disrupted. The proper Self is back on stride with its narrative line that it must maintain against disruptions at all costs. But the bodies and the fantasies that Ed has tried to bury in his narrative refuse to stay put. As he is preparing to leave, he encounters an eerie scene. The bodies in the local graveyards are being dug up and moved to escape the rising waters of the dammed river. The movie closes with a nightmare: looking over the still, murky waters of the lake, a hand slowly breaks the surface and jarringly fills the frame. Ed jolts awake in his bed. There is no escape from the body that the narrative allegedly sealed over. And the Self, loose against its dangerous Others, now spreads out over the boundaries of fantasy and the real. In these drifting, haunted scenes is an unarticulated play of meaning that stands poised in the refuse of a civilized narrative, waiting to rupture that line.

We can sense this other dangerous aspect of narrative in the wreckage that the men’s journey leaves behind. Trash involves a construction of meaning based in diffusion, of repeated tangles, and being stuck. The Self is disrupted and cannot remove itself, constructing meaning of events that leave open an unaccountable edge to the world. The ruptures are not sealed over, and the account becomes a diffusion of meaning through a compilation of details and images that are fed or heaped up in the story.

Too often, efforts to conceptualize culture rely on unconsciously classed perceptions of bodily conduct and narrative coherence. As well, a certain sense of propriety deflects interest in such taboo objects of our culture as insults and degrading names. Ethnographies that include white trash seem at a loss as to what to do with the name (Foley 1990; Gitlin and Hollander 1970; Howell 1973). It appears as a bit of data, but the content and form of its designation seem analytically inaccessible. The notion of white trash poetics, derived from the example of Deliverance and other mass-produced cultural objects, offers a means of understanding both the charged, degrading content of the stereotype and the formal class relationships that structure its use and appearances (Fox 2004). This poetics is a means of grasping the aesthetic dimensions of class relations—in narrative and other expressive cultural forms—that too often are either dismissed as irrelevant to social analysis or disregarded by the use of value-laden artistic criteria that implicitly devalue products of “low” culture. Making these aesthetic aspects of class conflict the centerpiece of cultural analysis is the subject of the following chapter.

Disadvantage is a key basis for assessing the significance of race in this country. Discrepant life chances associated with race are primary evidence that racial discrimination remains active and powerful. Cumulative forms of racial disadvantage—financial, social, and in terms of health—provide the grounds for generalized assertions about whiteness as a form of privilege and blackness as a condition of subordination. But a closer look at poverty and race in the United States should make us more cautious about such generalizations and the ambiguous complexities of racial matters. For instance, there are two glaring and enduring facts about poverty in this country: a disproportionate number of Latinos and African Americans are poor, but whites compose the majority of poor people in the United States. The first fact leads many commentators to stress the correlation between poverty and race, yet this emphasis dismisses or ignores the far larger numbers of poor whites. But does taking into account the condition of poor whites necessarily undermine an attention to the relationship between race and poverty? It should not. Analyzing the situation of poor whites actually provides a critical basis for grasping why and how race matters, but it does entail moving beyond generalized statements about whiteness and blackness.

Arguably the greatest insight generated by whiteness studies is the assertion that whites are racially interested and motivated social actors rather than unmarked, normative paragons of the mainstream. Yet this funda-
mental recognition is limited by the insistence that whiteness is strictly equivalent with forms of domination and privilege. If we are to understand the fast-changing significance of race—the way racial identities and formations are being remade and reinvented today—then we also have to examine whites who are not in positions of privilege. And we have to do this with specific attention to race, understanding it as more than an absolute bipolar relation of advantage and disadvantage or domination and subordination. Such an approach certainly risks muddying the view of the association between disadvantage and racial discrimination, but it brings an ability to understand race in a far more nuanced manner, which is necessary as racial matters become more complicated and mutable.

This chapter takes up this task by examining a series of labels for poor whites: hillbilly, redneck, and white trash. These marked forms of white identity each derive from and respond to the dissonance raised in the American cultural imaginary by linking whiteness and poverty. But they also reflect distinct forms of social positioning and cultural representations that lead us further in understanding how white racial identity operates. Usage of these terms in popular culture evidences the tangled interplay of cultural poetics and social conditions as poor whites articulate a discursive identity in the dense conflation of race, gender, and class. In contrast to an innocuous self-referent like “white guy,” which makes a passing, often dismissive, self-effacing gesture toward acknowledging racial identity, redneck, hillbilly, and white trash bear traces of the history of drawing boundaries between whites and people of color and of traditions of intraracial distinctions in this country. These terms emphatically inscribe a charged form of difference marked off from the privileges and powers of whiteness, each demarcating an inside and an outside to “mainstream” white society. Though it is easy to assume that these racial labels are synonymous, the differences from which they are historically derived and that they continue to inscribe reflect fundamental social dimensions to whites’ lives and interests that are obscured by the concept of whiteness and are critical to the task of rendering this racial identity in specific terms rather than abstractions or generalizations. The manifold uses of these derogatory terms in U.S. popular culture offer an excellent means to grasp both the enduring intraracial dynamics that have long maintained the unmarked status of whiteness and the intriguing, complex current forms of name-calling that whites engage in as they attempt to navigate increasingly fraught social terrains in the United States from economically tenacious subject positions.

These terms reflect distinct processes of racialization and thus frame a challenge facing whiteness studies. Whites need to be examined not just as shaped by ideological operations of whiteness as a hegemonic construct, but as racial subjects. This entails recognizing whites as subjects whose identity is nested within a variety of overlapping discourses on belonging and difference, generated in particular social relations, and indexing a host of cultural positions or statuses—and not simply as reproducers of latent or blatant forms of racism. Just as the broad cultural and political dimensions of blackness cannot be reduced to a response to racism, the significance of white racial identity, developed through class- and gender-based intraracial contests over belonging and difference, cannot be wholly equated with racist perceptions, beliefs, or actions. Tracking the uses of these epithets through popular culture in the United States today, where the racialness of whites is close to the surface, should make this point apparent.

