CDs, DVDs, greeting cards, and other memorabilia (Hauhart 271-274).

The recognition of an ethnic identity is not solely based on claims made by members within the group, however. Oring writes, “[T]he perception of [ethnic] groups is usually motivated…. Groups that seem ‘significant’ in the unfolding of our everyday lives generally are more widely recognized, and they are recognized by both those within the group defined as well as by those without” (25). Essentially, recognition of an ethnic identity is reliant on members of both the in-group and the out-group. Considering the widespread commercial success of Foxworthy’s redneck persona and redneck-inflected comedy, as well as wider American society’s awareness of the term’s dualistic contemporary usage, one can assume that both self-identifying rednecks and non-rednecks have awarded the term the appropriate significance to be used as an identity-shaping adjective. Yet, does significance as a personal identifier necessarily point to ethnic standing? Why would the redneck identity need to be constructed as ethnic?

To answer these queries, I turn to Matthew Frye Jacobson, a scholar of the American “ethnic revival” and author of Roots Too. The ethnic revival can be generally described as a period immediately following the Civil Rights Movement in which a meteoric shift took place in American identity discourse, such that earlier ideas of an assimilationist American society—often called “the melting pot” mentality—were abandoned for a new hyphenated nationalist identity: Irish-American, Greek-American, or Jewish-American, for example. Jacobson outlines a number of sources that contributed to this revision of American identity in his book, but for the sake of this argument, this thesis will focus on the two most pertinent sources of the ethnic revival: the Civil Rights Movement and the distinctive antimodernist attitudes of the time.
The Civil Rights Movement forever altered America’s conception of personal identity when, with its crowning victories of the mid-1960s, it advanced a new notion of group-based experience, politics, and grievance into dominant (WASP-)American discourse. By locating one’s personal conception of self within a niche community of shared experience, the movement revised the long-established ‘fact’ that American-ness hinged upon the valuation of “individual liberties” (Jacobson 19). The effect of this new idiom of group identity was twofold: first, it provided all Americans with a new avenue through which to express identity and grievance, and secondly, group-based black grievance pinpointed group-based white privilege, thereby rendering white Americans suddenly and uncomfortably aware of this skin privilege.

Although the Civil Rights Movement did much to uncover the normative nature of whiteness in American culture, a white, normative American identity was further exposed by the hyphenated ethnic-American identities that erupted as a result of the ethnic revival. White Americans began taking on identities as Jewish-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Italian-Americans, among others. Among these three examples, for instance, we see not only a distancing from the normative nationality of white American identity, but in the case of “Jewish-American,” a religiously-informed, cultural departure from the white American standard. In this way, it should not be too surprising that normative American-ness may be referred to as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP).

The use of “WASP” might seem contradictory to a paper that argues for the redneck as a constructed ethnic American identity. Where we see “ethnicity” as identification with non-dominant cultures, the redneck—often a WASP figure itself in terms of skin color, ethnic lineage, and religion—surely cannot be considered “ethnic.” However, to borrow a point from Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, racial identities are commonly used as allegories for class status
in a society where “the myth of classlessness” reigns supreme; in essence, the whiteness of WASP classification also indicates a higher class status (Wray & Newitz 1). Because the redneck identity is a specifically underclass version of a white Anglo-Saxon protestant, it can also be seen as non-WASP.

Furthermore, Jacobson names antimodernist attitudes as both a cause and effect of the so-called roots revival; within this antimodern period, says Jacobson, ethnic identity provided “a haven of authenticity” that defended against the “bloodless, homogenizing forces of mass production and consumption, mass media, commodification, bureaucratization, and suburbanization” (22-23). Where, in the assimilationist Cold War era, ethnic identity had been “lost, forgotten, or forcibly cast off … in [the] rush to Americanize,” the 1960s and ‘70s were a time to seek “refuge in the symbolic, ‘pre-modern’ communion of ethnic identity” (Jacobson 3, 24).

This “refuge” not only provided the ethnic subject a sense of unicity, but with awareness of it, a “sentimental journey to the harsh circumstances” of ethnic legacy (Jacobson 25). Ethnicity became a form of escapism from the restlessness of easy contemporary living; in strange (and sometimes problematic) ways, ethnic identity was a way to look back on “the fire and storm of Old World hardship” with a sense of nostalgia (Jacobson 25). Jacobson notes that this ethnic understanding of self, the authenticity awarded by the struggles of our predecessors, was especially attractive for men whose masculinity seemed “hollow” in the contemporary age (26).

Clearly, these yearnings for traditional American lifeways can be seen in the redneck stereotype. Across the many characterizations of poor rural white males, they have been continuously composed as “guardians of a rugged individualism and traditional ways of life”
Their rural status is often associated with farming and other agricultural labor activities (as mentioned in the OED definition of “redneck”), one of the few traditionally ‘masculine’ occupations available today, for example. Furthermore, the redneck identity’s association with close family and kinship networks, a byproduct of rural Southern characteristics, speaks to the community construction that ethnic identity attempts to provide as an antidote to the distancing that occurs between individuals in modern society.

