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"You Better Redneckognize": White Working-Class People and Reality Television

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“You Better Redneckognize”: White Working-Class People and Reality Television

by

Tasha Rose Rennels

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Eunice Benson, who took her last breath as I was writing the last words of this project, a project that would never have been possible without her unwavering love and support.

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ABSTRACT

This project documents the complex and interwoven relationship between mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people—a task inspired by the author’s experiences growing up in a white working-class family and neighborhood and how she came to understand herself through watching films and television shows. Theoretically guided by Foucault’s recognition that people are constituted in and through discourse, the author specifically analyzes how reality television articulates certain ideas about white working-class people and how those who identify as members of this population, including the author, negotiate such articulations. A focus on white working-class people is important considering their increasing presence in reality television and the ways in which they are frequently ridiculed in U.S. cultural discourse. Through a combination of qualitative methods, including critical autoethnography, interviews, interactive focus groups, and close textual analysis, the author focuses on three findings: (1) the lived experiences of white working-class people are complex and can be used to challenge essentializing stereotypes about this population prevalent in the media; (2) films and television shows are polysemic as evidenced by the varied responses of white working-class people; and (3) listening to those who are implicated in media sites can render more complex the analyses and critiques scholars provide as well as contribute to the recent increase of media studies that speak across multiple methods and boundaries.

INTRODUCTION:

**NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING MEDIATED REPRESENTATIONS OF WHITE
WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE**

“We live in the Taj Mahal of the trailer park.”

Mom feeds this lie to her new friend, Laura, who is visiting our home for the first time. I cringe and run to my room, my sanctuary from embarrassment and the strains of adolescence. Seventeen has not been easy. As I slide the flimsy, faux wood accordion door open, I breathe a sigh of relief. At least in here I don’t have to witness mom trying to polish a turd.

We may own one of the few double-wide trailers¹ in the neighborhood, but Laura isn’t blind. Our ceilings are leaking. The walls, made of a material no thicker than cardboard, are lined with gaping holes—the remnants of conflict. Half our windows are missing blinds. The carpets are so stained and faded it’s hard to tell whether they are blue or brown. And a vice grip is needed to operate the broken shower faucet.

My door is closed, but I can hear Mom’s shrill laughter echo through the house. I wonder if Laura is buying her bullshit. Laura befriended my mom during a community theatre production this past summer, and she is everything I hope to be one day—hip, beautiful, college educated, happily married, and gainfully employed as a leader for a reputable company. Her new

¹ A double-wide is made of two modular units that have been connected together side by side lengthwise making the width double that of a typical mobile home.

three-story brick home is a candidate for the cover of “Better Homes and Gardens.” From the outside, her life seems like a dream.

I can’t believe Mom has exposed her to our nightmare.

Frustrated, I grab the remote to turn on my 13-inch TV hoping to drown out their conversation. I mindlessly flip through channels until I stumble across *Trailer Park Boys*, a satire about the misadventures of white ex-convicts who live in Sunnyvale Trailer Park, located in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Great, I think, another show featuring a trailer park full of white people who are filthy, criminal, and riddled with addiction. I wonder if Laura thinks the same of my family and me.

I have felt the weight of the media on my shoulders for as long as I can remember. By age 12, I developed a habit of sitting in front of the TV to compare images of white working-class people on the screen with my experiences growing up in a white working-class family and neighborhood. I would watch blockbusters like *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and see characters living in a trailer park, usually holding a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. When I pulled my eyes away from the screen, I would turn to see my parents holding the same things in their hands. I remember inhaling second hand smoke while counting the bottles of Bud Light consumed every night. It was as if the movie had never ended.

Time and time again I would make these comparisons, finding people in films and television shows who both were and were not like me. I embodied our similarities (e.g., I was white, poor, from a broken family, had experienced violence and the aftermath of substance abuse, and lived in a trailer), but felt disembodied by our differences. I was not stupid. I was not a criminal. I was not excessively sexual. I was not dirty. Yet, because most of the white working-

class people on screen were, people assumed I was, too. The “white trash”² stereotype, which permeates popular culture, had a huge impact on the way I felt others saw me, and how I saw myself.

The wind rushes through my long, blonde, sun-kissed hair as I race up the street on my rusty mountain bike to the neighborhood pool. Today, June 1, 1998, marks the first day of summer. Having survived seventh grade, I’m eager to celebrate with a swim. I approach the black metal gate surrounding the pool and see a tall boy, about my age, wearing khaki shorts, a 311 band t-shirt, and a baseball cap. He is sitting on top of a Mongoose trick bike, probably his prized possession. The small hoops dangling from both ears suggest he has an edge, which intrigues me. I wonder if he’s new to the neighborhood or just visiting. He looks at me with piercing green eyes and smiles, revealing a straight set of white teeth—my weakness. A wave of excitement rushes over me, and I can’t help but smile back.

“Hey, are you Tasha?” he asks in a surprisingly deep voice for a boy my age.

“Yea, I am,” I say cautiously. “Who are you and how did you know my name?”

“I’m Sean. I live on the other side of town and go to Delano High.”

“Cool! I know a few people who go there.”

“That’s cool. You go to Rockford High, right?”

“Yep.”

“I know some people from your school, too. I was actually hanging out here in the trailer

² According to Heavner (2007), this term, commonly associated with those who are white and struggle to make ends meet, marks and makes whiteness visible. Associating “trash” with white people who are clinging to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder justifies their marginalization and consequently challenges the privileges their racial identity affords (Newitz and Wray, 1997).

park last week with a couple of juniors, Nate Packer and Scott Brown. Do you know them?"

"Yea. We don't hang out or anything, but I've seen them around."

"They actually told me who you were. That's how I knew your name."

"Gotcha."

"I asked them about you after I saw you last week. You were biking through the neighborhood." He smiles with half of his mouth. "I thought you were cute."

"Oh!" My face turns three shades of red.

"Yea." He clears his throat. "I'm glad I ran into you. I've been meaning to ask you if you wanted to hang out some time."

I hesitate, trying to look as casual as possible. I don't want it to be obvious I haven't dated anyone yet. "Sure," I manage to say, "that would be cool."

"Yea, I normally don't hang with girls in the trailer park, you know, but," he shrugs his shoulders, "you seem cool."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, my mom doesn't really want me to come here a lot, especially to see girls. She's worried about the whole—" His eyes meet mine. "Never mind. It's not a big deal."

My curiosity is piqued. "What's your mom worried about?"

"The whole trailer trash thing," he says, rolling his eyes.

I stare at him, bewildered.

Sensing my discomfort, he continues. "You know, like on *Trailer Park Boys*. My mom watches a lot of shows like that and seems to think that every trailer park is full of drugs and crime and pregnant teens and shit. She thinks I am going to knock up some trailer park girl. But no worries. I don't care what she says."

“Haha that’s good,” I say, laughing to cover the embarrassment coursing through my veins. It bothers me that the media has fed him and his mother such negative ideas. But I can’t blame him. I’ve also seen films and TV shows depicting neighborhoods like mine in a bad light, one that has caused many people to assume the worst of my family, my neighbors, and me.

“So yea, want to hang out?” Sean asks, interrupting my stream of consciousness.

Lured by his looks and determined to prove not all trailer park residents are like what people see in the media, I say, “Yes.”

One week after meeting Sean, we went on our first date. After that, we were inseparable. In the eight months we dated, I started to spend time with some of Sean’s friends, like Nate and Scott, who lived in my neighborhood. Many of these guys engaged in rebellious behaviors that fit the “white trash” stereotype portrayed in film and television. Instead of judging them and fighting against the stereotype—something I tried to do before meeting Sean—I gave in. I spent the summer smoking cigarettes and weed, wearing low cut shirts, freely exploring my sexuality, swearing like a sailor, and sneaking out at night to explore forbidden property around town. By the start of eighth grade, I was a new person. I smoked weed out of bent pop cans and tinfoil pipes in the shadows behind buildings. Instead of riding the school bus, I squeezed into Nate’s beat up, two-door Chevy with three other guys from the trailer park, all seniors, whom I had recently befriended. Our ten-minute drive to school consisted of chain-smoking Marlboro Reds and jamming to ear-bleeding heavy metal music. Riding in a car full of “badass” senior boys made me feel like I was on top of the world. I was convinced I had found “my people.” Convinced, that is, until my peers ridiculed me incessantly—a common occurrence for mobile home youth (Kusenbach, 2009). Friends I made in seventh grade stopped hanging out with me,

and some of the popular girls I admired started to call me “trailer trash” and “white trash” under their breath. I felt isolated at school, but loved in the neighborhood where I had lived since I was five.

I continued on the same path for a few more months until the day I almost got arrested. It was November, and the weather was unusually warm for Minnesota. Instead of hitching a ride with Nate, I decided to walk home from school with Jessie, Becca, and Will, a few of the new friends I had made while dating Sean. They had a reputation for being “druggies,” but that didn’t deter me. At that point, they were some of the only people who acknowledged my existence in high school, and I was grateful for their friendship.

As we made our way past the school grounds, Jessie pulled a glass pipe out of the pocket of his wide baggy jeans and said, “Hey, you guys wanna smoke up quick?”

“Hell yea!” Becca and Will shouted with a smile.

Eager to please, I agreed.

We ran behind the first building we could find—a small brick storage shed located next to a gravel alley. It was a common spot to do drugs because it was surrounded by foliage and the nearby alley was usually deserted.

After the second round of hits, as the buzz was just starting to sink in, I heard the sound of rocks crushing beneath car tires.

“Shit!” Will shouted, letting out a puff of smoke. “The cops!”

I turned my head and laid eyes on the familiar dark brown hood of a Wright County cop car making its way towards us in the alley.

A chill ran up my spine as the sirens began to wail. The only thing I could think to do was bolt. I ran as fast as I could into a wooded area near the river that flowed through town. I hid

there for over thirty minutes, long after the sirens had stopped and I knew the coast was clear.

When I finally emerged, my friends were nowhere to be found. Hanging my head to keep a low profile, I continued the long walk home. Fear had ruined my high and replaced it with a mountain of regret. “What am I doing?” I thought. “This isn’t worth it.” In that moment of solitude, I knew something had to change. As with many mobile home youth, my life had come to a juncture. I could continue to “flounder” and be the “white trash” girl I thought I’d be by remaining attached to my new friends within the park, or I could “flourish” by running away from it all and pretending to be middle-class (MacTavish & Salamon, 2006, p. 175). I chose the latter. I broke up with Sean, dressed more modestly, stopped smoking weed and cigarettes, cleaned up my language, parted ways with the older boys, and disassociated from the trailer park and everyone in it. I slept there, but did little else in that context or with the people who lived there.

My shift was partially inspired by befriending the “goody two shoes” in my class who lived in modest homes, earned good grades, rarely broke the rules, and always sought success. I tried hard to imitate their lifestyle; by doing so, my “white trash” past eventually became a distant memory, and a point of denial. But films and television shows featuring trailer parks frequently reminded me that this memory was not as distant as I wanted, and perhaps not a memory at all. Like it or not, the trailer park was a part of my life—a place I returned to every day. Many of the representations I saw on the screen were reflected in my lived experiences. I may have passed as middle-class among my peers, but I lived in a trailer that was falling apart. My mom and whoever she was married to at the time, were alcoholics. Lottery tickets were considered a staple. The cops knew my family by name based on the number of times they were called for issues of domestic violence. The list goes on. I was white trash.

My dissertation, as the above suggests, focuses on mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people. I am primarily interested in how reality television (RTV) shows articulate certain ideas about this group and the possible ways those who identify as white and working-class negotiate such articulations. My interest in this topic stems from two sources: my lived experiences growing up in a white working-class family and neighborhood and how I came to understand myself through watching images on film and television; and, the Foucauldian recognition that people are constituted in and through discourse (Foucault, 1979). Taking this approach, discourses in media are part of what constitutes us, and can tell us much about what is occurring in the world. Media provide a place where we can access the workings of a larger cultural context and, by doing so, understand how media and life are intertwined. As Meyer (2012) observes, “Television is a living, breathing discourse that becomes such a central part of individual lives that it cannot be separated from the ways individuals articulate their identities, communicate interpersonally with others, and act as agents in communities, organizations, and culture” (p. 267).

I want to define “working-class” as it is a core component of this project, something I see as both material and performative. According to Shipler (2004), who provides a material definition, the working-class in the United States consists of people with little or no college education who work for low wages, including unskilled and semiskilled laborers and their families. Zweig (2011) proposes an alternative material definition of the working-class that I find useful because of its connection to power and poverty. Although the working-class fulfills the largest labor-intensive role of any group in producing economic goods, Zweig claims they are defined by their lack of power at work and in society at large. The working-class receives much

less support from the U.S. capitalist economy than the significant amount of work they put into it. Zweig (2011) adds that the working-class is not immune to poverty. As he states, poverty is “something that happens to the working-class.” In fact, more than half of this population experiences poverty at least once over a ten-year period, meaning they are forced to rely on public assistance in order to survive (p. 86). This may explain why the working-class and working-poor are often used synonymously (Shipler, 2004)—a conflation that informs my conceptualization of the working-class.

Class, however, is not only a fixed, material location related to Marxist notions of labor and production. As Langston (1992) indicates, “Class is your understanding of the world and where you fit in; it’s composed of ideas, behaviors, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, and walk” (p. 112). This description suggests that class can be performed apart from one’s economic resources. In other words, people may have an abundance of income but still perform as though they are working-class by learning from, relating to, and imitating working-class people around them (Bettie, 2003; Dykins Callahan, 2008). Class, then, is an unstable identity, not a reified natural identity attached to specific bodies, but rather, a contextual and situated identity that comes to make sense within certain parameters. As such, when I refer to the working-class, I am referring to those who engage in intensive labor and still struggle to make ends meet, and those who perform working-class by imitating those who identify as working-class.

Scholars such as Brown (2005), Cooke-Jackson & Hansen (2008), Goad (1997), Kendall (2005), Newitz and Wray (1997), among others, have critiqued the ways in which white working-class people are portrayed in the media. These critiques have not, however, been grounded in personal narratives of white working-class people that might evocatively illuminate

how media images and lived experiences are intertwined, part and parcel of each other. Furthermore, while some published accounts of white working-class people's lived experiences mention the media (e.g., Hicks, 2013; Wilson & Rucker, 2006; Moss, 2003), focused attention has not been given to the media. Robin Boylorn's (2008) critical autoethnography, "As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality," most closely resembles the work I pursue in this dissertation. In her essay, Boylorn writes a series of personal narratives to engage and interrogate representations of Black women on reality television shows. While Boylorn does not focus on the white working-class, she concentrates on another disenfranchised group (i.e., Black women), how it is represented within the genre of reality television, and how these representations are intertwined with lived experiences. Boylorn's work provides a model for my dissertation.

A focus on white working-class people is important considering how often they have appeared in media, particularly over the last several years (Owens, 2012). Reality television, premised on the idea of putting "ordinary" people on display, is the genre in which they are featured most (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). Since *Beverly Hillbillies*, the first widely popular television show to feature white working-class people, this group has been repeatedly portrayed as ignorant and uncivilized (Goad, 1997). An important element is added when these portrayals appear on RTV shows as opposed to scripted shows: on RTV, there is a call to the real, meaning that such shows maintain and formally emphasize a desire to portray the real by featuring "real people" doing "real things" (Dubrofsky, 2011). As a result, depictions of white working-class people on these shows are promoted as authentic. In the context of RTV, these people do not just act deviant, they are (constructed as) deviant; we know what we see is a construction on a scripted show, but on a RTV show this line is blurred. We are sold the idea that what we see is

real, which may have serious implications, such as limited social mobility, for white working-class members today.

Social stigma is a growing reality for those who struggle to make ends meet (MacTavish & Salamon, 2006). According to Goad (1997) and Sweeney (2001), as well as Hansen and Cooke-Jackson (2010), the white working-class is one of the few targets left in our cultural shooting gallery. Many other targets are deemed off limits due to written and unwritten laws of cultural sensitivity. In other words, white working-class people are open game for ridicule, which occurs repeatedly in the films and television shows where they are featured. If, as Dow (1996) indicates, the media is a window into culture, I wonder how this ridicule might manifest in working-class peoples' everyday lives. At the very least, I am curious to see how white working-class people respond to media sites that are supposed to represent them, specifically those that frame them as "deviant" in a genre like RTV, with its call to the real.