Current uses of redneck, hillbilly, and white trash reveal critical dimensions of the stratified social terrain of white social identity, as well as the rhetorical means of boundary maintenance work that whites pursue in stabilizing and reproducing the homogenizing practices that both occult these differences and project an ostensibly nonracialized (i.e., unmarked) social position of authority and dominance. These instances of name-calling evidence the forms of decorum or etiquette that whiteness depends on for its hegemonic position and that are consistently threatened by the words, actions, bodies, and lifestyles of various strata of whites who reveal the tenuous and artificial nature of these social conventions by their inability to conform to the decorums of whiteness. Tracking these terms in popular culture is a means to view gaps within the body of whiteness in order to understand how they may be further exploited.

**STOMPING ON BABY CHICKENS**

There are few better places to begin such a survey than statements by John Rocker, a baseball pitcher initially with the Atlanta Braves, who incited a flurry of antiracist protest and commentary across the nation when he voiced his dislike for New York City in an interview in *Sports Illustrated* magazine. Rocker explained that his loathing for the city derived from “taking the 7 train, looking like you’re going through Beirut with some kid with purple hair and some queer with AIDS right next to you.” He also complained about all the foreigners: “You can walk an entire block in Times Square without hearing a word of English” (quoted in Pearlman 1999, 60). These comments, among others from the interview, instigated a wave of
public protests and accusations of racism against Rocker that led the commissioner of baseball to levy a stiff, twenty-eight-game suspension and $20,000 fine on Rocker. The beleaguered Rocker tried an interesting tack to counter his depiction as a clear public example of the enduring operation of white racism. In a subsequent ESPN interview, he insisted that he was not a “racist,” just a “redneck.” Rocker was soon traded to Cleveland, where he struggled to fit in with teammates and to get along with fans, due, in part, to his public notoriety. One source of conflict in the clubhouse came to light when Rocker derivatively labeled a teammate white trash. However, this epithet received scant media attention and provoked no public outcry at all.

The example of Rocker helps to highlight distinctions in the usage of these three terms. Quite simply, redneck is something Rocker doesn’t mind being: it is an identity that can be invested with valor, in contrast to the loathsome image of the white racist (though, for some, redneck and racist remain synonymous). In contrast, white trash is something even John Rocker holds in low esteem. It operates here intraracially, inscribing a sense of contempt and distinction that even a self-identified redneck and publicly pilloried racist feels is critical to maintain. The lack of public outrage over his use of white trash also evidences a key component of this term’s operation. White, middle-class liberals learn very young not to use epithets with racial connotations, but they receive quite different messages from their parents concerning labels for poor whites, the most naturalized of which is white trash.

Rocker’s is only one of many instances of the use of redneck in popular culture, but this form is the most common, featuring the term as a means of self-identification. There are certainly instances where redneck is applied in public contexts in a disparaging and dismissive manner, but most usage involves individuals claiming this marked social identity. These forms of self-identification are distinctive in that they continually allude to the charged terms of difference between whites; they underscore rather than efface the distinctions that inform the severely sloped terrain of power and privilege of whiteness by animating and inhabiting the most extreme caricatures of white rural poverty and ignorance. Within this position of marked whiteness there are two distinct strategies employed by those who self-identify as redneck: one approach seeks to actively counter the stereotyped connotations of this label, whereas an opposite tack asserts a stance squarely within these disparaged features.

Two great examples of these different strategies of self-identification are the Redneck Games, held annually in Dublin, Georgia, and the American Redneck Society. Membership in the latter comes with a year’s subscription to the society’s newsletter, the *Mullet Wrapper*, plus a certificate of membership, an inscription of the redneck creed—“Just because we talk slow doesn’t mean we think slow”—plus two bumper stickers. The American Redneck Society uses the *Mullet Wrapper*, with a subscription base of ten thousand, to counter stereotypes of poor whites, such as those voiced by one reporter covering the society, who noted: “Apparently, not all rednecks look like extras from *The Dukes of Hazard* and decorate their lawns with old appliances. In fact, they come from all walks of life and from every corner of America” (Marchand 1997, 12). Against this grudging acceptance and fairly benign acknowledgment that rednecks might be everywhere—a point best evidenced by the enormous popularity of Jeff Foxworthy’s comic routine, “You might be a redneck . . .”—other whites so labeled sound a very loud, contrary claim, asserting the disreputable, southern connotations of the term, as brazenly promoted by the Annual Redneck Games.

This event, which has drawn a combined crowd of fifty thousand people between 1996 and 2003, puts on display a range of buffoonish activities that purport to represent this distinctive white tribe. Contests feature bobbing for pigs’ feet, hubcap hurling, seed spitting, the armpit serenade, and dumpster diving; festivities commence with a ceremony displaying a propane torch. As the torch suggests, the games originated as a spoof of the Olympics and other established athletic venues. Confederate flags are displayed enthusiastically, either worn emblazoned on shirts, hats, bikinis, or pants or hung on boats and campers or carried about on poles. The mud pit produces a bit of “color” on participants, visibly marking their redneck status as one pale white body after another plunges into a mud pool to emerge dripping red. Such public performances might start out critiquing the stereotypes but end up actively reproducing them—perhaps because, in the end, participants tangibly feel the weight of the social distinctions that animate the stereotype and recognize that these cannot be easily dispelled. In that regard, why not at least retain an identity, one that does provide performative room for maneuver? As one of the Redneck Games organizers put it, observers “seem to think we are portraying Southern people as unintelligent, beer-swilling hicks.” Rather, “we just like to have fun” (Pappas 1999, 45).