Contextualizing Oring’s definition of ethnicity within the late twentieth century ethnic revival provides a better understanding of how Foxworthy’s redneck can be seen as the attempt to forge a new ethnic-American identity. The redneck, as a poor rural white person (and more often, male), is first and foremost an anti-WASP identity through its lower class status, a status that renders the redneck’s perceived whiteness as, truly, “not-quite-whiteness” (Jacobson 22). In this not-quite-white characterization, the redneck term serves, as an ethnic marker, to displace white privilege in much the same way as other ethnic-revivalist identities, such as Irish-American. Secondly, the redneck ethnic identity provides an ethnic legacy through its poor, rural Southern history, much of which is based on a real or imagined rural location as well as back-breaking agricultural labor of a bygone era that provides authenticity for the contemporary white masculine subject. This ethnic legacy, like many others of the ethnic revival, participates in the continuation of the racist, classist “bootstraps” myth by positing the contemporary ethnic subject’s successes as the direct, uncontested rewards of hard work rather than privileges borne of institutionalized prejudices.

By repositioning the redneck identity as an ethnic identity, Foxworthy widens the term’s definition to include any “glorious[ly]” unsophisticated person; the term is thus expanded from a statistical subset of specifically white, poor, rural, Southern males to a more diverse community.
While ethnic categorization of redneck identity works to legitimate that community and loosen the grip of the term’s roots as a disparaging slur, the serialization of the joke form acts against such progress. In a white, middle-class American-centered (WASP-centered) society, multiculturalism is presented in manageable units; different cultural identities are reduced and fixed in place so they become contained commodities of supposed cultural knowledge. Rather than representing the often-messy particularities of ethnic and cultural identities, series of cultural identity conform to an overarching “ideological category of difference” in which “other,” non-WASP cultural identities are all kept the same distance apart from the dominant cultural identity. In this way, cultural difference and uniquity is relative only to dominant society, and thus, ethnic identities become exchangeable, homogenized volumes within a series of reductionist multiculturalism.

In the following sections, I group Foxworthy’s one-liners together into three attributes of the presented redneck identity; these attributes are categorized as deviance, obsolescence, and unsophistication. It is hardly surprising that these fundamental facets of the identity all classify the redneck as different and distant from a perceived norm. Deviance is the very antagonism against a normative culture; obsolescence is the inevitable disappearance from or forced assimilation into that culture; and unsophistication is a lack of sophistication, which I treat here as the rules, values, and tastes of dominant society. Although the redneck subject(s) of these jokes often work to revise the boundaries between dominant society and their own position as “other,” the categories through which they are classified focus not only on difference, but the redneck other’s inferiority; the redneck identity is not different, but deviant; not apart from, but invisible; not unconventional, but unsophisticated. In all these characterizations, the redneck
does not become an alternative-but-equal identity, but an identity that is, instead, aberrant and inferior.

V. Deviance

One of the defining characteristics of the redneck—indeed, the very basis of the redneck as an identity—is the character’s deviant ideals and behaviors. Redneck deviance may be henceforth understood as those hedonistic activities or characteristics relative to the id, such as violence, insatiable sexuality, substance abuse, etc. Many Southern historians have noted a widespread cultural trend in describing the South as the American id, where the rest of the country—particularly the North—sees the South as “sexualized, tropical, and horribly violent” (Guterl 231). This excessive, hedonistic facet to the portrayal of the South and the Southerner has become rooted in a number of the Southern stereotype’s linguistic offspring, especially in the case of ‘redneck.’

The redneck is not only deviant, but defiant. Jim Goad, author of The Redneck Manifesto, notes that the very word “redneck” “connotes defiance—stupid or otherwise” (84). He goes on to describe the redneck as “someone both conscious of and comfortable with his designated role of cultural jerk. …A redneck is someone who knows you hate him, and rubs that fact in your face” (84). In this way, the redneck’s deviant actions are constructed not, simply, as deviant through ignorance or unawareness, but as calculated, dissenting protest against the norms he or she is measured against.
A. Collective deviance

When redneck deviance is acted against all those outside of the redneck community, then that community can be seen as a unified group. Often, outsiders (and Foxworthy, in his moments as someone on the outside) exaggerate this unity by constructing a close-knit community network as something even closer: an interbred, interrelated family. Thus, it is not surprising that, in Foxworthy’s jokes, defiance is enacted not by the individual, but collectively by the family. This is seen most directly in the redneck jokes about incest, where family members participate in taboo sexual practices together. This theme of incest comes up quite frequently: “You might be a redneck if…All your cousins are kissing cousins” and “You might be a redneck if…You view the upcoming family reunion as a chance to meet women,” for example (Biggest Book 28 and 45). Due to the universality of the incest taboo and the wording of the second joke (“you view the…reunion as…”), incest here seems to be a deliberate action on the part of the redneck subject. Yet, Foxworthy’s redneck family not only sleeps together, but they also drink together, smoke together, fight together, and fight each other.

Alcohol abuse and its effects are seen throughout Foxworthy’s jokes as inherited traits: “You might be a redneck if…Beer bellies run in your family” and “You might be a redneck if…The only thing you inherited from your father was alcoholism” (Biggest Book 9 and 23). By presenting alcohol abuse as inheritance, the redneck’s lineage is confirmed; indeed, alcoholism here is seen as another inherent trait to the redneck ‘ethnicity.’ However, this inheritance does not render the redneck family helpless in their use and abuse of substances. Often, rednecks participate in and encourage substance (ab)use in family settings: “You might be a redneck if…Your family reunion features a chewing tobacco spit-off” and “You might be a redneck if…Your family reunion was sponsored by a beer company” (Biggest Book 10 and 20). In the
first joke, we see substance (ab)use valorized; the spitting that accompanies chewing tobacco is made into a family competition. Hence, the act of chewing becomes a twisted kind of family fun. The second joke, however, is more complex; the beer company’s sponsorship was offered, one can presume, because the family supplies a lot of business to that company—hence, alcohol abuse. Yet, the important part of this joke is that the acceptance of such an offer could only be made on the part of the family; in essence, the family not only uses and probably abuses great amounts of alcohol, but they also want to broadcast that abuse to the world. In this way, their deviance becomes defiant—the redneck family intentionally presents their substance (ab)use to the world in what can be read as an antagonistic act.