When I am exposed to these sites, even to this day, I have an immediate visceral reaction, which is what has inspired me to write and incorporate autoethnographic accounts throughout this dissertation. I call on my own life to examine how I perceive mediated images of white working-class people and to describe how these images influence the way I behave and define myself, as well as come to understand larger social, structural, historical, political, and cultural ideas. Additionally, I share how I believe these images shaped my childhood and my adolescence by motivating me to mask my working-class identity to avoid ridicule from my peers.

I am 29 years old, seated on the bright red couch in my living room, my eyes glued to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*—a reality TV show that follows the adventures of a child beauty pageant participant, Alana "Honey Boo Boo" Thompson, and her white working-class family

from the rural town of McIntyre, Georgia. Clad in a ruffled pink gown plastered with sequins, Alana prances across a brightly-lit stage, and I see myself in her routine. According to Giroux (1998), a majority of contestants who enter local pageants are from working-class families driven by mobility fantasies and the lure of a small cash prize. Alana Thompson is no exception to this rule—her family’s dreams of mobility are couched in pageant performances. Where pageantry is their potential source of mobility, academia is mine. I exist in a liminal space between the “white trash” and “educated elite.” I twist and turn in a ruffled pink gown through the halls of the ivory tower and no one knows what I look like without my costume. My identity, for the past fifteen years, has hinged on presenting a middle class persona—one driven in part by problematic media images of white working-class people, fostering in me a yearning to pass and disassociate myself from the class I come from.

As I watch Alana and her family, my reaction is mixed. I am repulsed when I can tell producers have amplified their bodily functions and featured clips highlighting various grotesque-seeming flaws such as stained, ill-fitting clothing, mispronounced words, and unhealthy foods. To me, this is poverty porn—an invitation to voyeuristically gaze upon the supposed failings of those who struggle to make ends meet, placing the viewer in a superior position separate from these failings (Wasserman, 2013). This angers me because it exploits and makes a mockery of white working-class people, robbing them of their dignity by encouraging us to laugh at rather than sympathize with them and the adversity they face due to systemic failings. As viewers, we are invited to recognize that Alana will never be a beauty queen; her failure is what makes the show so entertaining. This makes my blood boil.

As I watch, I am frustrated by some moments, but laugh at others. I fall into the trap of making fun of poverty that is set by producers; by doing so, I am able to distance myself from

my working-class past and Alana's working-class present. But every time I laugh, I do so with a guilty conscience. I am uneasy, aware that when I laugh, I become complicit. Instead of running away and continuing to deny my roots, I need to embrace and complicate them. There's a reason shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* get under my skin: they remind me of where I come from and, in many ways, where I still exist despite my denial during the past fifteen years.

While I may react strongly to shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, I am aware that others who identify as white and working-class may not, or may have reactions different from mine. Discovering alternative responses provides an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of negotiating media sites, as well as reinterpret and complicate the influence these sites have on me. I always assumed mediated representations and lived experiences were separate realms, one impacting the other. In this work, I trouble this assumption by exploring just how intertwined they are: lived experiences emerge through discourses, popular media is one place where prevailing discourses are located, articulated, rearticulated, as well as modified, and both are part of larger, ongoing, and continually transforming cultural processes (Gauntlett, 2002). The relationship between media and life is much more complex and connected than my experiences alone can reveal. This is the main reason I wanted to learn about other white working-class people and the ways they negotiate mediated images that are supposed to represent them. Furthermore, I want to write alternative stories that are rarely, if ever, found in popular media—stories that feature the varied reactions and lived experiences of white working-class people; stories that talk to, talk with, and talk back to mediated representations and canonical ideas about this population; stories that shed light on how media is life and life is media.

Methodology

To explore how mediated representations and lived experiences are discursive constructions that not only intersect but are embedded in one another, my dissertation addresses the following research questions: How does RTV depict white working-class people? What can be learned by watching and reflecting on a RTV show like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* with the very people from the demographic this show supposedly represents? How do I respond to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and similar shows? How might my response change throughout the course of the project, especially after hearing how other white working-class people respond? How might what I learn through this process address larger questions about U.S. culture in terms of race and class, as well as contribute to critical media scholarship and research on the lived experiences of this class of people?

I use critical autoethnography, interviews, interactive focus groups, and close textual analysis to answer the aforementioned questions. The combination of methods is influenced and guided by the methodological framework of crystallization which, according to Ellingson (2009), ...combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them (p. 4).

Crystallization is an especially fitting framework for interpretive, self-reflexive scholars, such as myself, who like to embrace a wide range of methods on the qualitative continuum.

Real's (1996) call for multiple methodologies in media studies also influences the

combination of methods I have chosen. Historically, media scholarship has been methodologically divided between studying text, audience, and production. These divisions shed insight into media culture, but alone they do not always capture the complexity of film and television in the twenty-first century. One way to sift through this complexity and offer greater insight is to eliminate these divisions and combine these approaches. As Meyer indicates, “the future of critical television studies lies in its ability to speak across multiple methods and boundaries” (Meyer, 2012, p. 267). For this reason, I expand the focus of my analysis of RTV shows beyond what is represented on the screen to provide insight into the lived experiences and responses of some of the people ostensibly represented in the shows.

Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography stems from autoethnography, a method where the self becomes a site for interpreting cultural experiences. Autoethnography, first conceptualized by Heider (1975), has been popular since the late 1980s and is comprised of three elements: the self (auto), people or culture (ethno), and writing or describing (graphy). When combined, these elements form a bridge that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political—a primary goal of autoethnography. Autoethnographers emphasize the relationship between individual lives and larger social formations (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Scholars who recognize the critical potential of autoethnography have expanded this approach to create critical autoethnography. Similar to autoethnography, critical autoethnography entails providing cultural analyses through personal narratives, though in these analyses, a critical lens is featured and encouraged throughout the process (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). This lens opens up a space of resistance between the individual and the collective

(Holman Jones, 2005). In this space, the critical autoethnographer not only focuses on how lived experiences are affected by the dominant social order, but also seeks to defy and deconstruct this order (Boyd, 1999; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

To accomplish their goals, critical autoethnographers compose first-person accounts of lived experience that confront and challenge the oppressive representations that permeate cultural landscapes. The work is guided by a desire to address injustices within particular lived domains. When addressing these injustices, critical autoethnographers acknowledge and take responsibility for their subjective lenses by openly engaging in self-reflexivity. Looking inward in such a manner enables them to identify how they shape and are shaped by power relations within a given culture. Practicing self-reflexivity, critical autoethnographers understand that they are not immune from creating or experiencing oppression (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

For the critical autoethnography in my dissertation, I incorporate first-person, reflexive accounts of my lived experiences growing up in a working-class family and neighborhood. In these accounts, I illuminate the stigma I felt as a working-class person. I specifically highlight how this stigma was reflected in mediated depictions of white working-class people, which made me feel shame. I also include stories that depict my responses to films and television shows about the white working-class. Additionally, I incorporate the experiences and responses of other white working-class people to: (1) highlight the complexity of identity, (2) shed insight into the various ways some working-class people negotiate media sites, (3) reflect on whether listening to white working-class people respond to films and television shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* has the potential to alter how I make sense of the media sites in which I have felt implicated, and (4) gain insight into various cultural phenomena, such as the politics of class and structural inequalities.

As I incorporate the experiences and responses of other white working-class people I interviewed, I take responsibility for my subjective lens in the production of knowledge. To do this, I engage in self-reflexivity by turning my observations inward to shed insight on how I am a product and a producer of culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Interviews

For this study, I chose to interview and spend time with three families who identified as white and working-class. Working with families was ideal because I could learn about them within the confines of their own home rather than asking them to meet at a neutral location. This home context is key because homes reflect and shape identity (Henry, 1965; Relph, 1976). As such, I was able to learn more about each family and, by seeing where and how they live, gain insight into their class status and experiences.

To recruit families, I relied upon suggestions from students, colleagues, professors, and friends. I also posted an ad on Craigslist and delivered flyers to mobile home communities all around the Tampa Bay area. A colleague of mine suggested one of the chosen families and the other two were found on Craigslist. My only qualification for recruitment was that the families live in a mobile home community composed primarily of working-class people, similar to the one in which I grew up, so I could have more of an opportunity to identify and form connections with family members. I wanted participants who lived in mobile home parks because of the negative ways in which these neighborhoods and their residents are depicted in popular media (e.g., Hollywood blockbusters like *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *8 Mile* (2002), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1996), and *Independence Day* (1996) as well as TV shows such as *Trailer Park Boys* (2001-present), *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor* (2013-present),

Mobile Home Disaster (2008), and *Trailer Fabulous* (2005), to name a few). As Kusenbach (2009) describes:

Mobile homes are shown to be crowded, ugly, dirty, and unsafe accommodations. Mobile home parks are portrayed as desolate places packed with junky homes and roaming dogs where lawns are strewn with litter, broken down cars, and indoor appliances. Mobile home residents are depicted as alcoholics, drug addicts, wife beaters, prostitutes, sex offenders, and as mentally insane. Women are promiscuous, men are violent, kids are out of control. (p. 400-401)

These portrayals, which focus primarily on inadequacies, are not taken lightly by mobile home residents (Kusenbach, 2009), something about which I wanted to know more. With this in mind, I showed the families not only clips from shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* featuring white working-class people, but also clips from shows and films featuring white working-class people who live in mobile home communities. I describe these clips in more detail in the following section.

When recruiting and in the field, I took Kusenbach's (2009) advice and made sure to use the term "mobile home" instead of "trailer." Even though such homes are rarely moved due to cost and hassle, "mobile home" seemed to be the most neutral and acceptable term among the people with whom I interacted. For example, I used the term "mobile home" in the flyer I made for recruitment purposes so I could appeal to a wider audience. I also was careful in the flyer to describe my study in what I hoped were neutral terms, with no mention of the ways in which mobile home parks are depicted in the media. I wanted to encourage potential participants to express their own opinions. My study was described on the flyer as follows:

My name is Tasha Rennels and I am a student at USF who is working on a study about

the relationship between mediated representations and lived experiences of people who identify as white and working-class. I am doing this study because I grew up in a mobile home community and was always intrigued when I would see TV shows and films featuring neighborhoods like mine. I am curious to see how others who live in mobile home communities in the Tampa Bay area and who identify as white and working-class respond to clips from these films and TV shows.

In addition to using neutral terms on the flyer, such as “mobile home” and “intrigued,” I emphasized that I would be providing compensation so potential participants knew I respected their time. Originally, I planned to provide each family with a \$25 gift card to Wal-Mart but when I didn’t get any responses, I changed my flyer to indicate that each family would receive \$150—an amount that, though I struggled to afford, made me feel more ethical because it could benefit participants much more than \$25 could. Immediately after the change, responses started to flood my e-mail, two of which are indicated below.

“My family and I would be happy to help out with your study. My name is _____, just let me know when and where :)”

“We are interested in participating in your research. We are a family of 5 and live in _____. You can contact me back by email or text.”

To narrow my selection, I asked all potential participants—if they didn’t already provide the information—where they lived, how many family members they had, and how old their family members were to ensure I could stay within IRB requirements (i.e., between the ages of 13 and 64). Responses to these questions usually came within a couple of hours. I decided to choose one family from the suburbs, one from an urban area, and another from a rural area. I reasoned that the differences in geography would illuminate differences in lived experiences and

opinions, which is exactly what I was looking for. Once I narrowed my choices, I let everyone who expressed interest know whether or not they were chosen to participate. The chosen families expressed excitement, writing phrases such as, “I look forward to meeting you,” in follow-up e-mails.

After finding participants, I met with each family twice for a lengthy audio-recorded interview, prior to hosting an interactive focus group. I provided the gift card once the interviews were complete and participants’ reactions to this provision were positive. For example, Ellen, the matriarch of the third family I worked with, wrote the following e-mail after our last session together:

“That was a lot of fun today and very interesting. Thank you for the experience and the gift card. It is something we could definitely use :).”

Knowing how much the gift cards helped people like Ellen was encouraging. I was happy to give participants something in return for their openness and the abundance of information they provided in the interviews. This provision presented me with a tension. On one hand, it positioned me as a member of the “educated elite,” because I had the means to provide the gift. On the other hand, it allowed me access to the “inside,” to the working-class—a space of familiarity. Here, the gift card became a symbol of my liminal insider/outsider position. How do I navigate these two spaces when I am both of them and apart from them? This is a dilemma with which I continue to grapple.

Dilemma aside, my ultimate goal for each interview was to learn who participants are and how they construct their lived experiences. I fulfilled this goal by asking a series of open-ended questions, such as: What does a typical day entail for you? How would you describe your family? What brought you here and how long have you lived here? What social class do you

identify with and why? Interviews took place in either the kitchen or living room of each family's home. Once I was directed where to sit, the family members gathered around me in a circular configuration. I then placed a recording device in the middle of the circle to ensure that everyone's answers were recorded. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours, depending on the length of the family members' answers as well as the overall flow of conversation. Some families were more open than others, and I made a point of respecting their boundaries by minimizing probing questions.

After learning about my participants during each interview session, I composed field notes reflecting on my own experiences growing up in a similar situation. This self-reflexivity filters through accounts I have written, which I hope illustrate the complexity of identity by comparing and contrasting the ways in which my participants and I construct our experiences. By shedding light on this complexity, I confront and challenge oppressive prevailing discourse about the white working-class population that saturate the media.

Interactive Focus Groups

In addition to learning about the lived experiences of my participants via interviews, I also sought to understand how they make sense of and respond to films and TV shows that are supposed to represent them. To do this, I used interactive focus groups. According to Davis & Ellis (2008), interactive focus groups involve working with a group of people to discuss an issue and share a variety of opinions in a focused manner. What makes these groups distinct from traditional focus groups is a resistance to hierarchical structuring with one facilitator or leader in control. Interactive focus groups dismantle the power difference between researcher and their

participants as much as possible.³ To do this, the researcher first collaborates with participants to form open-ended research questions that promote discussion. Next, the researcher participates in the discussion with participants as opposed to remaining an outside leader or facilitator. Everyone is considered a co-participant so multiple perspectives can be incorporated and the primary goal, joint sensemaking, can be accomplished. At times, a leader may be needed to facilitate and focus the discussion. The researcher usually takes on this role, but participants may lead, too. I recognize this is not likely to occur due to the inherent power imbalance and the preconceived notion that most people have about how research is conducted. Either way, the researcher has to be ready to offer guidance, when needed. Researchers also should acknowledge their power and privilege and be self-reflexive about their presence, subjectivity, and production of knowledge.

To put together the interactive focus groups, which were split up by family for the sake of convenience and comfort, I followed two steps. First, I asked each person to reflect on the clips I showed and share their observations with the group. The clips were the same for every family and came from the following films and television shows: *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *8 Mile*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, and *Trailer Park: Welcome to Manor*. For an overview of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, see Chapter Three. I briefly describe the others below.

8-mile (2002) is a film based on the rapper, Eminem's, troubled life prior to his success. This was one of the top grossing films of 2002, bringing in over \$51 million during its opening weekend. Since its release, the film has grossed over \$242 million (Makarechi, 2013). *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999) a film about an annual teen beauty pageant held in small-town

³ It is not entirely possible to dismantle the power hierarchy between researchers and participants, because the researcher/participant dynamic in and of itself is bound by colonial Euro-Western thought (Chilisa, 2011).

Minnesota. Amber Atkins (Kirsten Dunst), daughter of an alcoholic single mother who hails from a local trailer park, and Becky Leeman (Denise Richards), daughter of the richest man in town and a former beauty-queen mother, are the primary contenders in the pageant. Since 1999, the film has grossed \$10.5 million and has garnered an extensive cult following, making it more popular today than ever before (Peitzman, 2014). *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor* (2013-present) is a new reality series on TLC that documents the lives of residents at Myrtle Manor, a trailer park located in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The show is currently airing its third season and is considered a hit for the network since it averages over 1.1 million viewers per episode (Noell, 2014).

Apart from their popularity, there were three other reasons why I chose the films and television shows I did. First, they all feature white working-class people, the population of concern in this dissertation. Second, they were available on DVD and online streaming, which meant they were convenient for fieldwork. Third, they related to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (the only text I formally analyze at length) and to my lived experiences. For example, *Drop Dead Gorgeous* revolves around beauty pageants, similar to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and the film takes place in Minnesota where I am from. *8-Mile* and *Welcome to Myrtle Manor* are both framed as “real,” like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and they feature mobile home communities similar to the one in which I grew up.

Given time constraints, I had to be selective about the clips I chose for focus groups. Since *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is my primary focus, I showed the entire first episode for participants to get a sense of the series. For the remainder of the films and television shows, I showed the trailer to familiarize participants. I also featured one scene from each that was set in a mobile home community to see how participants would respond to depictions of neighborhoods

similar to their own.