Such public displays by rednecks are not merely reflexive responses to widely circulated, disparaging depictions of lower-class whites. Each element of these performances bears some link to actual social practices and a certain cultural condition. The most systematic attempt to survey the cultural content of redneck is quite likely Bethany Bultman’s (1996) *Redneck*
Heaven: Portrait of a Vanishing Culture. Bultman compiles beliefs and practices, stories and traditions, even recipes and advice that define and inform “redneck culture,” which she argues evidence Celtic origins. Bultman travels the nation interviewing people who both claim this charged label and follow a set of “codes” or “values” that she discerns as central to “redneck ideology.” These largely hinge on Attitude, “a genetic inability to kiss butt,” derived from both the necessity and the willingness to flout social conventions. Jim Goad’s (1997) Redneck Manifesto asserts a similar definition: “A redneck, as I define it, is someone both conscious of and comfortable with his designated role of cultural jerk. While hillbillies and white trash may act like idiots because they can’t help it, a redneck does it to spite you. A redneck is someone who knows you hate him and rubs that in your face.” This antagonistic, disparaged stance can be seen as informing a core of cultural practices from music to athletics to work. Bultman’s compilation of aphorisms, culinary practices, forms of ingenuity, sexual habits, styles of labor and recreation, and devotional dispositions amounts to a range of cultural practices framed by, but not reducible to, responses to economic constraints or social stigmatization. This cultural view, though, is predicated on a charged contrast to hillbillies and white trash, who, as Goad notes, “can’t help” the way they act, reflecting brute economic determinism rather than cultural identity.

The core feature Bultman discerned in redneck, a socially boisterous Attitude, also often undercuts claims to a serious and coherent cultural identity. In its place, the transgressive dimensions of redneck counteract against efforts at asserting a “respectable” identity in the stratified terrains of whiteness. An example of this tension is framed by two Web sites that, at first impression, seem to have a good deal in common. Dixie-Net and RedNeck.org each assert a form of separate southern white identity, rupturing a public decorum of whiteness that eschews direct invocations of racial self-identity; but each does so in ways that reflect “respectable” and “disreputable” class divisions. Dixie-Net features petitions for southern reparations as well as various states’ rights efforts and in opposition to “Southern ethnic cleansing.” The site also features the League of the South’s Declaration of Southern Cultural Independence, which opens: “We, as citizens of the sovereign States of the South, proclaim before Almighty God and before all nations of the earth, that we are a separate and distinct people, with an honorable heritage and culture worthy of protection and preservation. Standing in the very place where our President Jefferson Davis stood in 1861, we declare that Southerners are entitled, like all peoples, to self-determination.” The site is packed with notices of conferences and associations, links to journals and newsletters, and copious lists of events that promote white southern distinctiveness. Interestingly, my keyword search of the site for “redneck” revealed “no matches on this site.”

RedNeck.org, on the other hand, wallows in many debasing images of pock, rural whites. The page opens with a warning that immediately asserts a sense of difference from the mainstream of white society: “Caution. You are entering RedNeck.org. Sissy Yankee Boys and eny uh y’aller born north of the Red River, may need to git a note from yore mamma’s or flash a lil red skin round th’a neck ta git in. Don’t step in anything, stomping around in here.” The self-deprecating use of vernacular English and misspellings reflects the transgressive emphasis of the site, a point that is further underscored by the site’s claim to be “more fun than stomping on baby chickens in yore bare feet.” Links, images, and text on the site conform to an aesthetic of the grotesque, featuring deranged deer hunters, sex with farm animals, public urination, and a slew of redneck jokes. Each caricatured depiction asserts a stance that, quite in contrast to the efforts of a site like Dixie-Net, inhabits, ratifies, and indulges stereotypes of poor rural whites, finding them enjoyable rather than abhorrent.

Tara McPherson (2000), in “I’ll Take My Stand in Dixie-Net: White Guys, the South, and Cyberspace,” assesses how such sites operate in the post–civil rights public discourse of the United States. McPherson deftly uses Dixie-Net as an example of how “cyberwhitening” occurs in online discussions and virtual communities. She finds that “the default setting is all too white” at this site, because discussions of racism are directly squelched and invocations of the South as an imagined community consistently promote an implicitly white racial subject. But McPherson asserts that it takes more than an attention to racism to analyze these sites because participants “do not believe themselves to be racist,” and “labeling them and their cyberspaces as ‘racist’ does little to help us understand how they understand either whiteness or blackness” (124). After detailing how the play of images and texts interpellates the viewer into a white subject position, she then demonstrates how, by coining new languages and investing old signs with new meanings, these sites surprisingly fashion a “subaltern counterpublic.” This leads McPherson to a challenging question: “What does it mean that white, mostly middle-class men—the group that we usually see as important players in the public sphere—feel the need for alternative publics?” She adds, “These men
clearly see themselves as marginalized because of their southernness, and they actively construct spaces in which this origin can be discussed, celebrated, and protected from attacks, real or imagined” (126).

Whiteness, as McPherson (2000, 126) observes, is reproduced through these sites, particularly as discussions of white southernness couched in terms of ethnicity deflect attention to “the privileges whiteness confers and often functions as yet another form of covert racism.” Yet McPherson also regards this experience of perceived marginality—exaggerated or not and certainly varied in its intensity along a continuum of class positions—as a means “to make whiteness strange” by amplifying the forms of difference its homogenizing practices obscure. In terms of the experience of social marginalization, we can discern in these two Web sites different strategies: one striving for the “respectability” of social practices like conferences, petitions, and redemptive, scholarly research to valorize this condition; the other, conversely, flouting social conventions and underscoring the debasing differences. This latter, redneck approach acknowledges the indelibility of class markings and the interminable importance of class distinction in determining matters of belonging and difference.