Finally, the redneck family is also presented as collectively violent, not only as aggressors, but even as victims. One joke reads, “You might be a redneck if…Every member of your family has been shot at” (Biggest Book 10). By presenting redneck victims in terms of the family, one can assume that there is some collective action happening here. What is interesting about this joke is the ambiguity: the reader is not told why each family member was shot at, who was the attacker, etc. Yet, because the family members are presented as a collection of victims, the violence may be seen as experienced collectively. Interestingly, this joke can also be read as a characterization of rednecks enacting deviance collectively. One could assume that the redneck family is being shot at for a reason, that the shooting victims have enacted some sort of offense on the shooter. In this way, although the family members are the targets of a gun in this particular joke, there is a strong implication that the redneck family could, in a different situation, all fire their own guns at an offender.
B. Simultaneity of Deviance

Another interesting way in which deviance manifests in Foxworthy’s jokes is intersectionally—that is, that two or more deviant actions are performed at the same time, or a single action may be marked as two different kinds of deviance. In these instances, the redneck’s deviance is exaggerated through simultaneity of deviance(s) so that the redneck’s deviance becomes an all-encompassing, unarguable fact and facet of the redneck identity. In short, the redneck’s deviance is part and parcel of the identity—it is inescapable, whether enacted intentionally or accidentally.

One of the most complex jokes that displays intersectional deviance is one that interweaves sexuality and violence: “You might be a redneck if...a woman says she’s game, so you shoot her” (Biggest Book 32). The deviant sexuality in this instance is assumed by the ambiguity of the female sexual subject—she is not a wife or a girlfriend, but simply “a woman,” implying sex not only out of the institution of marriage, but also with a presumed stranger. When the woman says she’s “game,” there is an implied informality to the sexual act—sex here is not for the purposes of procreation, but for fun, as a “game.” Violence is almost always considered deviant in any form; here, of course, the violence is doubly deviant for being such a hyperbolized response to the woman’s sexual consent.

By shooting the ambiguous, sexual woman, the redneck subject enacts violence against her. This violent response may be read in a number of ways. First, it might be read that the redneck misreads the female’s description of herself as “game” in which she does not mean she is “game,” or open to the idea [of sex], but that she is the “game” of hunting, a target for murder. Secondly, the redneck’s consequential violence to the woman’s suggestion might be read as a type of punishment enacted against the woman’s overt sexuality—although it is an extreme
reaction, the redneck might be seen as shooting the woman in defense, to prevent her from ‘attacking’ him. Clearly, this speaks to traditional and problematic characterizations of female sexuality as a dangerous offense on a supposedly pure masculine subject. In this way, redneck deviance is seen as a necessary trait of the redneck subject: even when the redneck tries to follow the rules of polite society (in this case, by refusing participation in deviant sexuality), he must still enact deviance in another way (through violence). Essentially, the redneck is incapable of acting properly; try as he might, he will always be a deviant in one form or another.

Moreover, a third reading presents the shooting as an action simultaneously sexual and violent. It is assumed that the woman gives her consent to a purely sexual activity; yet, the redneck’s response to that consent is through shooting, and that such a response is—to the redneck—an appropriate one. Shooting might be read as a metaphor for male ejaculation, and the implied gun is, of course, a phallic symbol. In this way, violence and sexuality are construed so that they are one and the same—the shooting is fetishized as an appropriate response to the woman’s sexual consent; the shooting of the gun becomes the sexual release of orgasm.

In the first reading, the redneck is characterized as stupid or at least confused: the shooting is the result of a misunderstanding, in which the term “game” is understood by the redneck as having only a single definition, that of hunting game. In the second reading, the redneck punishes the woman’s sexually deviant behavior through violence; although shooting the woman is clearly an over-the-top response to her supposed offense, the redneck here tries to follow a rule of polite society, by refusing this deviant sexual proposition. In the third reading, the redneck is constructed as a fetishist of violence in which shooting a gun becomes a sexual release that displaces ejaculation. Although the first reading presents redneck deviance as almost accidental, or the result of ignorance, the last two readings mark redneck deviance as something
more complex: either the redneck enacts deviance accidentally because he simply cannot follow the rules of polite society, or because the redneck chooses deviance in the pursuit of pleasure.

In the jokes that combine sexuality and substance use, a similar pursuit of pleasure may be seen; however, sexuality in this case is not only pleasure, but sometimes used as currency to purchase pleasure: “You might be a redneck if…A man lights your cigarette and you show him your bra” (Biggest Book 166). Here, substance use and sexuality are combined so that two readings may be derived from the joke: in the first, sexuality is transactional; in the second, the man’s facilitation of substance abuse is seen as an arousal. Although the man does provide the [presumed] female redneck subject the actual substance, he does provide her the means by which to use it. As such, the man provides a service to the redneck by lighting her cigarette, to which she ‘pays’ him for such a service through showing him her bra. In this way, sexuality may be seen as transactional for the redneck—it becomes a kind of currency that both solidifies and complicates the redneck’s implicit lack. On one hand, the redneck does participate in a type of economic transaction, in which sexuality stands in for money; this grants a certain agency, in which the redneck does have a type of currency by which to afford products and services. Yet, clearly, this is the ‘wrong’ kind of currency, and moreover, it is a deviant currency paid out for a deviant service. It might be assumed that the redneck uses non-normative currency because she lacks money, and as such, the redneck remains an economically impoverished identity.