Instead of being a mediator only while discussing the clips, I participated in a limited way. I asked questions and contributed when prompted, but tried not to offer critiques since I had had a chance to formulate these over several months, whereas participants had not. Furthermore, I wanted to encourage participants to express their opinions rather than be influenced by mine. If they asked what I thought, I shared my views, but the primary focus was on their responses.

Each focus group lasted one to two hours depending on the flow of conversation and schedules of my participants. As soon as the focus groups were finished, the second step was to review the recording and transcribe the discussions verbatim. I also took notes about the researcher/participant dynamic and the reactions participants and I had while watching the clips(s); doing so enabled me to be self-reflexive about my research process and gain more insight about what happens when lived and mediated bodies intersect, which was my primary reason for using interactive focus groups.

Close Textual Analysis

I begin with a discussion of critical/cultural studies since it informs my approach to close textual analysis. According to Ono (2009), critical/cultural studies is a subfield of communication studies that fuses critical theory with cultural studies to investigate discourses of power and knowledge (pp. 74-75). This subfield has the same primary focus of its foundation, cultural studies: to describe and intervene in the ways discourses “are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power” (Grossberg, 1997, p. 237).

What is useful about critical/cultural studies for my work is that it recognizes popular media as a product of and window into culture—something we can turn to in order to understand dominant ways of thinking or rather, the workings of a larger cultural context (Dow, 1996; Walters, 1995). Critical/cultural scholars who study media often employ the method of close textual analysis. I used this method by first watching all 34 episodes of seasons one through three of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* that aired from August 2012 to March 2014 as well as clips from similar films and TV shows featuring mobile home communities (e.g. *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*, and *8 Mile*). While doing so, I looked for recurring patterns related to my central concerns about race and class, paying particular attention to production elements (e.g., editing, camera angles, sound) as well as to how the characters were characterized, what they said, and how they behaved on the series. This examination enabled me to access popular cultural assumptions about white working-class people.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One outlines the areas of literature addressed in this dissertation: whiteness, the lived experiences of white working-class people, representations of white working-class people in the media, reality television, and finally the intersection of lived experiences and mediated representations. I explain how the literature I draw from makes me think in new and complex ways about my lived experiences, opens up new issues and concerns I want to address, raises questions I wish to explore, as well as provides clarification about and guidance for the work I do.

Chapter Two addresses my first research question: How does RTV depict white working-class people? To answer this question, I conduct a close textual analysis of all 34 episodes from

seasons one through three of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. This series warrants such an analysis because it features all white working-class characters and has a large cultural reach as evidenced by its record-breaking ratings on TLC (Kepler, 2012). I view the episodes I analyze as highly mediated products. I do not assume there is an accessible, authentic reality displayed on the screen. Instead, I contend that the action on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is a constructed fiction, similar to what occurs on scripted shows (Dubrofsky, 2011). My primary goal in this chapter is to illustrate how the series functions as a “symptomatic text” (Walters, 1995) that informs us of a cultural phenomenon—in this case, the ongoing stigmatization of white working-class people. An example of this can be found in the media’s recent resurrection of the Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding scandal where Harding’s working-class roots are still, twenty years later, factoring into the blame and criticism cast upon her (Brennan, 2014). By analyzing episodes of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as “symptoms,” clues about the workings of a larger cultural context can be accessed. As Dow (1996) explains, television contributes to culture in important and meaningful ways because it can define, mediate, represent, and reinforce social issues; thus, it is the goal of media critics to account for the role of television in public discourse.

Chapter Three analyzes the information gathered from spending time with my participants. In addition to describing their experiences, I reflect on my own to incorporate an autoethnographic component, which addresses complex elements of working-class life, adding rich layers to the essentializing stereotypes repeatedly portrayed on screen. The accounts I write resemble what Delgado (1989) refers to as “counterstories,” which are stories from the margins that disrupt and challenge dominant cultural narratives. I write so that the experiences of the people I talk with as well as my own experiences “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to dominant ideas about white working-class people that saturate the genre of RTV.

In addition to learning and writing about my participants' experiences, I describe how they make sense of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and other media sites featuring white working-class people, which is the focus of Chapter Four. This chapter incorporates and analyzes research gathered from the three interactive focus groups. I explain what happens when lived and mediated bodies intersect and the understandings of class and race that emerge as a result. Due to the various understandings I uncovered in my fieldwork, this chapter illuminates the ways in which media sites are polysemic; their meanings can change depending on context and the individuals who are interpreting them. Though most media scholarship alludes to the polysemic nature of media, I am able to use data gathered from ethnographic observation to show what this looks like and, by doing so, make complex the critiques of media I provide. Through this process, I am able to illuminate moments of progression, regression, complicity, opposition, negotiation, and more.

The concluding chapter contains an analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* that integrates critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives much like Boylorn's (2008) article. I focus on the show in this chapter and in Chapter Two to access the ways in which my perspective of the series has changed throughout the course of the project, particularly after listening to the experiences and responses of my participants. The chapter begins with a second analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* where I record my reactions while reflecting upon what I have learned from listening to my participants. I then incorporate personal, reflexive, and evocative narratives that (1) describe my new reactions to the series, (2) challenge mediated stereotypes about white working-class people, and (3) discuss the insight I gained from participants. In these narratives, I also reflect on what I learned about myself throughout the project, particularly in terms of my relationship with media. I move beyond thinking of this

relationship as a simplistic one-way cause and effect (as illustrated in this chapter), but instead as a complex integration and blurring of many factors. Combining critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives allows me to show what this complex relationship looks like and how the insight provided can inform media critiques as well as accounts of lived experience.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

My dissertation draws from five areas of scholarship: whiteness, lived experiences of white working-class people, representations of white working-class people in the media, reality television, and finally the intersection of lived experiences and mediated representations.

Whiteness

Whiteness functions as a privileged state of being and the marker of racial normativity in U.S. contexts (Dyer, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Wray & Newitz, 1997; Wray, 2006). To be “just white” is to possess no racial identity (Heavner, 2007; Nakayama & Martin, 1999). Whiteness, in other words, is invisible (McIntosh, 1998), refers to a set of largely undefined characteristics, and is considered the “unraced center of a racialized world” (Wray & Newitz, 1997, p. 3), meaning it exists as a standard against which all other racializations are measured as deviant (Yancy, 2012). Its privilege often goes unnoticed, which is what makes it powerful and increasingly difficult to talk about (Dyer, 1997). Research on whiteness seeks to expose the strategies used to conceal and maintain the power and privilege of whiteness. My work is guided by the recognition that if whiteness is ignored, its power will continue to remain invisible, unquestioned, and unchallenged, and that one way to address this problem is to make visible whiteness and its functioning (Giroux, 1997; Twine & Gallagher, 2008). Scholarship on

whiteness covers a plethora of themes, many of which are relevant to my dissertation as I describe below.

Scholars have looked at how diversity is strategically used in media narratives to recenter whiteness (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Gray 1991 & 1995; Hasinoff, 2008). Some of their work expands upon Projansky and Ono's (1999) notion of "strategic whiteness," which refers to moments when whiteness is recentered without calling explicit attention to this fact. One example of this can be seen in texts with a diverse cast that feature a "white savior," a white person who appears to know what is best for people of color (e.g. *Avatar*, *The Green Mile*, *Pocahontas*, etc.). The "white savior" is a common racialized trope that, as many scholars detail, reinforces white supremacy (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014; Giroux, 1997; Hughey, 2010; Ono & Buescher, 2009; Ono, 2009; Vera & Gordon, 2003).

Scholarship about whiteness in a postracial era also mentions white supremacy. According to Thornton (2011), postracism is "a pervasive ideology that holds that Americans are beyond race and racism, that cultural distinctiveness is itself constitutive of racism, and that history has no hold on present political or economic realities" (p. 428). Postracism is the assumption that we are all equal when it comes to race (Vavrus, 2010). Scholars who analyze postracial discourse argue it works strategically to displace and deny racism in order to resituate whiteness as central, supreme, and ideal (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Dubrofsky, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Ono, 2010; Thornton, 2011). Dubrofsky (2013) discusses this phenomenon occurring in the popular television series, *Glee*, which defines itself as not racist, but relies on racist tropes, such as the angry Black woman, as a means to sanction whiteness. Once again, whiteness takes center stage. I expand upon this scholarship in my own work on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the primary RTV text I will be analyzing throughout the dissertation. What makes *Here Comes*

Honey Boo Boo interesting and important to analyze is its recentering of a certain type of whiteness: an “ideal whiteness” privileged for dispalying dominant cultural standards inspired by neoliberalism such as wealth, rationality, personal responsibility, and self-control—while denigrating another form of whiteness, an “inappropriate whiteness,” reserved for people who are working-class, uneducated, and seemingly out of control. To explain this process, it is helpful to draw from scholarship that takes an intersectional approach to whiteness.

According to Heavner (2007), people who are situated at the borders of whiteness have remained largely outside the critical gaze of whiteness studies. I am referring to people who identify as white and whose marginal existence is premised upon characteristics like class, region, sexuality, ability and gender (Hartigan, 1997, 2013). Bonilla-Silva (2010) states: “Although whites, because of their privileged position in the racial order, form a social group (the dominant order), they are fractured along class, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of ‘social cleavage.’ (p. 10). In essence, though race may define whiteness, additional variables determine boundaries of privilege. As Frankenberg (1993) indicates, “whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it” (p. 76). For example, white people who are poor or working-class do not often experience privilege because of their class. This is something I have personally experienced as well as witnessed on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Each member of the white working-class family in this series is portrayed as ignorant and uncivilized when juxtaposed against a host of other white people from a higher class (based on their material possessions, values, morals, and level of education). These juxtapositions illustrate that a privileged form of whiteness has clear boundaries. White people who are educated, middle to upper class, and presented as taking

personal responsibility for their actions stay within these boundaries—their type of whiteness is idealized. White people who are working-class, uneducated, and often presented as out of control, are ridiculed and relegated to the margins. Taking note of this phenomenon, I heed Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) call to closely examine the instances when white people are marginalized. My dissertation aligns with and extends the work of scholars who approach whiteness from an intersectional lens because it not only focuses on race, but is equally concerned with how class, region, gender, and other variables of identity contribute to lived experience(s) of whiteness.

Some of the scholars who approach whiteness from an intersectional lens recognize the inherent privilege white skin affords in spite of other forms of oppression (DiAngelo, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; Pitcher, 2009; Roediger, 2007; Warren, 2001; Yancy, 2012). DiAngelo (2006) notes:

Regardless of one's other locations, White people know on some level that being White in this society is "better" than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors Whiteness opens, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations. (p. 54)

Being aware of the privilege associated with my whiteness is important for my project. I do not want to contribute to the invisibility of white supremacy, thus I am reflexive about my racial privilege and the racial privilege of my participants when describing our lived experiences. I am also reflexive about my educational privilege and the ways in which it has complicated my class status in relation to my participants. I describe how my time in the academy has prevented me from being fully accepted as a member of the working-class, placing me in an insider/outsider position that I struggle to negotiate.

Lived Experiences of White Working-Class People

Accounts of the lived experiences of white working-class people come in a variety of forms, such as personal memoir (Bageant, 2010; Bragg, 1998; Collins, 2004; Hannon, 2009; Johnson, 2012; Pope, 2012; Wilson and Rucker, 2006 to name a few), fiction (Allison, 1992), and satire (Goad, 1997; James, 2003), to name a few. These accounts cover many themes, including: race relations (McDermott, 2006; Moss, 2003), the pursuit of upward mobility (Blanton, 2011; Covington, 2004; Gillespie, 2008; Hicks, 2013), the stigma associated with living in a mobile home—a topic I expand upon in the following section—and the liminal existence of being raised in blue collar families and then living white collar lives as adults (Lubrano, 2004). Many academics who hail from working-class backgrounds can relate to this liminal existence and have written personal accounts about their experiences as well. A focus of their work has been to challenge the middle class homogeneity assumed in the academy (Barney Dews & Law, 1995; Dykins Callahan; 2008; Samarco & Muzzatti, 2005).

My dissertation also incorporates lived experiences of white working-class people. Instead of focusing on the themes listed above such as race relations or the pursuit of upward mobility, I add to the conversation a focus on how white working-class people negotiate, in their every-day lives, mediated portrayals of white working-class people. I begin as I did in the previous chapter by describing how I have come to understand myself through watching television and movies that feature white working-class people. This allows me to illustrate how, as Gauntlett (2002) describes when discussing the work of Foucault, discourses shape the way we perceive the world and ourselves. Because popular media articulates and reinforces prevailing discourses, it is important to illustrate its role in shaping who I consider myself to be.

In this way, I transform my personal experiences into a topic of investigation by employing autoethnography which recognizes that lived experiences are not separate from, but enacted within, larger systems of power, oppression, and privilege (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). As a cultural product, the media is a reflection of these systems and thus intertwined with life. Scholars such as Bageant (2010), Goad (1997), and Moss (2003) have alluded to this intimate connection to the media in their accounts of white working-class people's lives. I extend their conversations by focusing specifically on the genre of RTV because of its ubiquity and tendency recently to feature white working-class people, several of whom live in mobile home parks (e.g., *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*)—a type of neighborhood that factors heavily into my dissertation because of the stigma attached to it, which my participants and I experienced.

The Stigma of Mobile Homes

According to recent U.S. Census Bureau (2013) figures, an estimated 20 million people live in 8.6 million mobile homes throughout the country. Despite the vast number of U.S. residents living in mobile homes, little scholarly attention has been paid to this population and the communities in which they live. Scholars who have studied mobile homes and their residents have written about the following subjects: the history and culture of mobile homes (Hart, Rhodes, & Morgan, 2002; Hurley 2001; Thornburg 1991; Wallis 1991), neighborhood satisfaction (Gruber & Shelton, 1987), and social participation (Edwards, 2004) of mobile home residents, the economic and political aspects connected to mobile home living (Geisler & Mitsuda, 1987; Happel, Hogan, & Pflanz, 1988; Krannich & Greider 1984; Salamon & MacTavish 2006); the regions in which mobile homes are located (Benson 1990; MacTavish & Salamon 2001), the different types of mobile home communities (Salamon, 2003), and specific

social groups within mobile home communities such as rural youth (MacTavish & Salamon, 2006), high school students (Miller & Evko 1985), rural working-class families (Edwards, 2004), retirees (Hoyt 1954; Johnson 1971), and snowbirds (Martin, Hoppe, Larson, & Leon, 1987).

A number of scholars have produced ethnographic (Kusenbach, 2009; Moss, 2003), autoethnographic (Dykins Callahan 2008) and autobiographical accounts (Berube 1997; Burch-Brown & Rigsbee, 1996; Hassman, 2013) providing detailed and evocative insights into the lived experiences of those who have encountered the stigma commonly associated with living in a mobile home. According to Miller and Evko (1985), this stigma can be traced back to the World War II period when makeshift homes on wheels, used primarily for vacationing, became permanent dwellings for low-income retirees and migrant workers. Mobile homes also served as temporary housing units for defense workers during the war but the camps in which they were located developed a reputation for being overcrowded and unsanitary, which has come to impact the attitude towards mobile home communities today (Edwards, 2004; Kusenbach, 2009; Salamon, 2003).

Apart from public ridicule as evidenced in the media, location is a primary indicator of the stigmatization associated with mobile homes. According to MacTavish and Salamon (2006) as well as Burch-Brown and Rigsbee (1996), mobile home communities are commonly located on the outskirts of town. Many towns even go so far as to move these communities to the least desirable and unattractive areas to prevent offending those of a higher class who may wander past. It is also not uncommon to find these already concealed communities camouflaged by paintings or tall fences to ensure their invisibility (Hart, Rhodes, & Morgan, 2002).

The stigma of living in a mobile home can leave a lasting impact; Kusenbach (2009) suggests three reasons why. First, belittling one's home can have significant repercussions since

home is a symbolic expression of our identity and the place to which we have the strongest social, psychological, and emotional attachments (Bachelard 1964; Casey 2001; Duyvendak 2011; Low & Altman 1992; Relph 1976). Second, racial implications are linked to the stigma of mobile homes. For example, “trailer trash” is a term primarily reserved for white working-class people who live in mobile homes. Interestingly enough, when compared to people of color, those who identify as white and working-class are most worried about the negative reputation attached to mobile homes because it taints the privilege their race affords. Third, labels such as “trailer trash” and “white trash” directly attack the decency these folks attempt to salvage to counteract the stigmatization that arises from their living situation (Kusenbach, 2009). Furthermore, these demeaning labels are commonly used to describe white working-class people who are featured in films and television illustrating the media’s role in Othering this population.