The work of redneck in popular culture in the United States opens up a space within whiteness, one that clearly features the diacritics of class and regional difference that importantly score the social landscape of white identity. Caricatured behaviors and beliefs may be claimed as forms of self-identification under the label, but they still resonate with usages of the term to inscribe a contemptuous form of difference among whites. These connotations are notably on display in the computer game “Redneck Rampage.” The designers claim that it is “far away the most profane computer game in the history of mankind,” which, along with the excessive amounts of blood and gore, are clearly a strong selling point. The distinguishing feature of “Redneck Rampage” is that it enthusiastically animates the most debasing tropes from the poor rural white stereotype. The representational dynamic is underscored by the fact that rednecks are the ones being slaughtered in the game. The storyline features “Leonard and Bubba’s” efforts to “get back their prize-winning pig who’s abducted by aliens . . . in the fictional town of Hickston, Arkansas.” Players blast their way through country bars and trailer parks, slaughtering rednecks left and right. The game’s promo reads: “If you thought navigating a melted-down Los Angeles or sneaking around ogres’ castles was tough, then just try your hand a-whippin and a-stompin the good ole boys at Stanky’s Bar & Grill.” Clearly, part of the allure here is bloodletting in a scene of socially disparaged poor whites.

DOWN FROM THE HILLS

Hillbilly applies to a social collective similar to that covered by redneck, but rather than defined by Attitude, its usage entails greater regional specificity and perhaps more historical depth and coherence. Public uses of hillbilly also provoke a sharper response from whites so labeled. Hillbilly burns sharply and poignantly in the memory of many poor whites and engenders strong antipathy. One source of this sentiment is that hillbilly has a longer record of use in the public domain than redneck; it entered the popular lexicon quite early and served active duty as an acceptable, derisive term. What makes the label insidious is that its connotations often seem comic and buffoonish rather than offensive, which renders its effects harder to confront. This comic dimension is underscored in the effort by CBS to revive The Beverly Hillbillies as part of their reality programming, featuring a new family of “real” hillbillies cast in today’s Beverly Hills and offering Americans yet another way to see poor whites debased in public.

However, the most common current usage of hillbilly is in relation to music, reflecting the term’s historical status in popular culture. In the 1920s, hillbilly was used by record companies to characterize and market the music being produced by whites in both rural and urban areas throughout the South. This marketing practice paralleled the “race records” approach of the major labels, segregating early jazz and blues recordings. In this regard, hillbilly was racialized as white but also clearly marked as distinct from the mainstream audiences and musical practices of white society broadly. Tony Scherman (1994, 42) relates how music producers and marketers tried to fix a label to this emerging regional style of music: “Record companies restlessly tried out ‘Old Time Songs,’ ‘Old Familiar Tunes,’ ‘Mountain Ballads.’ Gradually a single name emerged: mingling amusement and derision, it neatly encapsulated America’s feeling about the new genre: hillbilly.” Through fits of fashion and in conjunction with the dramatic midcentury demographic shifts in the United States as rural people migrated to industrialized urban areas, the popularity of hillbilly rose and fell over the next eight decades. Rural whites derided as hillbillies in the North at first took solace in the image and the music; as they assimilated to middle-class urban lifestyles, they gradually rejected the genre and the label. Beginning in the 1980s, hillbilly commenced one of several returns to modest popularity, reflecting discontent with white suburbia or the disillusionment of downward mobility and deindustrialization.

Hillbilly is currently enjoying a resurgence, as noted by Billboard maga-
zine: “Now, a crop of current entertainers, including Toby Keith and Montgomery Gentry, are bursting out of the proverbial closet and proudly waving the hillbilly banner” (Jessen 2000, 60). These performers appeal to whites who find themselves distanced from middle-class society or on the fringe of economic survival. Montgomery Gentry’s hit “Hillbilly Shoes” earned an early release from Columbia “because radio jumped on it early.” Audiences were enthused over the song’s depiction of righteous rejections of descending social judgments. “You want to judge me by the whiskey on my breath / You think you know me but you ain’t seen nothing yet / Till you walk a while, a country mile / In my hillbilly shoes.” Studio executives characterize the group as “raw” and “gritty,” claiming, “There’s nothing slicked up here,” invoking the rustic realism that is a consistent feature of efforts to aestheticize cultural expressions of poor whites. Strikingly, though music industry representatives in Nashville continually try to distance themselves from the “hillbilly stereotype,” they repeatedly are drawn back into reproducing and marketing just this imagery, largely because it is lucrative, with a strong appeal to those who feel distanced from white social forms of respectability and belonging (Appel 2000).

Hillbilly may command a significant market share in current popular culture, but it is not hard to find many accounts of those who are closest to the stereotype and resent the term, refusing its relevance and rejecting it as a form of self-identification (Goster and Hummel 1997). Nationally, attention to the disparaging features of this stereotype intensified during the period when Bill Clinton campaigned for and won the presidency. Hillbilly was a label alternately applied to Clinton, his running mate, Al Gore, and a key portion of his constituency—mostly rural southern whites. Particularly affected were white residents of Arkansas. As noted in the Los Angeles Times, “Eight years after Bill Clinton first ran for president, reporters there still seethe at the hillbilly image produced by outside reporters” (Kolker 2000, A15). One sustained response to this image is the documentary The Ozarks, which “attempts to counter the stereotype of the lazy, moonshining ‘hillbilly’ image of Ozarkers with a view of a strong, proud, hardworking and independent people.” But more typical are the kinds of first-person accounts featured in an essay in Newsweek titled “Who’s a Hillbilly?,” relating stories of rural whites who are unable to escape from the “hillbilly stigma.” Author Rebecca Kirkendall (1995, 22), drawing on her personal experiences of being derided and disparaged in jokes and comments about her rural upbringing, reflects both on the reproduction of hillbilly stereotypes in popular culture and the curious way some whites participate in these forms of commercialization: “Despite their disdain for farm life—with its manure-caked boots, long hours and inherent financial difficulties—urbanites rush to imitate a sanitized version of this lifestyle. And the individuals who sell this rendition understand that the customer wants to experience hillbilly-ness without the embarrassment of being mistaken for one.” The best examples of this are the booming novelty shops of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, just outside the Great Smokey Mountain National Park, that purvey all forms of hillbilly caricature and stereotyping, largely for white southern tourists.