Another reading, however, reads the redneck’s partial undressing as sexual response to an action she reads as a sexual come-on. In this case, the man’s lighting of the cigarette may be seen as a chivalrous action, a flirtation to which the redneck woman responds in kind, by showing her bra. In this reading, the woman may be seen as having deviant sexual stimulants: she is aroused by people and actions that facilitate her substance use. In such a way, the substance use itself
may be seen as arousing, and therefore, sexuality and substance (ab)use are construed into mutually or simultaneously deviant activities.

VI. Obsolescence

Returning to the groundbreaking article “Sophisticated People Versus Rednecks,” Jarosz and Lawson discuss the methods in which the redneck stereotype is presented in contemporary American discourses of geographic development. The authors argue that characterizations of certain geographic spaces as wild or untamed marks the inhabitants of such spaces invisible or wild as an extension of their socio-geographical positioning. To this end, the authors reference the film *Deliverance*, in which a trio of “urbanites” takes a canoeing trip down the Chattanooga River prior to the completion of a new dam that will ultimately submerge much of the surrounding wilderness. At first, “[t]he wilderness is idealized, as it is soon to be consumed by the all-powerful transformative forces of development”; yet, the “wilderness,” in the urbanites’ view, is not only the river, but also its “associated nature—woods, hills, men” (13). In this way, the people living within this space actually become a part of that “wilderness,” as evidenced in the urbanites’ changed perspectives at the film’s end. Together, Jarosz and Lawson argue, “wild nature and the people associated with and living within it have become savage, violent, evil, hostile, and lawless” (13). In this way, the building of the dam—the imminent destruction of the rural space—is justified as a means to tame and control not only the wilderness itself, but the “natives” within it (Jarosz and Lawson 14).

Extending outward beyond the film, the authors draw parallels between contemporary redneck discourse and early European and American discourses of colonization. Like these earlier discourses that framed Africans and other indigenous groups as “primitive, backward,
stagnant, and traditional” or as “standing in the way of economic progress,” so too are rednecks situated as hindrances to the projects of expansive development and “modernization” (13). Within the American legacy of conquest, this narrative that equates wilderness with wild people frames both the space and its inhabitants as disposable; the wild quality of a natural space may be disposed through means of rural restructuring, whereas the wild people may “either change with the economic times or be discarded” (Jarosz & Lawson 14). In short, rural spaces are viewed in development discourses as obsolescent; from their imagined location within these obsolescent spaces, rednecks, too, are presented as obsolescent.

Foxworthy’s jokes similarly present the redneck subject as obsolescent through his or her location in ambiguously defined rural spaces. Although Foxworthy has often asserted a national rather than regional association on the part of the redneck character, his jokes often utilize rural themes, such as a physical proximity to nature or distance from society, as well as rural motifs, such as agricultural labor or farm animals. When situated as obsolescent, both redneck subjects and redneck spaces are perceived as temporary. In this way, redneck obsolescence may also be read as redneck liminality; a kind of impermanence or non-rootedness that grants the redneck simultaneous presence and absence. Redneck obsolescence is most often seen in three motifs: the immobile mobile home, nature’s intrusion into the manmade space of the home, and trash, whether unwanted or unusable items cast off by either rednecks themselves or others.

---

3 On the fifth track of his Double Wide Single Minded album, for example, Foxworthy says: “I’ve found that there are a lot of misconceptions about the South. A lot of people think everybody from the South is a redneck. You don’t have to talk like this to be a redneck. I’ve been to 48 states, there are rednecks everywhere you go.”
A. Mobile Homes

Many of Foxworthy’s jokes about mobile homes focus on the disconnect between the permanency of property and the temporality of house. Normally, property and the shelter that stands upon it are considered totally fixed in place; yet, the redneck trailer’s mobility disrupts this notion: “You might be a redneck if… You’ve lived in three different homes at the same address” (*Biggest Book* 117). Here, the opposition between the land’s permanency and the structure’s temporality is enhanced by the word “home.” Compared to “house,” “home” is more personally and conceptually understood—the home is something much more permanent than a “house” because it alludes to the family and objects within the house as a structure, as well as the memories made within it. In a way, “home” is more a concept than a physical building. Yet, the redneck here has “lived in three homes” on a single plot of land, indicating a divorce from nostalgia. The redneck “home” is really whatever structure he or she presently lives within.

As the previous joke has shown, mobile homes mark rednecks as non-rooted or impermanent; in this way, redneck lack remains inherent. When impermanence marks the redneck home, then that home may be easily destroyed or taken away—so the threat of lack is ever-present. Foxworthy further solidifies the connection between the mobility of the redneck mobile home and lack through the inverse: “You might be a redneck if…Your richest relative buys a new house and you have to help take the wheels off” (*Biggest Book* 7). Clearly, there is a relationship between wealth and permanence explicitly at play here—only the “richest” redneck is allowed to have a permanent home. We may assume the relative is indeed a redneck through the collective, family-based identification of redneck as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, because the home is originally a mobile home, one may also assume the relative’s identification as a redneck, as a mobile home is, for Foxworthy, a definite marker of redneck
identity. This joke may appear to complicate the very mobility of the mobile home—indeed, when the wheels are removed, the house ceases to be mobile. Yet, even though the house has become immobile, impermanence still characterizes the home: aside from being constructed of less durable materials than non-mobile homes, the house may also be seen as impermanent simply because of its humble beginnings as a mobile home. In short, whether or not the home retains its wheels, it was still—originally—meant to be a mobile home; in a way, removing the wheels is nothing more than a roughshod attempt to pose the house as something it isn’t, that is, permanent. In this way, the mobile home serves as a symbol for the redneck’s very identity; despite rednecks’ best attempts to hide or revise their identities, they will forever remain rednecks.