White Working-Class People in the Media

For over a decade, scholars have written about the ways in which white working-class people are portrayed in the media (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Brown, 2005; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Goad, 1997; Grindstaff, 2002; Hansen & Cooke-Jackson, 2010; Kendall, 2005; Newitz & Wray, 1997; Sweeney, 2001; Tyler, 2008). According to their findings, this group is frequently depicted as stupid, criminal, racist, dirty, lazy, and addicted to alcohol, drugs, and sex among other things. White working-class people are made to appear as if they are unable to abide by middle and upper class standards associated with their race. For this reason, they are considered “white Others” (Newitz & Wray, 1997; Sweeney, 2001). Another common term used for this population in the media is “white trash” which, according to Heavner (2007), marks and makes whiteness visible. Associating “trash” with white

people who are clinging to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder justifies their marginalization and consequently challenges the privileges their racial identity affords (Newitz and Wray, 1997). DiAngelo (2006) adds that it “pollutes whiteness” by exceeding the class and racial etiquette required of white people to preserve their power and privilege. Those who rupture the etiquette of whiteness, who fail to perform a normative, white, middle to upper class act, are figuratively thrown to the curb—the only place where they cannot pose a threat to the symbolic social order (Bettie, 2003; Gibbons, 2004; Hartigan, 1997; Wray, 2006). Similar to “white trash” is the term “trailer trash,” used in popular films and television shows (e.g., *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999), *Joe Dirt* (2001), *Trailer Park Boys* (2001-present), and *Baby Mama* (2008), to name a few). Though a variety of people live in mobile home communities, this term is used for low-income whites (Kusenbach, 2009).

My work, like the work of the scholars mentioned above, is also concerned with how mediated portrayals perpetuate the Othering of white working-class people, but I focus specifically on how this occurs within the genre of reality television (RTV). Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) have done something similar by questioning the ethics of stereotyping Appalachian people on RTV—a project that was conceived in response to CBS’s 2003 proposal of *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*, a reality-based remake of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. After describing this proposal and the controversy it spurred among rural activists, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen describe some of the negative stereotypes the media has promoted and reinforced about Appalachian people. Next, they debunk these stereotypes and explain why they are problematic. As the authors state, “Appalachian people have been described as ignorant, lazy, uneducated, and incestuous, when in reality they live in poor, depressed regions far from access to quality

resources such as grocery stores, employment opportunities, or quality health care.

Unfortunately, such stereotypes leave Appalachians feeling marginalized” (p. 187).

In addition to pinpointing the problem with mediated stereotypes, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) make an important distinction between scripted shows and reality shows. They indicate that stereotypes in scripted shows do not target disenfranchised individuals as directly as reality television shows. This is because, in reality shows, the rhetoric of realism is used to authenticate the stereotypes of disenfranchised populations that are portrayed. The point made here is key for my work because it illustrates the importance of looking at RTV since the call to the real (Dubrofsky, 2011) in this genre can have greater implications for disenfranchised populations when compared to scripted shows.

In line with Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008), my work focuses on how the genre of RTV articulates the cultural Othering of white working-class people. Rather than focusing on the ethical implications of these portrayals, I look at a specific text to describe how these portrayals naturalize constructions of race, region, and class—an important and timely endeavor when considering how depictions of white working-class people are steadily on the rise in RTV creating what has been called a “redneck reality” subgenre (Haynes, 2014). Shows within this subgenre (e.g., *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Swamp People*, *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*, *Duck Dynasty*, etc.) are part of a larger trend in reality TV programming centered on absurdities—“the bigger and weirder, the better”—which has persisted for nearly a decade, suggesting that Southern white working-class people are absurd (Slade, 2014, p. vii).

Reality Television

Since the first season of *Survivor* in 1999, RTV has become a cornerstone of prime-time

television programming (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008) and is considered a major cultural force in the United States (Oullette & Hay, 2008). In fact, by 2010 viewers worldwide watched more RTV than any other genre (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Scholars have increasingly paid attention to RTV and written about several topics, including: audience reception (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Hill, 2005 and 2007; Sender, 2012; Skeggs & Wood, 2012); cultural history (Murray & Oullette, 2008; Taddeo & Dvorak, 2010); ethics (Lumby, 2003; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012); neoliberalism (Couldry, 2008; Oullette 2009; Oullette & Hay, 2008; Sender, 2006) authenticity (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Deligiaouri & Popovic, 2010; Escoffery, 2006); “ordinary” people on television (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Turner, 2004); surveillance (Andrejevic, 2004, 2006; Corner, 2002; Couldry, 2002; McGrath, 2004; Palmer, 2002; Pecora, 2002; Trotter, 2006); race (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Derosia, 2002; Drew, 2011; Dubrofsky, 2011, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Harvey, 2006; Hasinoff, 2008; Hubbard & Mathers, 2004; Kraszewski, 2004; Orbe & Hopson, 2002; Orbe, Warren & Cornwell, 2001; Vrooman, 2003); sexuality (Bennett, 2006; Cohan, 2007; LeBesco, 2004; Pullen, 2004; Sender, 2006; Tropiano, 2009; Vargas, 2010; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006) gender (Cox, 2012; Heller, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Kirby, 2013; Lee & Moscovitz, 2013; Marwick, 2010; Moorti & Ross, 2004; Sears & Godderis, 2011; Thompson, 2010; Weber, 2009); and oddities (Slade, Narrow, & Buchanan, 2014). These categories are not fixed or exhaustive.

Among the scholarship focusing on RTV, the concentration on class has been minimal (e.g., Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Johnston, 2006; Palmer, 2004; Scott, 2010; Skeggs, 2009; Slade, Narrow, & Buchanan, 2014; Wood & Skeggs, 2004) considering RTV offers more representations of poor and working-class citizens than most other mainstream television (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Johnston, 2006). Investigating how this genre represents class, as I do, is

important because it can provide clues about how class is understood, defined, and negotiated in larger cultural contexts.

The Intersection of Lived Experiences and Mediated Representations

Many studies have explored the relationship between mediated representations and lived experiences, usually taking a media effects approach, which presumes that mass media influences the thoughts and behaviors of audiences (Sparks, 2013). I am less concerned with studying and assuming direct influence than in exploring the complex and interwoven relationship between media, culture, and lived experiences. In this relationship, lived experiences emerge through mediated discourses, which articulate important ideas in our culture. One of the few scholars who looks at this relationship is Aisha Durham (2014). Her work qualitatively analyzes the mediated representations and lived experiences of poor Black women who comprise the hip-hop generation. Similar to my dissertation, Durham seeks to discover what happens when real and symbolic bodies meet.

In addition to Durham's (2014) work, I located four studies that do similar work. Boylorn (2008) and Griffin (2012), for example, write critical autoethnographic accounts about their lives in relation to mediated representations. The primary goal of their work is to "talk back" (hooks, 1989) to controlling images of Black women in the media. Their use of critical autoethnography is monumental for my work, as I use this method for a similar purpose: to "talk back" to controlling images of white working-class people in the media. Grindstaff's (2009) work, though different from the aforementioned studies, informs my dissertation because it is concerned with the lived experiences of twelve women in the reality television series *Sorority Life*. Paying particular attention to the production process, Grindstaff seeks to understand the strategies

employed to “produce” these women and argues that the producers of the show chose to represent what was expected (i.e., heteronormative attractiveness and sexual display) given the context of a sorority on display.

Inspired by Grindstaff’s work, Dunn (2012) analyzes the relationship between the RTV show, *Cathouse: The Series*, and the lived experiences of the women featured in the show. Her approach, in some ways, is similar to my own. She begins with a close textual analysis of the show, which documents the professional lives of the workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, a legal brothel in Nevada. Next, she reports her observations from five weeks of ethnographic observation at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch where she studied the site and interviewed the women workers to compare the narratives constructed on the show with the stories of their lived experiences. Her findings suggest that the “‘front stage’ construction of reality in RTV is not entirely separate from the ‘back stage’ lives of participants” (p. 360)—a direct challenge to most reality TV scholarship that uses textual analysis and assumes the reality displayed on screen is a constructed fiction. Dunn argues that the assumption of reality as a construction is too simplistic and cannot be solely addressed through textual analysis; it should also be informed by ethnographic methods of data collection. As she states, “To provide more depth of understanding, RTV scholarship (and screen studies in general) should expand the focus of analysis beyond what appears on the television screen” (p. 346).

Though I do not interview the actual participants in RTV shows that feature white working-class people, or spend time in the settings in which these shows take place, my dissertation is inspired by and similar to Dunn’s (2012) work because it merges textual analysis with ethnography. Modeling Dunn’s work, the following chapter consists of a close textual analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Once I describe what’s on the screen, my subsequent

chapters focus on the lived experiences of white working-class people who, though they may not star in the show, are implicated in it and can therefore help shed light on the relationship between media, culture, and lived experience ultimately expanding what we know about RTV.

CHAPTER TWO:

HERE COMES HONEY BOO BOO: A CAUTIONARY TALE STARRING WHITE WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE

“What’s this yellow stuff?” asks seven-year-old pageant princess, Alana Thompson, pointing to a chunk of pineapple in the cake she’s devouring. “It’s pineapple, baby,” says her disheveled mother, June, seated next to Alana and Miss Georgia 2011 (Micheala Lackey) at a quaint café. Alana opens her mouth, bats her eyes at Miss Georgia, and pulls the chunk of fruit out of her mouth while passing gas. Miss Georgia’s eyes open wide while June turns to Alana and says, “What did you just do?” With a laugh, Alana says, “I farted,” as crumbs of cake fall from her mouth (season one, “A-Choo!”).

Bodily functions, as illustrated here, are a common occurrence on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, a thirty-minute weekly reality series on TLC that aired from August 8, 2011 to August 14, 2014. The storyline revolves around a white working-class family who lives in a cramped clapboard house in rural McIntyre, Georgia. Railroad tracks—a common symbol of poverty—run through the backyard and are featured frequently in each episode to remind viewers of the family’s class status. Alana (a.k.a. “Honey Boo Boo”), the main character, is a self-proclaimed chubby and hyperactive seven-year-old with sass who dreams of being the future Miss America. Alana’s biggest fan is June (a.k.a. “Mama June”), her 33-year-old, 300-plus pound mother who wears the pants in the family. For the past nine years, June has been dating Alana’s biological father, Mike (a.k.a. “Sugar Bear), a short 43-year-old who labors in chalk mines seven days a

week to sustain the family. Before meeting Mike, June had three daughters: 13-year-old Lauryn (a.k.a. “Pumpkin”), 15-year-old Jessica (a.k.a. “Chubbs”), and 18-year-old Anna (“Chickadee”) who recently had a baby named Kaitlyn.

Alana and her family initially became famous on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, which follows the lives of child beauty pageant contestants and their families. During a January 2012 episode of this show, Mama June gave Alana “go-go juice,” a blend of Mountain Dew and Red Bull, to boost her energy before a performance. This incident sparked controversy because of the beverage’s high caffeine content, and was widely discussed in popular media. As news outlets shunned Mama June for her parenting, Alana became an overnight star. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* emerged eight months later (Villareal, 2012).

In its first season, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* drew an average 2.4 million viewers per episode making it TLC’s third-highest-rated series in 2012. The finale of that season attracted more 18 to 49-year-old viewers (the demographic deemed most important by advertisers) than Fox News’s coverage of the Republican National Convention and CNN’s coverage of the Democratic National Convention (Bazemore, 2012; Kepler, 2012; Puente, 2012). Subsequent seasons have also been popular, making *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* one of TLC’s top ten most successful shows of all time (Tauber, 2014). In addition to its high ratings, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* has permeated popular culture and taken on a life of its own. A series of trending topics have appeared on Twitter (e.g., #redneckognize) and, in 2012, Alana was named one of Barbara Walters’s “10 Most Fascinating People”—alongside Prince Harry and Olympic gold medalist, Gabby Douglas (Kizer, 2012). Since the show’s cancellation, the family has received ongoing media attention and criticism regarding their conflicts, finances, eating habits, and more. Honey Boo Boo continues to be a household name in tabloids.

Under Surveillance: White Working-Class People

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is a series composed of footage gathered from the continuous observation of white working-class people. Surveillance cameras follow Alana and her six family members 24/7, capturing their everyday lives on film. Like any RTV show, members of the production staff edit the footage to create episodes. Editing plays a large role in creating the final product (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2006; Kilborn, 2003). As Kraszewski (2004) states, “media that attempts to document reality actually shapes it, filtering it through a variety of discourses and unequal fields of social power” (p. 207). Consequently, the identities of participants on RTV shows come to reflect the desires of producers and directors in shaping each story (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006). We see this identity work on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* when family members engage in behaviors presented as unorthodox through choices in lighting, camera angles, framing, captions, and sound, my primary focus. Sounds of common bodily functions like burping, for example, are almost always amplified. Highlighting these and other behaviors through stylistic choices like amplification articulates certain ideas about white working-class people to which we should be attentive. Because RTV shows emphasize a desire to portray the real by featuring “real people” doing “real things,” these ideas are promoted as authentic (Dubrofsky, 2006). Such authentication reinforces the cultural demonization of white working-class citizens that has remained intact since the late 19th century. During this time upper-class southerners began to elevate themselves by using the term “redneck” to describe poor, southern, uneducated, white, male farmers whose necks were frequently sunburnt from working in the fields (Reed, 1988).

Though many scholars have studied the ways in which mediated portrayals mirror and reinforce the cultural Othering of white working-class people (e.g., Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Grindstaff, 2002; Kendall, 2005; Sweeney, 2001), few have looked specifically at how this Othering occurs within the genre of RTV (see Cooke-Jackson & Hanson, 2008), and what it means in the context of neoliberalism, a conservative political agenda that has been prevalent in the United States since the 1980's. At the heart of neoliberalism is the deployment of policies such as economic deregulation, the privatization of social provision, and cutbacks in government expenditures like welfare. Each of these policies is designed to shift responsibility away from the government and onto individual people (Harvey, 2007). Advice, as opposed to injunction, has become the primary mode of governance (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996). Much of this advice comes from mainstream media, which reinforces neoliberal ideals. For example, neoliberalism's emphasis on personal responsibility is widely promoted throughout the RTV genre when "experts" are called in to help less-educated, lower-income participants escape their "lack" so that they can become more self-sufficient. By helping people help themselves, RTV functions as an apparatus that generates consent for the welfare reform imbedded in neoliberalism (Oullette, 2009; Wood & Skeggs, 2004).

In this chapter, I build upon the work of scholars who contend that RTV is a technology of neoliberalism (see Couldry, 2008; Hasinoff, 2008; McMurria, 2008; Oullette & Hay, 2008; Sender, 2006) by illustrating how surveillance is used in RTV to present white working-class people as irresponsible and helpless despite the intervention of experts. This type of neoliberal ethos frames the hardships white working-class people face as rooted from individual failures, which ultimately renders them undeserving of support. Consequently, the opportunity to critique structural inequalities is foreclosed and neoliberal ideals such as personal responsibility are

strategically reinforced to eliminate welfare and restore class stratification. Though Leistyna (2009) looks at the damning of white working-class individuals on RTV, I add to this scholarship an examination of the stylistic choices, primarily related to sound, that foster this damnation.

Central to this chapter are Foucault's notions of spectacle and surveillance as disciplinary mechanisms. Spectacle puts deviant bodies on public display (e.g., mugshots) to warn others of the dangers of defying a society's *modus operandi*. Surveillance subjects bodies to a relentless gaze to foster control (e.g., the modern prison system) (Foucault, 1977). Although Foucault historically demarcates practices of spectacle and surveillance, I argue that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* makes use of both—a combination that is on the rise in popular culture (Brown, 2005; Turner, 1998). Within the series, footage from surveillance cameras is used to make a spectacle of Alana and her family highlighting their failure—because of their working-class status—to conform to “ideal whiteness,” a whiteness privileged for displaying dominant cultural standards inspired by neoliberalism such as wealth, rationality, personal responsibility, and self-control (Harvey, 2007). Alana and her family are marked “white Others” because of this failure. They are cast beyond the boundaries of “ideal whiteness,” so that this form of whiteness is normalized and can maintain its superiority. Frankenberg's (1993) claim that there are two types of whites—those who are privileged and those who are marginalized because of additional variables such as class, gender, and sexuality—comes to fruition in this text.