Social commentators, political observers, editorialists, and comedians throughout the 1990s deployed hillbilly stereotypes without much restraint, reflecting little of the self-consciousness that is increasingly afforded to depictions of ethnic and racial groups. Most notoriously, perhaps, the Wall Street Journal did not hesitate to ask in a headline “Who Is This Sex-Crazed Hillbilly?,” referring to Bill Clinton (Ferguson 1996, A9). But the most intriguing dimension of uses of hillbilly in the past three presidential campaigns is the way it materialized across party lines. The same imagery that was invoked to characterize Clinton’s supporters was also mobilized in relation to George W. Bush’s 2000 campaign. In both cases, what mattered most was the sense of difference posed by lower-class, rural, southern whites. One story in Time featured a first-person account of a campaign reporter, Steve Lopez (2000), who leaves Bush’s bus to head out on his own through the rural areas of South Carolina in order to understand Bush’s popularity. Along Highway 178 Lopez stumbles into The Roadkill Grill and meets the people of the “hillbilly nation.” “The hillbillies, it turns out, liked Bush, as did plenty of God-fearing family folk, party loyalists and the professionals who fit more comfortably into the new South Carolina.” But in pursuing reasons for this support, Lopez found only confirmations of the most stereotyped features of hillbillies: “More often than not, when I asked people, ‘Why Bush?’ it was as if they had a zine deficiency. The smile would freeze, the eyes would cloud and all signs of intelligence would fade” (36). This image reproduces the most enduring representations of rural poor whites: faded or absent intelligence, stemming from some sort of indelible physical deficiency. Obviously, despite challenges to such stereotypes in the popular media, this image is entertaining enough and gives voice to anxieties sufficiently deep to warrant its continued circulation.

Though hillbilly imagery is caustically active from California to Washington, D.C., it has burrowed most deeply in Appalachia, where concentrations of poverty and illiteracy have long nourished its most disparaging connotations. Residents feel the impact of stereotypes that construe them
as backward, lazy, and dangerous. This region has been exploited for over a hundred years by various corporate interests and government agencies, producing a degrading dynamic of dependence that continues to this day, accentuated by rampant environmental destruction caused by ongoing mining operations. Many whites in this region are far from powerful or privileged. School programs in Kentucky work to counter hillbilly stereotypes by imbuing a sense of positive cultural content through exposure to bluegrass music and other aspects of “mountain culture.” Dan Hays, executive director of the International Bluegrass Music Association, relates, “Many kids who live in these mountain areas still suffer under the hillbilly stereotypes. If you can take something that’s an important part of their culture and history and turn it into something they can be proud of, they don’t have to be ashamed of where they came from” (quoted in Simon 2001, 36). What’s tricky about such a strategy is that it does nothing to drain the reservoirs of contempt that feed such stereotypes in the first place. Indeed, these efforts risk reanimating the very cultural distinctions that are the bases for disparaging uses of hillbilly.

“AND THERE IS NOT-US, THE WHITE TRASH”

Countering poverty-related shame is certainly a challenge in Appalachia, but more difficult problems arise for the poor whites with Appalachian roots scattered in pockets of inner-city neighborhoods in the Midwest. The prejudice and discrimination confronting urban Appalachians is well documented (Mead 1995; Obermiller and Philiber 1987; Pasternak 1994). Their rates of unemployment and dropping out of high school are double that of African Americans in some neighborhoods of Cincinnati, the city with probably the largest concentration of urban Appalachians. As has been the case since they first migrated to the midwestern cities, urban Appalachians face discrimination in hiring and housing because their accents, lifestyles, and relations are indelibly marked as hillbilly. Their situation underscores a basic point in relation to each of these forms of name-calling: these rhetorical identities make it clear that whites are not uniformly privileged or powerful because of their skin color. But the more fundamental point to be drawn from hillbilly, as well as redneck and white trash, is that these stereotypes derive their enduring currency from the way they ratify a host of anxieties that white Americans hold concerning the white underclass. This nexus of anxiety and contempt is clearest in uses and depictions of white trash.

If “hillbilly” burns, “white trash” brands. What distinguishes this term from the others is not the cultural content that it grounds, but the highly emotional response of loathing and disgust the image congeals among the middle class. Even among white lower classes, white trash is primarily a distancing technique before it is an identity. As with John Rocker’s quote, claims to a redneck identity are frequently accompanied by disavowal of and distancing from white trash. A central dictum of the “redneck value system,” according to Bultman, is to “never accept a handout, ‘cause if you do you’re white trash.” Goad favorably contrasts rednecks to white trash, and as the Redneck Web site emphatically asserts, the first in the list of “What a Redneck Ain’t” is white trash. We see in white trash the dynamics of distancing and boundary maintenance that informs redneck and hillbilly distilled into a concentrated and virulent form. Further evidence of this distillation is the effect on social perception of this rhetorical identity. Hillbilly and redneck easily conjure collective images of poor whites as a social order, but white trash, perhaps because it so keenly draws attention to breaches of racial decorum, singularly renders poor whites in isolation, as evictees from the social compact. Rednecks’ anxiety over being perceived as white trash brings another dimension of this term’s usage into view. The ease of this “misperception” reflects the fact that, in terms of cultural content (body type, lifestyle, and beliefs), these two terms can be regarded as synonymous. Thus, it is not the content to which white trash refers that distinguishes this term’s usage. Rather, its rhetorical dimension demarcates an order of whites definable strictly by transgressions of the social expectations that maintain the unmarked status of whiteness and facilitate its claims to power and privilege.