Finally, the impermanence of the redneck home—and, by extension, of rednecks themselves—is often marked by the redneck’s own indifference to impermanence. This can be seen in the joke, “You might be a redneck if…Your previous two homes are rotting in the back pasture” (Biggest Book 123). Here, impermanence comes full circle; the home is not successfully “rooted” in or on the land, but instead, nature itself takes root within the home, thereby displacing the redneck subject. The redneck’s detachment from home, however, is not only physical, but emotional, through an acceptance of impermanence. The joke alludes to the redneck’s agency in the houses’ decay, that the homes were decisively left to rot. The sinister implication, then, is that by accepting decay or impermanence of home, rednecks also somehow acknowledge and accept their own impermanence—that they allow themselves to be constructed as obsolescent.
**B. Intrusion of Nature**

As in the last joke, rednecks’ acceptance of obsolescence is often seen in jokes that focus on the intrusion of nature into the manmade space of the home. Almost always, nature is welcomed, or at least allowed, into the home by the redneck subject(s): “You might be a redneck if…a tree falls through your roof and you decide to leave it” (*Biggest Book* 100). It should need no explanation that the damage of a roof is, here, symbolic of a loss of shelter. If we understand shelter to be a human necessity—one of the necessities that separates humans from animals—then the redneck subject’s humanity is thus suspended, at least until shelter is restored. In this joke, however, shelter is *not* fully restored—the roof is left as is, and therefore, the redneck’s humanity is lessened. What is even more damning, however, is the redneck’s perceived *agency* in the roof’s disrepair: that the loss of shelter is continued through the subject’s decision to “leave it” destroyed. The implications of this agency, of course, are dire. In essence, the indication that this particular instance of disrepair is made, partially, by a redneck’s decision can be extended to the remainder of the jokes in the chapter, and denotes the redneck’s compliance in a degraded standard of living.

Although the redneck’s reasoning for ‘leaving’ the destroyed roof is never articulated in the previous joke, there are many instances in which Foxworthy does include the redneck’s logic—and in doing so, also plays into the notion that there was, indeed, a decision for disrepair made as the result of such logic.
The above picture\(^4\) comes from the same chapter as the previous joke. The two jokes share a similar narrative, a roof (or ceiling) in disrepair. Yet, in this joke, the reasons underlying the allowance of continued disrepair are foregrounded: the roof’s damage remedies a different type of disrepair, that of indoor plumbing. Here, we see disrepair taking on a cyclical nature; the necessity of shelter is displaced by the necessity of running water. When one type of disrepair becomes [insufficient] reparation for another lacking necessity, the presence of disrepair in redneck life is compounded and eternalized. The redneck home, therefore, is based on a presence of disrepair and the eternal displacement of brokenness.

Both of these jokes feature the erasure of the boundary between wild and tame space; the walls and roof of the home work to keep human elements contained and keep nature out. The convalescence of man and nature is a common facet of the poor rural white persona that has been

\(^{4}\) This illustration was created by David Boyd. Although we might assume the dialogue in the drawing is also the creation of Boyd, its appearance in an anthology copyrighted solely to Foxworthy, we may assume the illustration to be authored by Foxworthy, even if only by editorial inclusion.
connoted time and again with both positive and negative traits: a pioneer spirit, on one hand, and animalistic denigration on the other (Harkins 6-7). In both of the jokes, nature’s intrusion on private, man-made space is welcomed rather than prevented or remedied. To WASP sensibilities, this indicates—at best—a variant, “other” humanity, or at worst, a damaged or defective humanity. For the redneck, however, these intrusions can be merely read as the transformation of boundary lines between natural and manmade spaces.

C. Trash

In all the jokes about obsolescence considered up to this point, there has been a common thread of redneck revision, such as the attempted revision of a mobile home into an immobile one or the redrawing of boundary lines between natural and manmade spaces. Yet, in these aforementioned jokes, the rednecks are usually seen as the editors, whether or not their revisions hold. The motif of trash, however, is one that posits the redneck as obsolescent through the actions of outsiders more than the redneck individual. In these jokes, redneck spaces become battle sites between the redneck and outside forces. In the two jokes, “You might be a redneck if….Your yard has ever been the proposed site for a landfill” and “You might be a redneck if….Your property has been mistaken for a recycling center,” we see an attack on redneck property in which outsiders rewrite redneck spaces not as homes, but as sites of offal (Biggest Book 109-110). In the first joke, there is an obvious affront to redneck space, in which some ambiguous governing body advances a proposal to rewrite redneck space as a dumping ground. If this proposal were to be accepted, there is no explicit mention of what would happen to the redneck propertyholder, but one can assume one of two consequences. The first consequence would allow the redneck to remain on the property, essentially becoming another piece of waste
in the landfill; otherwise, the redneck subject would be displaced to another location. In either reading, the redneck is obsolescent: either by revising the redneck from human to offal (the redneck is rendered obsolete through a lessened humanity), or by displacing the redneck to what can be assumed will be yet another fringe space.

Though the second joke still works to revise the redneck from human to waste, a more complicated reading may be noted here. As a “recycling center” rather than a “landfill,” there is a sense of renewal or recontextualization at play here. Even though the redneck, by proximity to the supposed waste site, may be considered something that has been “disposed of” by wider society, the redneck here retains the potential for renewal. As the saying goes, while the redneck subject and redneck space is considered society’s ‘trash,’ they become their own treasure.