Building on the link scholars have established between authenticity and surveillance (see Andrejevic 2004; Couldry, 2002; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014), I show how surveillance functions in the service of whiteness and class to authenticate a deviant form of whiteness, an

“inappropriate whiteness,”⁴ with which the family is associated. Alana and her family are presented as authentic exemplars of “inappropriate whiteness” when a series of clips from surveillance footage highlight their “shortcomings.” Whether the clips feature Mama June’s deformed toe or Alana grabbing the fat of her stomach and using it as a puppet, we are invited to see the family as genuinely unable to conform to “ideal whiteness.” In other words, through surveillance, Alana and her family become “real” spectacles for viewers to gaze upon, laugh at, and learn what not to do and who not to be in the United States. The family’s projected failure to conform to dominant cultural standards is the *raison-d’etre* of the show—a setup that reinforces working-class limits to propriety in the neoliberal era. To illustrate this setup, I describe what “inappropriate whiteness” looks like, how it is constructed as humorous, and finally, how it is authenticated throughout *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to remove us from feeling implicated in the family’s marginality.

Laughing at “Inappropriate Whiteness”

Whiteness, as discussed above, functions as the default racial norm in U.S. contexts (Dyer, 1997). My work focuses on those who exceed the class and racial etiquette of whiteness and are dubbed traitors to their race. White working-class girls and women are considered especially repellant for their inability to conform to standards of ideal white femininity such as beauty, refinement, wealth, morality, responsibility, intellect, civility, and subordination to men (Banet-

⁴ My use of the term “inappropriate whiteness” is inspired by Wiegman’s (1999) conceptualization of “counterwhiteness,” which is defined by its disaffiliation from white supremacist practices. I favor the term “inappropriate whiteness” since “counterwhiteness” suggests that someone who can easily claim a white physical identity can choose to disconnect themselves from the privilege whiteness affords—a choice that white working-class people may never have because their socioeconomic status automatically disconnects them from such privilege.

Weiser, 1999; Lawler, 1999, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997). Consequently, these girls and women have to work incessantly to avoid ridicule from middle-class observers. The problem, however, is that their attempts to conform to ideal white femininity are often rendered comical (Lawler, 2005). Several of these moments appear on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and, because they are captured via surveillance cameras, the show presents them as if they are authentic: the working-class girls and women do not just fail to conform, they *really* fail. We see a clear boundary between “inappropriate whiteness” and “ideal whiteness.”

A particularly poignant moment of failing to conform to ideal white femininity occurs in “Gonna be a Glitz Pig” (season one) when Mama June hires Barbara Hickey, owner of the Etiquette School of Atlanta, to teach Alana some lessons after she is critiqued by judges at a pageant for being unrefined. Mama June forces Pumpkin, Alana’s sister, to join in the lessons, too. Ms. Hickey’s visit illustrates a common trend on RTV shows—inspired by neoliberalism—when experts intervene to help bring less-educated, lower-income participants up to middle-class standards (Oullette & Hay, 2008; Wood & Skeggs, 2004). A pageant coach, wedding planner, beauty queen, dance instructor, and makeup artist are some of the many experts who appear throughout *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. When Ms. Hickey arrives, a long shot reveals that she is white, middle-aged, has shiny brown hair, and is well put together: her ironed black dress, pink overcoat, manicured nails, and matching jewelry are presented in stark contrast to Alana, Mama June, and Pumpkin who stand on a porch petting Glitzy, their pet teacup pig, while a series of close ups highlight their disheveled hair and wrinkled clothing. Ms. Hickey tries to introduce herself to the family, but Glitzy’s squeals are strategically amplified to drown out her words, reinforcing the contrast we see. The scene cuts to Pumpkin, who, while chewing loudly with her mouth open, says to the camera, “My mama thinks I need etiquette classes. Look at me. I don’t

need no etiquette classes. I don't need no manners or anything. What you see is what you get.” This statement suggests Pumpkin is content with her behavior, even though it is presented in this scene—and throughout the entire show—as consistently aberrant. When Pumpkin is shown to behave consistently in the same manner, we are invited to see this as her authentic self. This authenticity makes her a “good” RTV participant: she is who she is, whether in front of a camera or not. The problem with this setup is that Pumpkin becomes an authentic example of a kind of whiteness the series shows in an unfavorable light: “inappropriate whiteness.”

After Ms. Hickey introduces herself, she asks the girls to join her in the dining room for lessons on proper dining etiquette. While Ms. Hickey sets the table, a camera zooms in on Pumpkin who picks up a clean white cloth and uses it to blow her nose, making a sound amplified by producers to ensure that this action is the focal point of the scene. We then see a close-up of Ms. Hickey who stops mid-sentence and stares at Pumpkin in disbelief. The next scene features Alana who, wearing a different outfit (indicating this was filmed at a different time), says to the camera: “Picking your nose is not ladylike because it's not pretty and it's nasty.” Immediately following this declaration, the camera zooms in on Alana as she picks her nose. This is an explicitly produced moment of situational irony viewers are hailed to laugh at, especially considering its strategic placement in the midst of a lesson on proper etiquette. Moments such as these, where characters unselfconsciously display bodily functions, are a staple of RTV shows featuring working-class people (Wood & Skeggs, 2004). The frequency with which these moments occur support the paradox Stallybrass and White (1986) have observed: “what is socially peripheral is also frequently symbolically central” (p. 12), meaning that acts or people considered deviant become a central spectacle. This observation helps explain why nearly every episode begins and ends with burps, farts, sneezes, or the sounds of a flushing toilet. By

centralizing Alana and her family's bodily functions, it becomes difficult to imagine them as capable of performing the "ideal white" behavior that would provide access to upward mobility; they are presented as too grotesque (i.e., their bodies are too open and secreting as evidenced by frequent and overt bodily functions) (Russo, 1995).

In the last moments of her visit, Ms. Hickey stands alone in the yard to reflect on the lesson. "There's some habits they have to break," she says to the camera with a smirk. "The bodily function thing, *we* don't do that." Then the camera cuts to a shot of Pumpkin who says, "I'll stop passing gas when I'm dead." Despite Ms. Hickey's teaching efforts, the girls seem content with who they are. They comfortably display what Valverde (1998) refers to as "diseases of the will": failures of responsible self-control, shown in a humorous light. Unlike Pumpkin and Alana, Ms. Hickey is presented as if she is immune to "diseases of the will." She is made to be the voice of reason, both literally and figuratively. When she speaks, captions are not used and the same can be said for all of the middle to upper-class people who appear on the show. The assumption is that we understand what these people are saying. But when the girls (or any of their working-class family members) speak, captions are regularly used, suggesting they are unintelligible. Captions, however, are not used every time the girls speak; they are interjected strategically, often when the girls are discussing topics like burping and farting. In this way, the captions literally spell out and emphasize how "out of control" and "grotesque" they are. Even more telling is the camerawork. Whenever the girls cough, sneeze, sniffle, blow their noses, or display any combination of these bodily functions, the camera zooms in on their faces to emphasize the occurrence. Ms. Hickey, on the other hand, is never featured excreting anything from her body and consistently appears calm, cool, and collected.

When the scene ends with Ms. Hickey saying, “The bodily function thing, we don’t do that,” she sets herself apart from Pumpkin and Alana, shoring up her racialized and classed privilege. Her statement reinforces Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) claim that whiteness can maintain its invisibility and superiority by assigning negative qualities (e.g., bodily functions) to white identities associated with marginalized characteristics, such as poverty. Ms. Hickey’s use of the pronoun “we” is particularly troubling because it suggests that she is speaking on behalf of all white middle to upper class people, alluding to an “us” versus “them” dichotomy where whiteness, despite its invisibility, has clear boundaries. White people who are rational, middle to upper class, and in control of their presentation of self (e.g., Ms. Hickey) stay within these boundaries because they display an “ideal whiteness”—a whiteness that conforms to dominant cultural standards. White people who are working-class, uneducated, and seemingly out of control (e.g., Alana and Pumpkin) exemplify “inappropriate whiteness,” and, as such, are relegated to the margins.

We see similar racial border work in the episode, “A-Choo” (season one), when Alana and Mama June meet Miss Georgia 2011 (Michaela Lackey) for the first time at a nearby clothing boutique. This scene is significant because it is the first time Alana comes face to face with someone she and her family would like her to be: a beauty queen. The contrasts that emerge are noteworthy because they make a mockery of Alana’s desire to win a pageant, a theme that permeates the first season. Viewers are invited to laugh at Alana as she repeatedly fails to perform white, middle-class, civilized femininity—the standard for beauty pageants (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006)—in contrast to Miss Georgia who effortlessly embodies these qualities. The bulk of the humor on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is couched in this type of

failure. If Alana were to succeed at being more like Miss Georgia, there would be no narrative tension on the series and the series therefore would not exist.

While waiting for Michaela to arrive, Mama June says to the camera, “We’re hoping that she can give us some advice,” illustrating her frequent reliance on experts. Moments later, Alana, whose hair is tied together in a lopsided ponytail, and is wearing a cotton sunflower dress that hugs her round stomach, spots Michaela. “There she is, Mama. There she is!” The instrumental country soundtrack shifts to a chorus of angelic women’s voices complete with chimes. We hear this same soundtrack in “Runaway Bride” (season two) when Mama June lays her eyes on a table full of pizza at her bridal shower, letting the audience know that Michaela and the pizza are both objects of desire. The scene cuts to Michaela who is featured in slow motion walking towards the boutique. She is wearing an ornate, short, white dress tied together with a brown belt emphasizing her thin waist. Michaela’s conventional femininity is emphasized by her accessories and makeup: turquoise feather earrings, high heels, gold bangles, painted red lips, and long, dark hair swaying from side to side. The camera captures the sun radiating around Michaela while she makes her way to the boutique. Her glowing appearance reinforces Dyer’s (1997) claim that idealized white women are often bathed in light. Alana, who is immersed in shadows next to Mama June, puts her hands up to her eyes, as if looking through a set of binoculars, to focus on the bright image of ideal femininity.

Alana, Mama June, and Michaela go to a café for dessert. A waiter arrives with several pieces of cake, one of which Alana grabs with a fork and shoves in her mouth. The piece is too large and dangles from her lips as she looks up at Michaela and smiles—a moment the camera zooms in to capture, highlighting Alana’s lack of manners. With a furrowed brow and halfhearted smile, Michaela looks down at Alana and says, “That’s not cute. That’s not cute.

Let's not do that." Alana laughs and continues to play with her food. Throughout this scene, a stark contrast emerges between the "classical body" and "grotesque body" (Russo, 1995). Michaela represents the classical body, which is transcendent, symmetrical, and sleek—the standard of beauty and perfection as illustrated by her glowing, angelic-seeming presence. Alana, with her tattered appearance, represents the "grotesque body," irregular, secreting, and protruding. This juxtaposition reminds viewers that no matter how hard Alana tries, she will never be a beauty queen; she is constructed as too aberrant. Instead of legitimizing the family's dream of Alana winning a grand supreme title—the highest award in the child beauty pageant circuit—Michaela's presence makes this dream laughable. We know Alana will never be a winner, unless she's competing in a blueberry pie-eating contest (as she does in season three's "Funk Shway"). Her attempts at pageantry are inevitably futile, but funny nonetheless. Interestingly, Alana gives up on pageants in subsequent seasons and instead tries ballet (season two, "It's Always Something with Pumpkin") and cheerleading (season three, "The Birds and the Boos"). Alana's attempts at both of these historically white, feminine, and middle to upper class activities (Grindstaff & West, 2010; Fisher, 2015) are presented much like her pageantry pursuits: utter failures, but always amusing. A series of clips show Alana either falling on her face, disobeying instructions, or moving out of sync with the young and predominately white girls who surround her. Narrating over these clips are critiques from white women instructors, such as, "Alana needs to work on her rhythm," which reinforce her marginal status.

Similar to Alana and Pumpkin, all the white working-class characters on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are presented as hypervisible, marked by an undesirable white racial identity when juxtaposed against "ideal white" people like Ms. Hickey and Michaela. This contrast becomes especially clear in "Never Boo-fore Seen" (season three) when Alana and her family

compete against the white, wealthy, and world-renowned “Cake Boss” family in the popular American television game show, *Family Feud*. Instead of being shown the entire game, we see several clips of the “Honey Boo Boo” clan providing wrong answers, indicated by the sound of a buzzer and large red x’s that appear across the screen. We never see the “Cake Boss” team make errors. Predictably, Alana and her family lose the game and the scene transitions to their living room where each member is gathered around a couch wearing different outfits, indicating this was filmed at a different time. With sullen expressions on their faces, they state the following in unison: “And the survey says, we didn’t win.” Following this strategically inserted moment is a shot of the “Cake Boss” family celebrating their victory in the *Family Feud* studio by jumping around and hugging one another. As they continue to celebrate, the camera captures Alana and her family slowly walking backstage. Here, Pumpkin grabs piles of free food spread across a table and Mama June passes gas (audibly, thanks to the production process) while shoving a free donut in her mouth. This scene provides a moment of hypervisibility reinforcing the family’s marginal status, as if losing the game didn’t send a clear enough message.

We see a similar juxtaposition in “Big Girls Wear Lace Ups” (season two) when Mama June and Sugar Bear take a ballroom dance class to prepare for their upcoming commitment ceremony, a celebration of their love in lieu of a wedding since June refuses to marry Sugar Bear because he has had two failed marriages already. As they enter the dance studio, they are greeted by four married couples, and two women instructors—all are white, middle-aged, and appear as middle to upper class in that they are well-groomed, and clad in ironed dress clothes, formal ballroom dance shoes, and jewelry consisting of precious stones and rare metals. Sugar Bear is presented as standing out through a series of close up shots emphasizing his dirty brown baseball cap, grey hiking shoes, and dark blue t-shirt tucked into faded and wrinkled blue jeans. The same

can be said for Mama June who is the only woman wearing no makeup, has her hair pulled back into a messy bun, and is sporting her signature black stretch pants, a light grey v-neck shirt with short sleeves, and plain white sneakers. Based on their wardrobe alone, Mama June and Sugar Bear do not look as though they belong in this elite space typically reserved for middle and upper class people (Bosse, 2007), a point made increasingly clear as the scene unfolds.

At the start of the lesson, Cindy, one of the instructors, looks directly at the camera and offers some advice. “If people can dance together, they can live together,” she says with a smile. “It’s push and pull, give and take.” We then see a close up Mama June stepping on Sugar Bear’s feet as they attempt to dance—strategically placed to suggest the couple cannot dance together and should not be together. They are the only couple in the class shown out of sync with each other and the music, making them hypervisible. Moments later, their hypervisibility is reinforced with a close up of Sugar Bear’s left foot stepping on Mama June’s right foot. The instant his foot touches hers, we hear a dinging bell to emphasize the error. As they continue trying to dance, June says to Sugar Bear, “Come on! Where are you going? What are you doing?” while the camera spins around them and shakes, signifying instability. Suddenly, the camera zooms in on a couple dancing gracefully and flawlessly nearby. June says to Sugar Bear, “Look at them.” Sugar Bear responds, “We might be like that one day,” as the camera features him and June out of sync with each other once again, clearly mocking Sugar Bear’s hopeful statement. We are invited to recognize and laugh at the fact that ballroom dancing is not meant for “inappropriate white” people like them, especially those who do not abide by neoliberal ideals of family where stable marriages between two heterosexual parents are revered (Atencio & Wright, 2004); this activity is reserved for the more refined “ideal white” people who surround them. Dichotomous setups like these, which feature Alana and her family’s overt and seemingly natural inability to blend in

with those who embody “ideal whiteness,” are what make the show funny, thus couching humor in failure—a trope that permeates *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*; white Othering, in essence, becomes laughable.

Authenticating “Inappropriate Whiteness”

Despite the white Othering that occurs throughout *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, Alana and her family are constructed as content with who they are, which ultimately removes us from feeling implicated in the issues related to poverty that they experience. To describe this setup, I draw upon and expand Dubrofsky’s notion of the “therapeutics of the self,” defined as “the process of affirming a consistent (unchanged) self across disparate social spaces, verified by surveillance.” The “therapeutics of the self” is useful for my argument because it centers the ways in which surveillance functions in the RTV genre to confirm authenticity. I use the concept to show how surveillance is used on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to authenticate the “inappropriate whiteness” with which the family is associated. The “therapeutics of the self” can be found in almost every episode when Alana and her family make self-reflexive, therapeutic statements like, “we are who we are” and “it is what it is,” expressing contentment with who they are and how they are portrayed. Statements like these are therapeutic not because they express a desire to change (key in many definitions of therapeutic transformation), but because they express self-knowledge, acceptance, and affirmation, which align with the rhetoric of therapy (Cloud, 1998). As Dubrofsky (2007) explains:

People enacting the “therapeutics of the self” are not, as they are in therapeutic models, admitting something “bad” about the self to change this “bad” part...but rather, they

admit something ‘good’ about the self and embrace it or admit that one’s “true” and “authentic” self is good (no matter what that self is like).