White trash also demarcates the end of the class spectrum where extremes are heightened, thus allowing for bizarre transpositions to occur. White trash becomes chic in a way neither redneck nor hillbilly could ever attain. White Trash Charms is a line of jewelry from a designer in Los Angeles who bedecks Hollywood stars with bracelets, earrings, and necklaces festooned with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires bearing “trashy” logos such as “Lady Luck” and “Punk Rock.” Across the country, in Manhattan, the East Village store White Trash sells “kitschy items” that cost hundreds of dollars. Or consider how the fall 2002 fashion season featured the theme of “dust-bowl glamour,” heralded by a photo spread in the New Yorker’s “Style Special” issue that restaged Dorothea Lange imagery of poor white migrants bedraggled and besmeared in undershirts by Dolce & Gabbana, dresses by Chanel, and cardigans by Louis Vuitton. Yet another dimension of the way white trash chic operates is its invocation as an aesthetic, a representational...
approach that purports to merge high and low culture. The most recent example is the movie Scotland, PA (2001), an adaptation of Macbeth set amid the fast-food pits of rural Pennsylvania. Billy Morrissette, the film’s director and writer, asserted, “I tried to keep it just pure white trash, with a touch of Shakespeare” (“Film Capsules,” Dallas Observer, March 16–22, 2000). Similarly, Peter Steinfield, the screenwriter for Drowning Mona (2000), characterized the movie’s motif as “the white-trash Murder on the Orient Express.” In addition to these, films like Poor White Trash (1999) and Joe Dirt (2001) all claim free license to use poor whites as a stage for fashionably depicting themes that breach an array of social decorums, even for speaking out against whiteness and racism.

The forms of defensiveness that accompany redneck and hillbilly, discussed earlier, are not similarly generated by these uses of white trash, perhaps because the term’s boundary maintenance work allows little room for valorized self-identification. As well, maybe with white trash we reach a terrain where the deprivities of poor whites are so stark or severe that representational struggles are simply not a priority. Among the various strata of poor whites, white trash most readily applies to those who cannot afford membership in the American Redneck Society or who have neither the time nor the social capital required to write angry letters to the editor over depictions of hillbillies in the Wall Street Journal, the New Yorker, or the New York Times. Instead of angry outcries over such debasing uses of white trash, though, there is a notable resignification of the term under way in U.S. popular culture, whereby whites who have been subjected to the label claim it now as a form of self-identity. But grasping the cultural significance of the rise of rap star Eminem or the popularity of comedian Roseanne first requires a deeper attention to the way the label has long policed the spheres of public discourse in the United States.

The emergence of these and other self-professed white trash performers flies in the face of the traditional usage of this term to restrict a segment of whites, their interests and concerns, from being regarded seriously in public forums. Social critics use the term not just to specify a particular group but to degrade a certain condition or behavior. This is evident from Charles Murray (1993) berating “white trash culture” in the Wall Street Journal to Oklahoma governor Frank Keating characterizing methamphetamines as “a white trash drug” (“Oklahoma Governor Criticized” 1999, A32). Governor Keating made his usage of this label explicit, explaining that such drug use is practiced “by the lower socioeconomic element of white people, and I just think we need to shame it.” The distinctive characteristic of this very pub-

lic form of debasement or name-calling is to depict certain behaviors or thoughts, words or actions as outside the realm of social acceptance. And it applies wherever the traces of poor white social conditioning can be detected, as is evident in the surge of white trash references to Bill Clinton following his departure from office. As the Boston Herald proudly declared on the day following George W. Bush’s inauguration, “The white trash is out of the White House. Our long national nightmare is over” (Carr 2001, A14).

But, as Clinton’s resilience in the face of social contempt perhaps indicates, a notable transformation is under way in U.S. public discourse, a possibility best glimpsed in the rise of Eminem. “White trash” is derisively applied to the singer by cultural critics, but he also enthusiastically performs the poetics informing this abject cultural figure. Critics initially dismissed Eminem and, as with Kid Rock before him, by deploying “white trash” to levy their judgment. P. J. O’Rourke, writing in Rolling Stone, characterized Eminem as “a beyond-Faulknerian specimen of double-Y chromosome white trash who mimics all that’s loathsome and stupid in ghetto thug culture—resulting in a toilet mouth recording.” This characterization reproduces a hackneyed image of “bad breeding” in the extreme, but one that has yet to lose its social luster for “respectable” whites staring out at the likes of white trash. Eminem, as with Roseanne before him, responded to critics by embodying and performing the object of their condescension, claiming the degrading epithet as a form of self-identification. In considering this claim, it is important to do more than assess the accuracy of this label or the authenticity of his usage: Did he really grow up as poor as he claims (Echlin 2002; Eddy 2000)? Rather, the important question is whether or how his usage draws from and reworks the connotations and representational elements of white trash in U.S. public discourse.