VII. Unsophistication and Excess

The final aspect of the redneck persona is one noted in both Foxworthy’s personal definition and the OED’s contemporary definition of redneck: that is, unsophistication (“glorious” or not). Like deviance, unsophistication is presented as an inattention to or unawareness of polite society rules; whereas deviance causes rednecks to defiantly break these rules as an assault on WASP culture, unsophistication better informs accidental social blunders. In short, defiance is active while unsophistication is inactive. For this reason, deviance is most easily seen in redneck actions—shooting a gun or guzzling a beer, for example.

Unsophistication, on the other hand, is assumed through the perception of redneck objects and symbols, the images that frame the redneck subject such as clothing, decoration, and scenery. These redneck textures may be collectively referred to as the “redneck aesthetic,” to revise Gael Sweeney’s “white trash aesthetic” (249).
In her discussion of “White Trash Culture,” Gael Sweeney describes the aesthetic of poor rural whites as “the true American Primitive,” “an aesthetic of the flashy, the inappropriate, [and] the garish” (249). Conversely, WASP culture—borrowing from the North’s Puritan aesthetic of the “plain and pure”—values an aesthetic that is “simple, spare, thin, and understated” (Sweeney 255). Hence, the redneck aesthetic exaggerates, overstates, and multiplies the aesthetic of the dominant order; in this way, the redneck aesthetic is truly an aesthetic of excess.

This valuation of excess may seem particularly interesting, if not contradictory, in the context of the redneck’s inherent lack discussed earlier on. Yet, if we are to understand ‘sophistication’ as the [aesthetic] ideology of dominant WASP society (and therefore—thin, simple, understated), the redneck’s position outside of that society prevents the full transmission—or at least, the full understanding—of such an ideology. In this way, the redneck ‘lacks’ a dominant cultural system that demands aesthetic lack; as such, the redneck aesthetic highlights overabundance and inundation—excess.

The redneck aesthetic also aligns with excess through WASP culture’s description of said aesthetic as ‘trashy.’ As Sweeney notes, “trash is always garbage,” and garbage is “the excess at the margins of society” (255). Physical manifestations of the redneck aesthetic are considered by the dominant society to be the lowest form of art, below both upper class “high culture” and middle class “popular” culture—in short, the redneck aesthetic centers on objects marked as kitsch, a term that will be employed throughout this section (Sweeney 260).

In Foxworthy’s comedy, the boundaries between redneck excess and lack are negotiated at the site of redneck unsophistication. Sweeney defines excess as “meaning out of control”; therefore, it can be argued that an object of the [excessive] redneck aesthetic has uncontrolled, polyvalent, shifting meanings: although the original ‘meaning’ or purpose of the neon Budweiser
sign was for advertising, its new placement within the redneck home might serve as a display of personal taste, or a memory of a wild night at the bar, or even, simply, as home décor—if not all three. While the sign might be viewed, on one hand, as a symbol of redneck lack—the lack of money to buy new décor, a lack of ‘sophistication’ in terms of taste, etc.—it is also quite clearly a symbol of redneck excess through its multiple functions and meanings. In the following section, I examine how unsophistication manifests in a number of redneck jokes: first, how Elvis is posited as a standard of excess that rednecks consistently surpass through their consumption of his iconography; second, how rednecks challenge the very notions of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ aesthetics through their presentation of literal waste as artwork; and finally, how rednecks play with and even revise socially-imposed body boundaries by introducing tools reserved for the purity of the mouth into natural, dirty space of the feet, and vice versa.

A. Surpassing Elvis’ limits of excess

Of all the symbols of redneck kitsch, images and iconography of Elvis Presley may be some of the most frequently recurring—and the most complex. The white trash/poor white aesthetic’s intense devotion for Elvis, argues Sweeney, is rooted in his legacy as an icon of and for the excessive; he is as much “a figure of terror and the grotesque” as he is a “spectacle of excess and release” (251). In this way, Elvis may be understood as the very standard of excessive living and the excessive life. In the case of Foxworthy’s redneck jokes, however, it is not Elvis’s excess that is central to the jokes, but the redneck’s; indeed, through their consumption of this figurehead of excess, rednecks actually surpass the limits Elvis had drawn before them.

Although Sweeney, and many other Elvis scholars, have convincingly drawn a connection between the adoration of Elvis fans and religious worship, Foxworthy’s jokes point
out, if anything, the excessiveness and distinctly kitschy quality of this adoration. One joke, for example, reads: “You might be a redneck if…your wife has a Jell-O mold that looks like Elvis” (*Biggest Book* 111). The humor of this joke lies in the redneck’s ability to make an icon of excess even more excessive. First, the idea of constructing a food item into the likeness of a saintly figure is inherently blasphemous; it lacks the metaphorical discretion of the communion wafer. Secondly, Jell-O is something of a ‘novelty’ food item, a jiggling, sugary, “just-add-water” packaged food. Clearly, it is not enough to iconize and worship Elvis; instead, there is a desire to *consume* the excessive figurehead. It is no coincidence, of course, that unbridled consumption is a defining factor of excess itself—as Sweeney notes, it was “the obese Elvis of the seventies” rather than “the sexy Young Elvis of the fifties” who most obviously and visually represented excessive overindulgence (256).