In other words, the therapeutic impetus in the “therapeutics of the self” is self-affirmation, exemplified in statements like “we are who we are” as well as Pumpkin’s previously mentioned declaration, “what you see is what you get.” Therapeutic statements such as these are often strategically positioned against a backdrop of compiled images from surveillance footage highlighting the family’s deviation from “ideal whiteness.” This deviation is made to seem consistent, as if the family is always aberrant, with or without the presence of surveillance cameras.

When Alana and her family engage in “therapeutics of the self,” they verify the consistency in their behavior across disparate social spaces, and consequently authenticate and appear content with their “white Other” status. This contentment trivializes the material struggles that the family’s marginal status affords. As mentioned, the seven family members live off only one reported source of income: Sugar Bear’s wage from chalk-mining. Though the family does make money from the show, this is never mentioned and not part of how they are constructed.⁵ We see them experience material disadvantages, evidenced primarily by the cramped three-bedroom, one-bathroom home where they live. In addition to dealing with the ear-splitting sound of passing trains in the backyard, the family members are presented as sacrificing to make the most of their small living space: bedrooms are shared, Mama June and her daughters wash their hair in the kitchen sink, and the dining room functions both as a place to eat and as a storage space for stockpiles of discounted goods. Privacy is also compromised. For instance, in “Turn

⁵ Salamone (2012) reports that the family made \$5,000 to \$7,000 per episode when the show first aired. Once the ratings proved that the show was a hit, the family’s earnings increased to between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per episode.

This Big Mama On” (season two), Sugar Bear attempts to seduce Mama June in their bedroom, but Chubbs bursts through the door saying, “I gotta pee.” We then see Sugar Bear say to the camera: “It’s kinda hard getting any privacy in the house because to get to the bathroom, the laundry room, uh the other girls’ room they have to come through mine and June’s room to get there. June and I get no privacy.” We also see the family eating unhealthy bulk food (e.g., potato chips and spaghetti) to save money, and suffering related health problems such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. Frequent shots of laughter and joy, accompanied by family members expressing contentment via “therapeutics of the self” tend to overshadow these and other disadvantages.

The “therapeutics of the self” first appears in “This is My Crazy Family” (season one), when Mama June introduces her family. While June is speaking, a country infused slapstick soundtrack plays in the background as we see clips of family members engaging in the following activities while smiling and laughing: Sugar Bear flipping his four-wheeler into a muddy ditch, Alana sitting on a couch with the rest of the family around her as they admire their loudly squealing pet pig, Alana throwing mud on Chubbs’ face in the back of a pickup truck, and Chubbs diving headfirst into a mud pit. Many of these activities involve mud, which, as Hartigan (2013) states, “produces a bit of ‘color’ to whiteness (p. 98)” and, in this case, literalizes the hypervisibility of the family. What we witness, however, is not a new phenomenon. Poor and working-class white people have been perceived as dirty since the mid eighteenth century (Wray, 2006)—a perception that reaffirms the invisibility associated with normative, “ideal whiteness.” As similar clips of family activities continue to be shown, Mama June says: “Our family is crazy. We like to be ourselves. You either like us, or you don’t like us. We just don’t care.” Here she exhibits the “therapeutics of the self” because she makes a series of self-affirming statements expressing how content she is with her consistently crazy, dirty, and happy family—a

consistency verified through the images compiled from surveillance video clips, which appear on the screen.

June's expression of the "therapeutics of the self" is explicit in her catchphrase, "It is what it is," which frames her as comfortable with how she and her family are portrayed. June says, "It is what it is" so often that it becomes the title of the last episode in the first season. At the end of this episode, June narrates over a series of clips, filled with laughter, featuring the family's summer adventures, which include: a trip to the "Redneck Games" (in which Alana and her sisters compete in and lose the "mudpit belly flop" contest), a futile attempt to raise a pig (evidenced when it ejaculates on the family's kitchen table), two pageant competitions (both of which Alana loses), and a trip to the waterpark. All of these activities are made to seem unorthodox through a country slapstick soundtrack that plays in the background as well as awkward camera angles, which make Mama June appear too large to fit on a waterslide and in an inner tube at the water park. While these "unorthodox" activities appear on the screen, June uses her famous catchphrase, "it is what it is," affirming her family's seemingly consistent deviant behavior and their contentment despite this.

A similar moment involving the "therapeutics of the self" occurs in "She Ooo'd Herself" (season one), when Mama June sets up the "redneck slip 'n slide" in her backyard, a tarp lined with baby oil and soap that her daughters—fully clothed—take turns sliding across as she sprays them with the water hose. A camera is placed at the end of the tarp so the girls look as if they are sliding towards us as the familiar slapstick soundtrack plays in the background. We are invited to gaze upon these girls as they happily and unselfconsciously defy conventional norms of femininity by rolling around in mud, water, soap, and grass. While this occurs, periodic shots of a train and railroad crossing sign appear, reminding us of their class status: they live on the

“wrong side of the tracks.” As the girls continue to play, June says, “*We are who we are. We like having fun. If you’re not having fun doing it, then why do it to begin with?*” Although the behaviors of June’s daughters are framed as deviant, June reframes these behaviors as integral to her family’s identity. Her words exemplify the “therapeutics of the self” because they communicate personal and familial knowledge, acceptance, and pride.

What is particularly significant about this scene—and other scenes in which we witness “therapeutics of the self”—is that the family members are displayed as having complete autonomy in how they present themselves under surveillance, and as content with this presentation. While the family is featured laughing and having fun, producers interject therapeutic statements they make (e.g., “it is what is”). Taking into account the production process, positioning these statements against a backdrop of consistently “deviant” surveilled behaviors is a strategy. As Jones (2003) indicates, the constructedness of a RTV show can help confirm the authenticity of participants. If, under surveillance, they appear to behave naturally in an artificial context, their actions can be trusted and considered sincere. In the context of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, surveillance, when combined with “therapeutics of the self,” does not just affirm the family’s consistency, it affirms their consistent failure to abide by the standards associated with “ideal whiteness” such as rationality, invisibility, and self-control—standards the middle to upper-class white people who appear on the show are presented as naturally possessing. Consequently, the family’s consistent display of “inappropriate whiteness” is authenticated.

As mentioned, Alana and her family seem content despite being presented as white Others. Their family unit is strong. From helping Chickadee through her pregnancy to attending every one of Alana’s pageant competitions, they share a bond that is shown as hard to sever—

one that challenges the idealization of traditional, white, middle-class, nuclear families because, among other things, it demonstrates that blended families can work. Mama June and her daughters break several conventions of femininity: they eat what they want, are agentic and outspoken, openly flaunt and talk about their bodily functions, and wear clothing that is generic and comfortable rather than fashionable and restrictive. In these ways, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* can be seen as potentially progressive; the show provides a glimpse into the lives of white working-class people who are happy and who defy gendered, racial, and familial ideals. At the same time, the show is problematic for some of these same reasons because the family's defiance is amplified, authenticated, and premised on their class status, which becomes the source of humor. Instead of sympathizing and identifying with white working-class people, shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* teach us to laugh at them, making it difficult to access larger critiques about structural inequalities.

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is also problematic because it reinforces what Thomas and Callahan (1982) call, "the myth of the happy poor," or the idea that "money doesn't buy happiness." A quintessential moment illustrating this idea occurs in "Funk Shway" (season three). In this episode, each of the family members are piled together in a tangled heap on top of Mama June and Sugar Bear's camouflage decorated bed after an unsuccessful attempt at searching for a bigger house. "Okay, the grand finale," says Mama June, "we're going to stay in McIntyre!" The girls cheer and the scene transitions to an aside with Sugar Bear saying to the camera, "I'd love to get another bathroom in this house but heck if I had a porta potty, I'd settle for it." Back in the bedroom, we see each family member gather their hands together and lift them high as they shout, "Making memories!" Mama June echoes the sentiment with her infamous phrase, "It is what it is." As everyone continues to cheer, Mama June says to the

camera “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it. We got a roof over our head. We’re together. I know we’ve got a trailer in our front yard and we’re on top of one another. Even though we’ve gotta wait for a while to take a poop, I mean so be it, I mean it’s our home.” Scenes like this perpetuate the “myth of the happy poor,” and are troublesome because they function to preserve the status quo. When poverty is equated with happiness, material struggles are trivialized. As viewers, we are invited to become complacent. We need not feel implicated in this family’s struggles if they always seem happy despite them.

A Cautionary Conclusion

Throughout *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, producers use Alana and her family to demonstrate and reinforce working-class limits to propriety. As Lawler (1999) indicates, entry to the middle class can be difficult for white working-class people because of the ways in which they are often ridiculed. RTV shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* amplify this ridicule when using surveillance to make the “deviant” behavior of white working-class citizens seem consistent and authentic; through this process, people like Alana and her family become exemplars of “inappropriate whiteness.” Surveillance, in essence, works in the service of authenticating a naturalized form of whiteness that is presented as bad; and, by default, bolsters an ideal form of whiteness. The classed bodies of Alana and her family are put on display, like a spectacle, to warn viewers what can happen when people refuse to conform to dominant cultural standards affiliated with “ideal whiteness:” they are pushed to the margins and not taken seriously. In short, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* combines surveillance with spectacle to create a cautionary tale that re-centers “ideal whiteness” and reinforces neoliberal ideals: be wealthy, rational, personally responsible, and in control, or else. While shows like this offer white

working-class people a chance to be in the spotlight and have their voices heard, their sole function in this spotlight is to show what not to do and who not to be in the United States today. This damning setup is part of a larger neoliberal framework that reinforces the demonization of the white working-class population, which continues to prevail in the U.S. cultural landscape.

At the same time Alana and her family are constructed as authentic exemplars of “inappropriate whiteness,” they also seem content with who they are—a contentment that, though seemingly genuine, is heavily emphasized to conceal the hardships they face. Viewers are invited to become complacent by recognizing that the marginality of white working-class people is deserved and—as verified through surveillance—natural. White working-class people can never succeed even if they try, so we need not worry. Through this logic, neoliberalism’s push to dismantle the welfare state is reinforced, widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

In a highly popular show such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, it is not surprising to find a setup like the one described above, where problematic ideas centered on class, race, and gender are reinforced. Critical scholars of RTV should not only point out these ideas but should also continue to develop strategies for understanding and describing how these ideas come to be authenticated within the genre, and the role stylistic choices play in this process. With the increasing growth of the RTV genre where representations of poor and working-class citizens are abundant (Biressi & Nunn, 2005) as well as neoliberalism’s push to hold these individuals accountable for their struggles, this task is now more important than ever. The more scholars can make the process of authentication visible, the more they can challenge the narrow ideas that emerge to make room for emancipatory possibilities, which can benefit those who have experienced disenfranchisement in the neoliberal era.

CHAPTER THREE:
FROM INSIDER TO INSIDER/OUTSIDER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT
OF RETURNING TO MY WORKING-CLASS ROOTS

My hands tremble as I weave my way through the narrow gravel streets of Sunrise Mobile Home Park, streets that remind me of home. I am looking for lot 31 C where Mary and her family live. I see a young white man with a pierced ear, dark clothing, and a brown mullet haircut standing on the side of the road smoking a cigarette. I do a double take. He is a carbon copy of my ex-stepdad to whom my mother was married for ten years, the “epitome of white trash” my peers used to say. My chest tightens as I recall their ridicule, a feeling that is amplified when I think about how I am going to describe this man in my research. I contemplate whether or not to share details about his appearance for fear of perpetuating the “white trash” stereotype. The same tension I felt then, I feel now as I write about the experience, but this is to be expected. As Ellis (2009) states:

Much is at stake in the ethical decisions we continuously have to make as we write ethnographically about self and others. These decisions are complex in terms of integrating our own moral positions with society’s call for scholarship that contributes to social justice, readers demands for truthful and multifaceted accounts, and research participants’ and characters’ desires for privacy, positive representation, and control over the stories of their lives (p. 226).

Rather than hiding the ethical quandaries I experience, I am open about them, letting them become part of my story so that the fine line I walk between working-class and academic, insider and outsider, is made evident.

The young man turns his head and stares at me as my car inches closer. I wonder if he knows I'm lost.

"Is this 31 C?" I ask, rolling down my window and pointing to a single-wide mobile home on my right.

"No. That says 29 C."

"Oh okay. 31 C must be around here. I'll keep looking. Thanks."

My foot presses lightly on the gas pedal as I spot an unmarked mobile home to my left with a sign in the yard that reads "For Sale." I assume this is 31 C because I can't find the address anywhere else. No cars are parked in the driveway. *Mary must have forgotten*, I think. I decide to knock anyway. I step out of my car and the young man approaches me.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Mary."

"Oh, that's my mom. You're right here." He points to the mobile home directly behind him—a double-wide covered in faded yellow vinyl siding, maroon shutters, and a small white sticker on one side that reads, "31 C," in faded black print.

How did I not see that? And how does this guy not know his mom's address?

I extend my hand outward. "What's your name?"

"Randy," he says, gently shaking my hand while letting a puff of smoke escape from the right side of his mouth.

"Hi Randy, I'm Tasha. Nice to meet you."

Randy smiles and leads me up a long ramp with handrails to the front door of his mother's house. As I approach, it dawns on me that I forgot my bag of paperwork in the car—my reason for being here. I ask Randy to wait while I walk back to retrieve it. I grab the bag's thick cloth handles and as I pull it out of the backseat, I feel the weight of the data-mining supplies it holds—recruitment script, copies of my informed consent, interview protocols—tangible reminders that I am not here just to pay a visit to friends or family. I am here for business, to conduct research for my dissertation. The feeling is unsettling at best. Sunrise Mobile Home Park may feel and look like home. But I am not home. I am not even close to home.

Randy greets me upon my return and kindly opens the door to his mother's house. A pungent waft of cigarette smoke combined with musty pet urine fills my nostrils. As a dog owner, I know how difficult it can be to keep the pet smell out of a home. I suppress my yearning to gag and enter the living room, nearly tripping over a motorized wheel chair, which explains the ramp leading up to the door. Randy calls out for his mother as I soak in the surroundings.

A red curtain covers the sole window in the living room, making for a dark but warm ambiance. Laundry, packages of food, lamps, and pet toys are strewn over the stain-covered beige carpet. Along one wall sits a counter top supported by two worn dressers. Underneath the countertop, in between the dressers, lie countless piles of adult diapers and medical supplies. Despite the stale smell, the trailer reminds me of the one in which I grew up; it has the same size and layout.

I continue to take in my surroundings until I see Mary emerge from her bedroom, directly adjacent to the living room. She is wearing glasses, a Star Trek t-shirt, long black shorts, and black ankle socks partially covered by leopard print kitten slippers—an accessory that throws off her predominantly masculine appearance.

“Hi. How are you, Mary?”

“Pretty good,” she says, running her fingers through her chin-length greasy hair.

“Great, well, thanks again for meeting me today. I’m looking forward to learning more about you and your family.” I say this as genuinely as possible because I don’t want to come off as an uncompassionate data miner, a fear I have had since the study began. I want my participants to know that I care and want to connect with them if they are willing. Inclusion is my goal, but I wonder if and how my status as a researcher might prevent this.

“Sure, no problem.” Mary gestures to the only couch in the living room. “Let’s sit here.”

For the next two hours, I listen to the following story about Mary and her family.

Mary, a 45 year old self-proclaimed dog-lover from New York, is the matriarch of her family, which consists of her husband, Steve, of 25 years, and their three grown sons: Troy, Brandon, and Randy (who I met outside). Mary joined the military after graduating high school because she felt it was her only option given her 2.3 grade average. Months after meeting Steve, Mary became pregnant with their first son, prompting a quick wedding planned by Steve’s mother. After the wedding and birth of their first child, Mary and Steve remained in the military until Mary suffered three miscarriages and decided to resign. Steve eventually followed suit, but for entirely different reasons, as explained in the following conversation between Mary and me.

“He got out like a year or two after I did cause of his disease,” Mary says.

My curiosity is piqued. “What does he have?”

“He has Ankylosing Spondylitis. His spine is fused together, hence the wheelchair right there. It reclines back. When he's in it he's like a big surfboard cause his hips, his knees, and his spine and neck are all fused together.”