In a variety of interviews, Eminem described his impoverished childhood in Detroit as a white trash existence. He makes the claim lyrically as well, when he describes his upbringing in “If I Had” (Aftermath Records, 1999): “Tired of being white trash, broke and always poor / Tired of taking bottles back to the party store / Tired of not having a phone, tired of not having a home to have one in if I did have it on.” But more than just claims about his personal past, Eminem performs white trash. Two aspects of his rapping style stand out in this regard. As several commentators have noted, though Eminem is drawing on the black aesthetic form of hip-hop, his nasal vocal style and the content of his lyrics clearly inscribe him as white; in crossing over or appropriating rap, he is not attempting to masquerade as black (Hancock 2003). Eminem is not just white but trashy, and he performs a
distinctive fusion of signifiers of whiteness and impoverishment that have long composed images of white trash. Unlike any self-respecting black rapper, he performs an identity of stupidity and debasement. In “Role Model,” he ironically asks, “Don’t you want to be just like me?” then flushes out lurid details that figure both abduction and the grotesque: “I’ve been with two women that got HIV / I’ve got genital warts and it burns when I pee / I tie a rope around my penis and jump from a tree.” He relies on tropes of being diseased, “clinically brain-dead,” and having “mental problems” that extend back to the eugenics family field studies. And he even draws on images of incest, as in “Kill You” (on the Marshall Mathers LP, Interscope Records, 2000): “Just bend over and take it like a slut, okay Ma. Oh, now he’s raping his own mother.” Such lyrics both preemptively respond to critics’ disparagement and fill out a stereotype that has a long history in American culture. And in “White America,” he ominously invokes a “fuckin’ army marching” of similarly debased whites rising up against the conventions and decorums of the white mainstream: “I’ve shoved shit all my life / and now I’m dumping it on white America.”

Why, then, is he so popular? There are many answers to this question, as his performances encompass a broader range of elements than those addressed here. In his own assessment, Eminem stresses the fact that many poor white kids identify with his gestures and posturing: “What people don’t realize is that there are so many poor white kids in America. They just go unnoticed, know what I’m sayin’, just because of like, statistics. There’s white trash in America, and as soon as they see a white-trash kid like me that lived a [expletive] life that they can relate to, then they go buy it because they understand it” (Wartofsky 1999). This claim links his familiarity with minimum-wage existence and all of its forms of debasement (in “If I Had,” he describes being “tired of jobs starting off at $5.50 an hour” and “tired of being fired every time I fart or cough / tired of having to work as a gas station clerk, for this jerk breathing down my neck, driving me berserk / I’m tired of using plastic silverware”) with his transcendence of those conditions, as in “Who Knew,” which relates how, in the past, “I used to get beat up, peed on, be on free lunch, and change school every three months.”

Does the success of Eminem herald a transformation of white trash? If so, the most intriguing dimension of the alteration of meanings associated with this epithet will be its racial boundary-crossing popularity (L. Holloway 2002). But whether or not Eminem’s megastar status will transform his representativeness as white trash, the term’s enduring usage will also continue to be to inscribe contempt and loathing between whites. This work typically is removed from public scrutiny and all the more effective for its ability to not draw undue attention—except for those rare occasions when the boundary maintenance work of the term is dragged into the open, as it was when Lizzie Grubman, a New York publicist, rammed her wealthy father’s Mercedes-Benz suv into a crowd outside a Hamptons nightclub, injuring sixteen people before fleeing the scene. This appalling act was instigated when a bouncer asked her to move the vehicle from a fire lane. She spat the epithet “white trash” at him, then turned the suv into a weapon, injuring the bouncer and others in the crowd in the process. This incident is instructive not simply because Grubman used the term but also because this was one of those rare instances when its usage was publicly critiqued and evaluated for its implications and assumptions. A host of social critics commented, and their reflections offer an excellent synopsis of the boundary work accomplished via this label.

For upper-class whites who noticed, Grubman’s usage was primarily a mortifying breach of etiquette, in that it led to a public spectacle. An essayist for the Washington Post used this incident as an opportunity to opine that “it has not been a well-mannered summer” and to discuss her informal investigation of whether the “social graces have disappeared,” an endeavor that involved keeping close “track of every service interaction I’ve had” over the summer, assessing the distinction between informality and indifference with plain rudeness and disrespect (Janis 2001). Another essayist, in the Hartford Courant, also used this incident to nominate Grubman as “the poster girl for bad behavior” for her indiscretions. However, she was cited as just one among a host of “famous faces [who] seem to be working overtime these days at cursing, bending the truth, evading responsibility and airing their dirty laundry” (Morago 2001, D1). Such commentators fixated on the rupture of decorum of being caught publicly using such a vulgarism enacted by social climbers like Grubman.

Another line of commentary fixated on the uneven social terrain illuminated by Grubman’s usage. Roberto Santiago (2001), in an editorial in the New York Daily News, pointed out that in her use of white trash, Grubman “made a social statement: ‘white trash’ remains the only slur that is not labeled as hate speech—and the only slur used unabashedly by all races.” Santiago notes that, with a term like white trash, there is no reciprocal, equally visceral, debasing, or morally charged name for upper-class whites. “In a fair world, ‘white trash’ would refer to those who sneer at maids, doormen, messengers and minorities. But because the slur is all about white class distinctions, the worst one can call a Lizzie Grubman is a pampered,
spoiled brat." Perhaps reflecting on the rise of white trash chic, Santiago commented further, “Sad to say, the final arbiters of what is ‘white trash’ and what is ‘cool’ are the world’s Grubmans. Body piercings, tattoos and Harleys used to be ‘white trash’ but now are embraced by the socially hip.” A view from England, the land where class culture has long been a central obsession, was conveyed in the *Daily Telegraph* by Zoe Heller (2001), who observed, “For the most part, the media have pitched the Grubman story as class war—a story about rich, ‘arrogant’ blonde girls using enormous cars given to them by their daddies to mow down the little people. This doesn’t preclude a certain kind of aspirational voyeurism of Miss Grubman’s ‘lifestyle’—gleeful accounts of where Lizzie gets her hair blown out, articles of advice from fashion experts on how she should ‘tone down her pampered look’ for her court appearances, and so on.” Heller’s attention to the upper-class fascination with this spectacle extends further, as she comments on the multivalent nature of this epithet and the way its derisive social charge can cut in many directions at once: “For all their private outrage on behalf of the humble working stiff, the reporters covering this debacle have betrayed a distinct snobbery of their own—a disdain for uppity Jewish princesses with too much privilege and no real ‘class.’ As far as the hacks are concerned, it’s Miss Grubman who’s white trash and this, no doubt, is why they have felt so free to stick the boot in.” Quite in excess of whatever cultural content or social position may be considered proper as this term’s range of reference, Heller identifies the premier purpose of white trash as a form of social distancing: inscribing an inaccessible upper sphere as well as a debased lower realm.