Another method of extra-excessive consumption is the metaphorical consumption of Elvis via the fandom’s impersonation tradition. In yet another cartoon, Foxworthy toys with the most extreme forms of excess:

*(Biggest Book* 5)
Impersonation is, of course, an already excessive activity; it involves a previously-marked excessive person (the redneck) acting the part of a previously-marked excessive figurehead (Elvis); in such a way, excess is exacerbated. The cartoon, however, takes excess away from Elvis and writes it onto the redneck family. The mother in the foreground is excessively overweight, has a heart tattoo on her shoulder, and wears clothing that might be considered ‘too tight’; a cigarette dangles from her mouth over the head of her infant child. The man at the center of the illustration, presumably the father, has facial hair somewhere between day-old stubble and a real beard. The male figure at far right lurks in the background, flashing a creepy smile that shows nearly rotten teeth, indicating, perhaps, more tobacco use or other drug use. Almost everything about these people is already excessive, from weight to tobacco use. Compounded with the ridiculous Elvis bouffant wigs, excess is taken to its highest height through hyperbole: “everyone” is an Elvis impersonator; Saint Elvis the Excessive now comes in all ages, shapes, sizes, and genders—and you can see a performance with all of them at once.

B. The excessive body and the excess of the body

As the previous jokes worked to classify the redneck body as an excessive body, there is a multitude of jokes that also feature excesses of the body—defecation, urination, and flatulence are all common themes of Foxworthy’s redneck jokes. Yet, perhaps the most interesting ways in which bodily excess theme is handled are in two jokes about the “waste” of surgical procedures: “You might be a redneck if…You have your appendix in a jar, sitting on your mantel, with the track lighting focused on it” and “You might be a redneck if…You made jewelry out of your gallstones” (Biggest Book 188 & 195). In both of these jokes, lack is transformed into excess

---

5 This character is shown in other illustrations and is usually characterized as a pedophiliac uncle figure. See Biggest Book page 16.
through the revision of multiple boundaries: between trash and art, memory and amnesia, the grotesque and the sublime.

Gallstones and the appendix are, by all means, considered ‘trash’—they have no specific ‘meaning’ or function, they are offal meant to be disposed of; indeed, in both cases, the removal of both gallstones and the appendix is meant to be done for the person’s well-being—actually keeping these wastes might be hazardous to your health. Yet, the redneck subject in both jokes retains the hazardous waste and makes it into decoration, whether for the home (the appendix) or the body (the gallstone jewelry). By recontextualizing these things as decoration, the redneck assigns new meaning to them as art so that they are transformed from functionless to functional, as decoration.

Aside from imbuing these seemingly meaningless biomaterials with meaning as decoration, there is arguably a second meaning at play here: that of the nostalgic, the personal. These objects were not only made of or within the body, but through their recontextualization as art, they were also made by [the hands of] the body. Because the gallstone as jewelry and the appendix as sculpture were handcrafted (or body-crafted), the display of these art pieces is also meaningful in that it displays the handiwork of the redneck artisan. What the redneck wants to show off and preserve as memory, the WASP actor would rather suppress or, better yet, forget entirely.

Finally, the rednecks of these jokes play with the very foundations of aesthetics by toying with the division between the grotesque and the sublime. To a WASP subject, an appendix or gallstone is a purely grotesque object: it is ugly and unclean, functionless and meaningless; it is non-art, even anti-art, and therefore must be contained and concealed. When the object is exposed upon its removal from the body, it is re-concealed through disposal. WASP sensibilities
dictate a private and immediate disposal of bodily excretions, such as flushing waste down the toilet. These bodily excesses are never the topic of polite conversation, much less a ‘conversation piece’ on public display. For the redneck to put this grotesque object on display, for any reason, may be seen as a revision to prevailing notions of beauty and meaning; in short, the redneck presents an item of bodily excess as something closer to the sublime than the grotesque. In this way, the redneck’s unsophisticated move to display WASP-characterized non-art as artful decoration reinserts meaning—indeed, multiplicitous meanings—into a WASP-characterized meaningless object, an appendix or gallstone.

C. Negotiating the foot into the mouth

Because the redneck subject is so adept at re-drawing boundary lines through revisions of meaning, it is not surprising that many of Foxworthy’s jokes feature the redneck subject using a tool in different ways than its intended function: “You might be a redneck if…You have used a potato peeler to remove a corn,” “You might be a redneck if…Your pocketknife doubles as a toenail clipper and a cheese slicer,” or “You might be a redneck if…You’ve ever used a tablespoon as a shoehorn” (Biggest Book 190, 210, 239). Yet again, these jokes focus on the boundaries of the body—specifically, the expansive separation between the feet and the mouth; in these jokes, rednecks toy with the boundaries between these two spaces by reducing the degree to which the two must be separated.

The tools of these jokes—the potato peeler, the pocketknife, and the tablespoon—bridge the gap between the feet and the mouth as somewhat neutral devices between the two bodily zones. The feet and mouth are nearly perfect opposites through both their distance on the body and the signified meanings of each symbol. Typically, the mouth is a pure—even immaculate—
part of the body; as the entry to the digestive system, it may also be understood as the barricade between the outer world and a person’s lifeblood, the fundamental systems that allow for their existence. Because of the mouth’s purity and the various impurities of the outer world, it is highly susceptible to degradation—sickness or death. Furthermore, the mouth may also be considered a synecdoche for a person’s humanity and, by extension, their sophistication. Not only is it the space where speech originates (the very foundation for communication), but it is also a space where ‘tastes’ are developed—both the corporeal perception of flavors and, metaphorically, the perception of preference and appreciation of certain aesthetics. Feet, however, are almost explicitly associated with dirt and filth; as the part of the body closest to the ground, they are also closest to nature and, therefore, dirt. Even though feet are protected and distanced from dirt by the protection of shoes and socks, they are still associated with filth from their sour smell and proclivity for carrying infections and developing unsightly sores, warts, and/or calluses. If the mouth is a symbol for a person’s refined humanity, the feet are an often uncomfortable reminder of his or her proximity to the crude natural wilderness.