“So he can't bend any of them?”

“Yep,” Mary says assuredly. “He's been in the wheelchair almost 15 years.”

“How did you first know that something was wrong?”

“When he went to do his annual run he couldn't do it in the time allotted you know. Guys are supposed to be able to run the mile and a half in like 13 minutes and he couldn't do it and they sent him to every specialist out there and then finally somebody figured out what it was that he had. He got an honorable medical discharge in '91 and his condition has gotten worse and worse ever since.”

Steve's disability leaves Mary to do most of the work around the house. A nurse comes five days a week to bathe and medicate Steve, but Mary is in charge of feeding him, changing his catheter, getting him dressed, and getting him in and out of his chair. Thankfully, Mary receives assistance from her children, one who still lives at home and the other two who live together a few mobile homes down the road and stop by several times a day. According to Mary, “they take good care of their dad.” I witnessed this care throughout the interview when each of Mary's sons made a point to check in with their father. It is clear they are a close-knit family.

For the past year and a half, Mary and Steve have lived in a three bedroom, two-bathroom mobile home with one of their sons, Brandon, and his girlfriend, as well as Steve's sister-in-law and her daughter. Before living in such cramped quarters, Mary and Steve owned a house, which, due to rising healthcare costs, they could no longer afford and were forced to short sell. With limited means and few other options, Steve and Mary decided to purchase a mobile home, the one in which they currently live. But even in a mobile home, an arguably more affordable option, they still struggle to make ends meet. Mary explains this dilemma:

They overcharged us on the price of this place. I mean it was used and they charged us the full price of a brand new trailer. Plus, every year they raise the lot rent here and it

angers a lot of people. As of July 1, lot rent will be \$407 a month. It's not worth it you know. We're paying more in lot rent than we are for our mortgage.

Mary's comment about lot rent resonates deeply with my own experience. As a child, I can remember the beginning of each month when Mom would begrudgingly write a check for at least \$400 to Rockford Riverview Estates—an amount that only covered the 3,000 square foot lot for our trailer. The mortgage payment was separate. Because we were always living paycheck to paycheck, the months when the lot rent was raised were the worst. \$10 here and \$20 there added up over the 15 years we lived in that neighborhood. But our experience is not exceptional.

More than ten million people live in mobile home parks throughout the United States (National Manufactured Homeowners Association of America, NMHAA, 2011). 20 percent of park residents rent mobile homes already placed on designated lots while the remainder own their homes. Among the 80 percent of owners, only 14 percent own the land beneath their homes (Housing Assistant Council, 2011). The remaining 86 percent of mobile home owners, such as Mary's family and my family, are at the mercy of the parks' owners who are free to raise lot rents, add or increase various park fees, and make their own rules about pets, land maintenance, and more. Sadly, lot rents are often raised beyond owners' and renters' means (Salamon & MacTavish, 2006). In some parts of the United States, lot rents are over \$500 per month, and this number continues to rise (Rolfe, 2011). Once utilities, park fees, and high interest mortgage rates are factored in, tenants can often end up with higher monthly payments than owners of traditional middle-class homes. While it would seem logical for mobile home residents to pursue better housing options, they often cannot build the capital to do so because of the high amount

they are already paying for housing (Hart et al., 2002). Owning a mobile home in a privately owned park is a trap and this is not changing anytime soon (Salamon & MacTavish, 2006).

Frank Rolfe, one of the founders of Mobile Home University, a three-day intensive course for investors on how to “strike it rich in the trailer park business,” claims that one of the perks of investing in these parks is that landlords can frequently raise the rent without losing tenants (Rivlin, 2014). Residents are more prone to deal with the increase than pay the large fee required to move their home to another park or plot of land (Berlin, 2011) As Rolfe (2011) states:

One of the bedrocks of the mobile home park as an investment vehicle is the inability for most customers to ever leave. At a cost of around \$4,000 to move a mobile home from point A to point B, few tenants can afford to move out even if they are unhappy with the product or the price. This locked-in tenant base is what enables park owners to enjoy phenomenally stable revenue figures, even in major recessions.

The irony is that mobile homes are anything but mobile; they are highly immobile (Salamon & MacTavish, 2006). Rolfe (2011), for example, provides a conservative estimate of \$4,000 to move a mobile home. According to Sullivan (2014), this process can range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 once permitting and installation fees are factored in; this is more than what some owners have paid for the mobile home. Apart from cost, which fosters immobility in a material sense, mobile home units are prone to structural damage if relocated. Thus, in some sense, they are immobile rather than mobile.

This set-up is all the more problematic when ownership in a privately owned park is often framed by owners and investors as an opportunity. People across the United States, such as my family as well as Mary and her family, buy into this idea of an opportunity, thinking of it as a

way to live frugally and save for bigger and better commodities. What we consider to be a potential source of upward class mobility instead becomes the source of our immobility, leaving us trapped, broke, and unable to escape (Hart et. al, 2002; Salamon & MacTavish, 2006).

Mary's inability to work, due to a series of health issues, adds to her family's financial struggles.

"I'm diabetic," Mary says, "and I have neuropathy in my feet and legs so that's what keeps me from working. And because of the diabetes I had a hysterectomy last year and so it causes hot flashes when I have to get Steve dressed. It's horrible."

I lean in. "Wow. When did you start getting the neuropathy?"

"I've had the neuropathy for four or five years now. And you know I can't stand on my feet for more than maybe a half hour at a time and my feet are always sore. My legs ache from standing for too long. It's starting in my hands, too, so I don't drive anymore. I've been trying to get disability, but I was denied, so I have to start all over again. It's aggravating because an alcoholic can get disability like that (snaps her fingers) but it takes someone like me two years to get approval."

Despite Mary's declining health, she continues to take care of Steve and make sure the house is in order. The second family who participated in my study also struggled to make ends meet due to healthcare related issues.

"Just look for the one with the mermaid painted on the side. You can't miss it," Ellen said. She was right.

Past rows of decaying single-wide mobile homes in an unmarked community on the outskirts of Tampa sits a home that sticks out from the rest. This two bedroom, one bathroom single-wide covered with brightly colored hand painted aluminum is where Ellen and her family live. A mermaid lying on sand is painted on the front of the home and a large celestial sun, surrounded by light blue paint resembling the sky, adorns the asphalt driveway. Shades of blue, white, and pink cover the remaining exterior—a stark contrast to the surrounding neutral colored homes. The interior, furnished completely by items found in local dumpsters, is equally kitschy—every inch, including the ceilings, kitchen cabinets, and insides of closets has been touched with a paintbrush or Sharpie marker. Each room has a different theme. The kitchen, chefs. The living room, a jungle. Ellen’s next project? The hallway, which will soon resemble an aquarium.

The eccentric décor is a direct reflection of Ellen, a 35-year-old robust woman with a thick New York accent and frizzy red box-dyed hair, who prides herself on her ability to turn trash into treasure for the good of others. Ellen is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in psychology online while taking care of her 7-year-old daughter, Anna, and 49-year-old husband, Ben. Five years ago, Ben had a severe stroke and has since struggled with mobility, incontinence, and problems with his speech and vision. He requires around-the-clock care, provided solely by Ellen who rarely leaves his side, though she also manages to take care of everyone around her.

Each day Ellen arises at seven, gets her daughter ready for school, feeds the various animals they have, cleans the house, and begins her homework. By nine, calls from friends and family begin. “Everybody calls us for everything. Constantly. Constantly. There's always something.” Whether it’s a flat tire, broken down car, stray dog, or a person who needs a place to stay, Ellen and her family are the first to be called. Last year, for example, they housed ten dogs

and seven additional people: Ellen's 18-year-old daughter, Anna; Ellen's sister, Kasie, and niece, Kayla; Anna's friend, Lizzy; and a homeless woman with two children who reached out for help on Craigslist. Every square inch of Ellen's home, including the shed outside which she uses for storing her vast collection of used items, was occupied.

Four years ago, Ben, Ellen, and Anna moved from their hometown of Kingston, New York—a small “cesspool” where “everyone knows each other” as described by Ellen—to Tampa, Florida with the hope for a better life.

“Ben had been really sick,” Mary says to me during our first meeting. “He had an aneurism and then he had a stroke and he couldn't walk, he couldn't talk, he couldn't eat, he couldn't do anything. I was carrying him around and then I argued with the state to give me money and they finally gave it to me, \$800 per month, to stay with him. We took that money and paid off our debt and got a mortgage for our house here, which cost \$32,000. I have family all around, like two blocks away, my sister, and three of my aunts. We're really close.”

“Wow. So the fact that your family is here is kind of motivating,” I say.

Ellen nods. “Yea, and the heat. When you're carrying someone around, literally carrying them around, you can't do it in snow. It just wasn't a feasible option.”

“And there's nothing in Kingston,” Ben adds from the corner of the kitchen table where has been sitting with us and listening intently. “So it was like let's go to Florida. It's warm. I mean that's why we came here, you know?”

Though Ellen and Ben are happy with their choice to move to Florida, the neighborhood in which they live contains a brothel, pedophiles, unattended children, and crime. Mere days before I first met the family, a domestic dispute resulted in the murder of a nearby neighbor. Adding to the family's concerns about safety are their financial struggles. While Ellen was paid

\$800 per month to help take care of Ben when they lived in Kingston, she is only paid \$100 in Florida.

“Okay, so we get here and Ben doesn't fit the criteria for the program,” Ellen tells me. “Here your internal injury has to happen from an external source, like if you were in a car accident and your brain is busted they'll pay for someone to take care of you but if you had a stroke or internal issue then no. So then you can do to the Medicaid Waiver program which gives me only \$100 per month to stay at home with Ben or a nurse to provide assistance for two hours a week. That was the choice. \$100 a month or a nurse for two hours a week. I'm like what the hell are you going to do for the two hours?” Ellen starts laughing. “See a movie? We couldn't even afford a movie. Maybe they'd clean. Can you do the laundry? Laundry would be worth the 2 hours a week.”

Because Ben requires around the clock care, Ellen is not able to leave the house for work, which is why she has resorted to pursuing higher education online. She eventually wants to teach online college classes. In the meantime, the family lives solely on Ben's social security income and the meager amount Ellen receives for taking care of him.

“There's no money in this house. There's no money,” Ellen candidly tells me.

“So you just live within your means?” I ask. “Paycheck to paycheck?”

Ben answers, “We pay the bills and we get food stamps.”

“If we didn't get food stamps,” Ellen says, “we would starve to death. Our income in this house is \$820 month.”

My mouth drops and eyes widen. “You live on that?”

“Yea,” Ellen says. “Our mortgage is \$462 so if you add the water, that's \$500, which leaves us with \$320. And then once you add the electric and cable, the money is gone already. So

what's left? Then there's the garbage. Usually I let the garbage go a while and then I pay backwards.”

“I used to have like boats and cars and motorcycles. I just live differently now,” says Ben.

Despite their financial struggles and the problems in their neighborhood, Ellen, Ben, and Anna seem content with the life they lead—a sentiment expressed more than once.

“I love it here,” Ellen says with a smile. “It's so much better than New York where it's grey and dismal. They're not happy there, even when they have money.”

“Even on my worst day I can go sit out on the front porch and it's a beautiful day outside,” Ben adds. “We can go to the beach or park whenever we want and sometimes we drive around to see yard sales. We also visit family a lot. Everybody lives close by so we can.”

Laughing, Ellen explains, “We do our rounds. We'll go to like Joyce's for coffee and homemade bread and then we'll go to Aunt Maryellen's and have a soda and something for lunch. Then we will go somewhere else for dinner. Stop here, stop there, you know.”

Witnessing happiness in Ben's and Ellen's life was a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect them to be so positive about their situation because of how dire it seemed compared to my own growing up. My family may have struggled to make ends meet but we rarely relied on governmental assistance, and access to proper and affordable healthcare was never a concern; we were, for the most part, healthy. Furthermore, the trailer in which we lived was larger and in better shape. I was more advantaged in many ways, yet I still complain. However, reflecting on the happiness expressed by Ben, Ellen, and many of my other participants, encourages me to reflect, rethink, and reframe my working-class past; maybe it wasn't so bad after all...

Déjà vu: the phrase that comes to mind when I think of my first meeting with Paula, Fred, and their three children, 17-year-old Eric, 14-year-old Jackie, and 3-year-old, Michael. It was a Wednesday evening, just after dinner, when I entered Halliday Village Mobile Home Park, a community located in a densely populated, crime-ridden part of Tampa. Here, the streets are lined with cracks and gaping potholes and a majority of the homes are old, narrow, and covered in aluminum siding. Paula and her family live in one of the few double-wides around.

The first time I set foot in their home, I felt like my past had slapped me in the face. Fresh laundry and the smell of a home-cooked meal reminding me of Mom's famous pot roasts lingered in the cool air. Each room was clean, but stuffed to the brim. Fitting five people, four of whom are adult-sized, in a three bedroom, two-bathroom double-wide is not an easy task. I know. I experienced this growing up. Space must be compromised and rooms often serve dual purposes. For example, Paula and Fred share a room with Michael and the living room is divided in half by a light brown leather couch. The front half functions as the TV room and the back half is Michael's play area where toys line the floor and walls are adorned with crafts made of construction paper. Directly in front of the living room is a dining room, comprised of a small table with two chairs and a large freezer to store surplus food. Every nook and cranny has a purpose, and this is how life has been since March of 2010 when Fred and Paula first moved to Halliday Park and rented their current home.

Prior to moving, the family lived in an even smaller mobile home in a neighborhood they despised.

"It was a terrible neighborhood," Paula tells me during our second meeting, "One that fit more of the stereotypical..."

"...white trash," Ben interrupts. "It was horrible living there."

“It was so small,” Eric says, rolling his eyes.

Jackie nods her head in agreement. “My bedroom was basically a walk in closet and that was terrible cause I am claustrophobic.”

“It fit the stereotypical trailer park,” Fred adds. “Everything was run down, there were car parts in the yard, babies running in the streets with diapers.... We tried to get out of there as soon as possible.”

“His cousin lives in this trailer park, just over there,” Paula says pointing northward. “She's like, ‘I don't know why you're paying so much for your crappy place. There is a better one by me that just came open.’ So we moved and I was almost in tears. I was like, ‘Oh my god this is so much better.’”

Fred, agreeing with Jackie, says, “It was a complete 180 degree difference. It was brighter, it was bigger and I was like okay let's get out.”

Though the family is happier in their new space, they have hopes for a brighter future—one that includes a minimum of four bedrooms and a dining room table where they can all eat together. Until that day, they make do with what they have. They must. Fred is the sole breadwinner of the family. He works in sales for Coca-Cola, one of the only positions he could find after retiring from the Marine Corps in 2009 and moving the family from North Carolina to Florida, near where he and his wife grew up. Paula used to be a paraprofessional at an Elementary School but when she unexpectedly got pregnant with Michael, she was forced to stay home to take care of him. Daycare would have cost more than what she made in her job.

Paula and Fred, both 36, were high school sweethearts. They met in tenth grade and have been together ever since. Fred joined the Marine Corps immediately after high school and brought Paula with him to North Carolina where he was stationed. He was set on marrying her—

a decision motivated by Paula becoming pregnant with their first child one month after graduation.

“I married Paula 17 years ago in April of ‘97,” Fred tells me. “I was 19.”

“And I was 18, almost 19,” adds Paula. “We got married two weeks after we had Eric. If I had it my way we would have waited a little bit longer. It didn't really matter ‘cause we were gonna get married, but I wanted to wait four years before we had a kid. Someone else, however, had other plans.”

With an air of confidence in his voice, Fred says, “I let her know what my plans were. I told her ‘either you're getting on board or you're not.’ I told her ‘two kids and I’m joining the Marine Corps. Either you're with me or you’re not.’”

As evidenced by the previous statement, Fred is the disciplinarian of this traditional patriarchal family—a structure that seems to work for them, based on how well behaved the children are. Michael, the youngest, is a bundle of energy who likes to help his mom around the house. The oldest, Eric, is a senior in high school who enjoys longboarding with his friends and is interested in pursuing a career in TV production upon graduation. Jackie is a freshman in high school who loves to read, earns good grades, and is very involved in band where she plays the flute. Her dream is to go to college and become a veterinarian. Her family is confident this dream can come true.

Among all the people I interviewed, Jackie is the one I connected with most. Her story merges with mine in many ways. As with Jackie, my family regarded me as the beacon of hope, the one who could escape the cycle of poverty. But many obstacles have gotten in the way for Jackie and me, money and its connection to education being the primary one.