Finally, an editorial in the *Washington Post*, in what I assume to be a sarcastic vein, declared “pity Miss Grubman. She is a victim of our culture if ever there was one. How was she to know that it was impermissible to run over white trash? Miss Grubman knows what we all know. There is us—us in the VIP rooms, us in the VIP schools, us in the VIP jobs. And there is not-us, the white trash, and there are very different rules for what each can do to each other” (Kelly 2001). Uses of white trash inscribe and make emphatic a realm of “us” and “not-us” for whites. On one side are all the social practices, conventions, and resources, access to which assure whites a privileged and powerful status in this society. On the other side are all those reminders of both the artificial nature of these conventions and the tenuousness of claims to these resources. Antiracist critiques have long targeted “naturalizing” discourse in relation to assertions of social superiority, but the manifold ways these discourses operate in relation to class identities is largely unacknowledged in the public sphere. White trash insists on the naturalness of class identities, but in every instance of its usage one can detect as well the anxious uncertainty as to how long or how well those identities will be maintained in the face of changing economic or social circumstances.

The distinctions among these key terms—rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash—are tangible and active, reflecting historical developments and varied current circumstances for lower-class whites. But these distinctions do not counteract the fundamental similarity that links each term: they demonstrate that the social landscape of whiteness is far more complicated than we can comprehend via assertions that it is generically an unmarked, hegemonic identity. These terms reveal contests over belonging and difference in relation to whiteness that are fundamentally shaped by class. Historically, these terms have been deployed and projected to maintain the unmarked status of whiteness. But the range of current usage of these labels suggests that this tradition is changing and that poor whites are carving out identities that reference a condition of relative disadvantage within the privilege of whiteness. This identity is tangible but multivalent, shifting in intensity of its effects—at times no more real for some whites, in social terms, than any other “symbolic ethnicity,” while for other whites it is a daily inscription of social contempt and distance.

These terms specify class and regional distinctions in a manner that demonstrates that assertions about whiteness as an unmarked normative identity are only a starting point for thinking about how race matters in relation to white social identity. Their usage in popular culture also offers only an initial glimpse of the forms of significance that animate white racialness. To comprehend more fully how white racial identity is constructed and experienced it is necessary to move from the realm of representations to that of the field, to the social settings where white people perceive and project race in dense daily circumstances. The following chapter pursues this level of inquiry, but it also portrays the difficulties inherent in empirically framing social circumstances. No perspective from the field is ever transparent; rather, such views are always predetermined by theoretical orientations, political interests and debates, and the biases inherent in human observations.

Eminem makes much of his experiences in Detroit, but does he represent the white underclass in that city? Chapters 6 and 8 represent my effort to examine poor whites in Detroit: first, in relation to debates about social science knowledge production concerning poverty; then, in terms of critical deployments of the whiteness concept. To do so, I engaged in debates about the urban underclass and the role race played in producing the conditions of
concentrated poverty in American inner cities. As suggested by my comments in opening this chapter, I found that theoretical and political debates and discourse on urban poverty revolved around and reproduced delimited meanings of race. As well, I realized that much of the social knowledge being produced about the urban underclass is generated at a great remove from the actual circumstance of these people's daily lives. What I encountered in Detroit was surprising, in terms of both social science definitions of race and popular impressions of the urban underclass. Chapter 6 strives to convey the novelty of circumstances in the inner city, but it also represents my effort to depict the conditions of poor whites in that city within the overdetermined political and theoretical discourses on race in the United States. The term "urban underclass" is only obliquely useful for representing people, particularly poor whites, living in the inner city, but it is a term that can be usefully wielded to think critically about academic discourses on race and class.

CHAPTER 6
GREEN GHETTOS AND
THE WHITE UNDERCLASS

This brings us to the emergence of a white underclass. In raw numbers, European-American whites are the ethnic group with the most people in poverty, most illegitimate children, most women on welfare, most unemployed men, and most arrests for serious crimes. And yet, whites have not had an "underclass" as such, because whites who might qualify have been scattered among the working class. Instead, whites have had "white trash" concentrated in a few streets along the outskirts of town, sometimes a Skid Row of unattached white men in large cities. But these scatterings have seldom been enough to make up a neighborhood. An underclass needs a critical mass, and white America has not had one.

—Charles Murray, Wall Street Journal, October 29, 1993

The "urban underclass" is a notorious social science objectification that generates large amounts of research and intense criticism of the representational dynamics related to this concept. As with white trash, urban underclass is a degrading label, key to "socially deviant" behaviors that transgress middle-class decorums rather than to economic and social dynamics, to the point of obscuring these important dimensions. Similarly, images of both play crucial roles in processes of middle-class identity construction (see chapters 1 and 2). Depictions of the urban underclass, whether in sensational journalistic accounts or in reserved academic reports, shore up the conviction of middle-class whites that those people are different—debased and