It is interesting to note that, in the first and third jokes, the tools are associated with the mouth but used on the feet (the pocketknife, however, is already a multifunctional tool, neither relegated to the feet or mouth). By taking the tablespoon and the potato peeler away from mouth-associated activities (cooking and eating) and using it on the foot, the tools have been not only contaminated with dirt and filth, but recontextualized as a tool of dirt’s natural, wild spaces. Whether or not the kitchen utensils are cleaned and sanitized, the memory of their use within dirt-ridden spaces lingers, drawing a more immediate connection between the spaces of man and nature, and therefore, bringing them in closer proximity with each other. Indeed, this proximity is
nowhere more pronounced than in the second joke, in which a single tool used neutrally between the two strata is noted for its movement between those spaces.

This is, again, a redneck revision of perceived lack into excess. WASP subjects might perceive these jokes as yet more evidence that rednecks lack sophistication, or the dominant rules—both scientific and social—that separate the two spheres from close contact due to health concerns. These jokes might also be said to represent financial lack, that the redneck subject simply lacks the money to afford both a shoehorn and a tablespoon, for example. However, the redneck’s use of a single object for multiple tasks can be read as excessive in multiple ways. First, the redneck again revises the object so that it moves from single- to multi-purpose, thereby granting it an excess of functionality. Second, the redneck’s continued use of the mouth-associated tools for the purposes of consumption after using the tool in the dirty space of the foot might be read as desire for excessive consumption. In this way, the redneck not only consumes dirt, but all the excessive natural qualities associated with it.

Lastly, there is an indication here—and in the previous three sections as well—that lack is almost fully dependent on the redneck’s perception of lack. This speaks back to the redneck’s pioneer spirit—making the most out of what one has, or at the very least, making do. In all these sections, the excessive redneck aesthetic has worked to challenge and revise notions of redneck lack, whether by surpassing the limits of excess as defined by Elvis, questioning the valuation of taste by presenting bodily excess as art, or overcoming lack by inventing excess in the functionality of the materials at their disposal.
VIII. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, the redneck has been shown time and again to be a liminal, dualistic character. The term’s historical definition grants a narrow, statistical definition for the redneck identity whereas the contemporary usage is more generalized. Furthermore, the term is used as both an insult and a positive self-identifier. Historical constructions of the identity have displayed the redneck as both a laughable fool and a violent antagonist. Eugenic studies have situated the redneck as a racially mixed ‘other’ somewhere between black and white. Foxworthy’s ethnic framing of the identity has done some work to remove the redneck from normative WASP identity, yet the redneck does retain all the markers of WASP identity (excepting implied class status).

Similarly, the close readings that examined redneck deviance, obsolescence, and unsophistication showcased the redneck’s skill in transcending and revising the boundaries set in place by dominant society. Whereas redneck deviance antagonizes and subverts dominant structures in a way that makes themselves plainly seen, redneck obsolescence toys with liminality through camouflage or invisibility. Unsophistication, in yet another way, raises questions about the “why?” of boundary lines by disgusting their audience and employing aspects of the grotesque.

Conclusively, it appears that the seemingly incurable contradictions of these many different redneck classifications are used as tools to navigate a world in which they are not the dominant actors. Just as rednecks consume the Jell-O mold of Elvis, the king of excess, in order to consume his aesthetic power, the rednecks in Foxworthy’s jokes appear to have consumed the labels pinned to them by outside forces to retain the relative merit of each. In this way,
Foxworthy’s comedy grants rednecks a sort of subversive liminal power that allows them to toy with the boundaries of their compartmentalized world.

However, Foxworthy’s comedy is not simply an uncomplicated, overwhelmingly positive and empowering presentation of the redneck identity. The serialization of these redneck jokes consequentially offers up the redneck identity as little more than a neatly packaged container of redneck cultural knowledge. It is assumed that, once all parts of the series are acquired, then total cultural knowledge is achieved. The transmission of ‘total’ cultural knowledge—if such a thing is possible—simply cannot be accomplished by a single persona within that culture. Many Southern and Appalachian writers have spoken out against Southern identity stereoty pes, by both Foxworthy and others, saying redneck jokes do little more than to resolve the “dissonance” or “difference between the [redneck] image and the reality” of redneck people, or people living in redneck spaces (Shelby 154).

Although Foxworthy might be reaching or just past the peak of his career, the research of this thesis remains relevant now more than ever with the meteoric rise of “redneck reality” TV shows such as Duck Dynasty and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, of which the former was “averaging 8.4 million views” in 2013 (Keveney 2013). Although these shows are very obviously—albeit loosely—scripted, the genre’s claim of ‘realistic’ redneck representations exacerbate the problematic effects of serialization displayed in Foxworthy’s jokes.

Furthermore, it would certainly be interesting to do a study of if, how, and where Foxworthy’s jokes use redneck identity as a claim to social victimization and, therefore, exemption from normative race- or gender-based privileges, among others; although this topic was beyond the scope of this particular thesis, my brief encounters with Foxworthy’s other types
of comedy (the Blue Collar Comedy Tour films specifically come to mind) would have me believe that this is a common goal in the task of asserting redneck identity.
Works Cited