“You could just look at my school for example,” Jackie says to me after I ask about their class status and whether or not it impacts them.

“Yes, that's an issue I have right now in society, the STEM program,” adds Paula, “science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.”

“Are the STEM kids like wealthy or something?” I ask.

“Yea,” answers Jackie.

Intrigued, I continue the line of questioning. “So do they separate the STEM students from other students?”

“From my understanding, yes,” Paula says. “I mean Jackie could be in that program, grade-wise she's up there, but it doesn't matter because the parents of STEM kids have the money to put them in STEM program and stuff, so I don't know”

“It highly aggravates me,” adds Fred.

“If you just look at the school society,” Jackie says, inching forward on the couch next to my chair, “you see the separation between the STEM children and the children who aren't in STEM cause the STEM kids stick to their own group. I've made friends with I think two or three STEMMIES, that's it. They think they're smarter than everyone else. I actually have problems with that. In middle school you can really tell the difference. They kind of flaunt their upperclassness around. They have their nose turned up.”

“I know what you mean. Middle school isn't easy,” I say to Jackie, attempting to empathize with her situation. I turn to Paula and Fred. “So you notice the separation, too?”

“Yes,” they simultaneously declare. Paula continues, “One of her history teachers told her that because she is not in STEM she has less than a 40% chance of going to college. I'm waiting until she graduates and then I'm writing a nice little letter.”

Education as a Mobile Home

Unfortunately, Jackie's experience is not uncommon. She attends one of the many schools throughout the United States that engages in tracking, the practice in education of placing students into differentiated curriculums (i.e., tracks) based on their perceived abilities. Though each school has different tracks, they often fall into one of two categories: the college preparatory track like STEM, which prepares students with "higher" abilities for college, and the vocational track, which prepares students with "lower" abilities for specific occupational fields. Track placement, however, is highly suggestive as poor and minority students, regardless of ability, are often placed in tracks catered to vocations where they receive a lower quality of instruction compared to those in higher, more college-oriented tracks (Bettie, 2003; Oakes, 2005; Schofield, 2010). As Dill and Zambrana (2009) state, "The opportunity for a college preparatory K-12 education is influenced by one's race but and also by class position in the society and within that racial group, as well as by gender and the perceptions and expectations of one's gender based on class, race, region, ability, and so on" (p. 6). This bias contributes to a widening of the achievement gap, which explains why Jackie's history teacher said that she has a significantly lower chance of going to college because she is not placed in the STEM track—a placement ultimately based more on her social class, than her ability (Bettie, 2003; Oakes, 2005; Schofield, 2010). If what her teacher says is true, Jackie's dreams of going to college to become a veterinarian are bleak. But this does not mean that she cannot try to pursue them. Based on her grades, involvement, and ambition, she is determined to do so.

Jackie's drive reminds me of my own when I was in high school. Though I wasn't quite sure what career I wanted to pursue, I saw higher education as my "ticket" (Durham, 2014) out

of the working-class. I figured I could go to college, get a degree, and land a decent job, one that paid me enough to be considered among the middle-class. After college, I decided to stay within the confines of the ivory tower by pursuing an M.A. and then a Ph.D. Academia, as I envisioned it, could become my source of mobility. But hearing my participants' stories and reflecting on my own, especially after my recent experience in the grueling academic job market, has me thinking otherwise. The ivory tower in which I have taken refuge has not protected me from my past as I thought it would. This is especially true considering that 76% of the academic labor force consists of adjunct instructors who earn only an average of \$2,700 per course (Pannacker, 2013). Thankfully, as of late, I have beaten the odds and have been given an opportunity to work in academia for which I am incredibly thankful. It is important to note, however, that the average starting salary for a new Assistant Professor of Communication is only \$58,482 per year (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2014). This doesn't come close to the \$130,000 currently needed, per year, for a family of four to live an "American Dream" middle-class lifestyle in the United States (Gold, 2014).

Like many others, I have bought into the idea that higher education is an opportunity but have yet to see this come to fruition. For example, Ellen, one of my participants, was just starting her online Ph.D. in psychology when I met her for the first time. She already has a Bachelor's in criminal justice and a Master's in criminology. When she finishes her next degree, she hopes to teach online classes in her area of expertise so she does not have to leave the house. As she states, "For somebody to come stay with Ben, I have to pay them at least \$15 an hour. I also have to pay somebody for Anna, so now you're talking at least \$20 an hour before I even leave the house. Where the frick am I gonna work that's gonna be worth leaving the house?"

Upon hearing her dilemma, I try to tell her that her master's degree would qualify her to teach online, but she says that her attempts to do so have been unsuccessful. "I have put in resumes and stuff," she explains, "but if I could get the Ph.D. and work for one of the colleges, then I could go for tenure and things like that. Plus, if my two kids wanted to go to college in Florida, they would get a free ride. It's gonna cost me probably another \$30,000 to finish the whole thing but it'll save, just for the two kids, \$250,000. And then they won't be bogged down in debt for the rest of their lives. It'll just be me.

Ellen's comment about the debt she would incur from obtaining a Ph.D. sparks my curiosity. I decide to ask more questions about her educational endeavors and discover that they are all linked to for-profit institutions, which recently have garnered a lot of attention due to their significant and controversial development in higher education in the United States (Tierney, 2011). Ellen, however, is not an exception; at least one member in each of the families I interviewed attends or is considering attending a for-profit institution of higher education.

For-profit institutions transform education into a business where prospective students are viewed not as applicants and learners but as clients and consumers (Breneman, Pusser, & Turner, 2006; Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010). The success of these schools in the last 15 years is noteworthy, as they have become the fastest growing sector of higher education. During the 2008 recession, for example, their annual growth rate doubled to 17 percent (Kamenetz, 2010) and, as of 2009, approximately ten percent of all post-secondary students now attend a for profit institution (Institute for Higher Education, 2012). The industry as a whole earns well over \$48 billion per year (Beaver, 2009). This popularity, according to Ruch (2003), can be attributed to three factors: (1) the many jobs in today's economy that require advanced training and education; (2) the expansion of adult education (more than half of all enrollees in U.S. higher

education institutions are over 25 years of age); and (3) electronic technology, which makes education more accessible to many. Mary's sister-in-law, Brenda, for instance, attends a for-profit institution where she takes all of her classes online so she is more available to help Mary around the house.

The success of for-profits is highly controversial as they have been accused of various types of fraud from shady and aggressive recruitment practices to the improper use of federal student-aid (Beaver, 2009; Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010). For-profit institutions earn 90% of their revenue from tuition—twice as much as traditional colleges and universities—so enrollment is vital. Recruiters are pressured to meet quotas and often are compensated based on the number of students they attract. Consequently, students are enrolled regardless of academic qualifications or adequate resources (Beaver, 2012; Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010; Kamenetz, 2010). The people recruited to these institutions most often include the economically disadvantaged as well as those who are considered older or rather, non-traditional (Berg, 2005; Beaver, 2009; Tierney, 2011). As of 2012, 63 percent of undergraduate students at for-profit institutions are 24 years and older (Institute for Higher Education, 2012) and a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education (2011) found that over one-half of the students at for-profit colleges are classified as low-income; at non-profits this figure is 26 percent.

The large number of low-income students at for-profit schools is problematic because tuition at these schools is, on average, five to six times higher than tuition at a community college and at least twice that of a public university (Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010). For example, Eric, Paula and Fred's son, is currently being recruited by a for-profit institution called Full Sail University, which specializes in entertainment, media, and the arts.

Eric wants to become a lighting technician and is convinced Full Sail University can help him have his dream career. After doing some research, I discovered that Full Sail University costs anywhere from \$10,000 to \$15,000 per semester to attend—five times the amount for a comparable degree at a local community college. If Eric chooses to attend Full Sail University, based on his family’s financial situation, he will need to take out loans. This will put him among the vast majority of students at for-profits who rely on federal student loans. Many of these students have trouble repaying the loans (Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010). Though students at for-profits make up ten percent of the college population, they account for 47 percent of student loan defaulters. This damning setup illustrates how the education system fails those who are economically disadvantaged; instead of providing them an opportunity for mobility, they are given a mountain of debt, which they cannot climb (Beaver, 2012).

Eliminating student debt is especially hard when graduates at for-profit schools are unable to find a job because their degree is not valued by prospective employers—a common occurrence (Beaver, 2009; Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010). Those who do manage to find a job are unable to make the wages they need to pay off their student loans (Tierney, 2011). This situation highlights the obstacles faced by poor communities in their desire for higher education. As Beaver (2009) states, “it is hard to make a case that more college degrees have had an impact on real income gains or social mobility...increasing educational equality is not likely to produce economic equality” (p. 64). For-profit schools may claim they are serving the underserved, helping people with modest means obtain college degrees so they can be upwardly mobile, but they appear to be doing more damage than good. They exploit the poor for profit (Durrance, Maggio, Smith, & Mangini, 2010), and several of my participants could be considered victims of these institutions. For-profit education, in this sense, is akin to a mobile

home. While both are framed as a source of mobility, they produce immobility. I believe the same can be said for the entire higher education system when considering the average \$29,400 debt in student loans per college graduate (The Institute for College Access and Success, 2014) and how many of these graduates are not working in the field they studied, something Mary alluded to in our first meeting:

I mean there's people out there who have degrees and whatever. My niece has got her Bachelor's in paralegal studies and she works for Publix. She's worked for Publix for ten years. My brother has got an Associate's in criminal justice and a Bachelor's in camp administration, but he works for the state of New York. He plows the roads and drives a dump truck.

Mary's words resonate as I think about my husband who majored in journalism but works at a bank and many of my college friends who majored in music or communication and are employed in the insurance industry to try and make ends meet. Drowning in student debt and a career they could care less about, each of them took one step forward, but ended up two steps behind. \$60,000 in student loan debt, I know this situation all too well. I thought education would be my ticket out of the working-class, instead all I have done so far is exchanged a literal mobile home for a figurative one. In my darkest moments, I fear I'm right back where I started.

Class: Fluid and Complex

As I sit and reflect on the immobility of education as well as my stories and the stories of my participants, the word "complexity" comes to mind. We are not what the media has portrayed us to be—stupid, lazy, riddled with addiction and other negative attributes. Many of us are stuck in a liminal space, craving and seeking mobility but finding immobility due to a lack of jobs as

well as affordable childcare, education, and healthcare. Collectively, our stories resemble “counterstories” (Delgado, 1989) because they disrupt, challenge, and “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to dominant cultural narratives about the white working-class, which saturate the media and paint our struggles as if they stem from individual problems. We have not failed the system, the system has failed us; this is what our stories reveal, which is why they are important to tell. As Delgado (1989) argues, “[o]ppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation”(p. 2437).

In addition to providing “counterstories” that illuminate the complexity of lived experience, our stories also counter the ways in which class has been theorized in that they show how class is more than a fixed, material location related to Marxist notions of labor and production. For example, I came into this study thinking I could neatly fit every participant into the working-class category because, similar to my family, they had little to no college education, worked for low wages, and lived in a mobile home as many working-class people do. Furthermore, each of them agreed to participate in the study, which I explicitly indicated in the recruitment materials and IRB paperwork was for white working-class people, so I assumed they would easily fit that category. However, when I asked participants during the first interview which class they identified with, they all had different answers. Fred, for instance, said, “I’d probably say lower middle class. But that’s not my choice. That’s what the government says.” His response indicates that class status is outside his control. Mary and her family, who live in an older trailer and more rundown neighborhood compared to Fred and his family, said they would identify as middle class. “We’re not poor, but we’re not rich either, kind of right in the middle class,” said Mary. As she elaborated upon her answer, I couldn’t help but fixate on the air mattress, covered in dirty unkempt sheets, spread across the living room floor. With six people

living in a three-bedroom mobile home, it is highly likely that someone sleeps on that air mattress every night—a realization that challenges, at least in a material sense, the idea that this family is middle-class. Ellen and Ben, among all of my participants, had the most confident answer in terms of their class status. “We’re poor,” Ben said, “but we’re not starving like homeless people poor. We get along pretty well. God provides for us.” Mary, nodding her head in agreement said, “We have everything we need. We’re happy with very little.”

These varying answers highlight the difficulty in defining class especially in the United States where class distinctions are increasingly hard to identify—a point Durham (2014) explains in the following statement:

The working poor and/or the underrepresented underclass used to be distinguished from middle-class by labor; the middle class performed intellectual white-collar labor and the working class performed manual blue-collar labor. White and blue-collar occupations corresponded to income and education levels. These distinctions have been disrupted by a shift toward information technologies and consumer-based economies in the United States. Moreover, blue-collar workers with terminal high school degrees might earn more than \$75,000 a year, and black workers might shift between blue and white collar work, making it increasingly difficult to define class in relation to occupation (p. 28).

In short, class cannot be solely tied to one’s economic or cultural resources; it is also a performance, meaning that it is relational, learned, and enacted (Bettie, 2003; Dykins Callahan, 2008; Durham, 2014). For example, someone can have few resources but still perform as if they are middle-class by imitating middle-class people around them. This performance is bound to change, which alludes to the fluidity of class; it is not a categorical given, but instead something that is continually being reshaped and refined (Gans, 2007).

By placing the working-class label on my participants, I had put them in a box that was ill-fitting. There were several moments during the interviews when participants used strategies to elevate their class status alluding to the performative and fluid nature of class. One of the strategies was distancing, which Kusenbach (2009) discusses in her work about managing the stigma of “trailer” living. This occurs when people separate themselves from those on a similar social level to elevate their own moral decency. Ellen and Ben, for example, used distancing to separate themselves from others who they felt better fit the “white trash” stereotype.

“My daughter's friend, Lizzy, from school. Oh my God, her parents are like unreal, so she moved in with us,” Ellen explained.

Ben also offered some input. “Now *they're* white trash people like the people on *My Name is Earl*. They have an electric cord running from the neighbor's house to their front porch so they can plug in their refrigerator because they don't have electric. For like four years they haven't had electric and water in the house. They didn't have water for Christ's sake. If you can't take a shower every day you're going to get teased, and Lizzy's overweight so that doesn't help.”

“Yea,” Ellen said, nodding her head. “It's like she's fat and she stinks and you know it's just a bad situation when she can't wash clothes and her mother takes all of the money she makes at her job. Lizzy is damaged goods. I don't know how else to put it. It's sad, so she came and she stayed here and then she got a little normal, took showers and stuff.”

“I thought she was like retarded or something,” Ben added, “but she is just socially retarded. It's like trying to save a drowning person. They'll take you down with them. And the parents just consider the kids to be checks so they can get their welfare or food stamps. It's terrible.”

In addition to distancing, I also witnessed the strategy of normalizing. This occurs when people, in order to obscure their perceived deficiencies, point out similarities between themselves and others who exist on a higher social level. Fred and his family frequently used this strategy, particularly when talking about Jackie and her success in school.

In our first interview, for example, Jackie said the following: “The funny part is the STEM kids act like they're so much smarter than the ‘normies,’ which is what they call us. We call them STEMies. But I have all the same classes except for technology and all they do in that class is sit around and play on their iPads.”

“I just see how she's treated,” added Fred. “She's smarter than half the freaking school and they think that it's okay because they make more money to look down upon people. Well, they can kiss my ass.”

Inspired by her father's comments, Jackie continued. “I once dyed the ends of my hair and, as I was walking through the hallways, several teachers gave me this look like, ‘Oh no! Problem child.’ Now, I'm not gonna lie, a lot of the girls at the school who dye their hair are problem children. But these teachers didn't get to know me, they just looked at my dyed hair and assumed I was a problem, and most of them were STEM teachers. I'm like, you don't know me. I'm probably a better student than all of your STEM children.”

In this scenario, Jackie was both compared to and elevated above those considered “normal.” Despite this strategy, she was comfortable in her own skin. Jackie, as well as most of the participants, didn't use any materials, such as brand name clothing, to make themselves appear to be of a higher class; they also didn't mind living in a mobile home, which was made clear in each of the interviews. Maryellen and Ben, for example, said they loved their home. While the other participants weren't quite as enthusiastic, each of them claimed to be

predominantly satisfied with their living situation; they also did not mind admitting to others where they lived, as if the stigma of trailer living had no impact upon them. Their reactions were completely opposite to mine growing up, where I did everything I could to hide my working-class roots.

Bettie (2003) describes similar experiences in her ethnographic study of white and Mexican American girls as they navigated through their senior year at a high school in California's central valley. Her goal was to learn how these young women experience and understand class differences in their peer culture. During her time at the school, Bettie discovered that an abundance of girls who came from working-class families tried to pass as middle-class in order to fit in with their privileged, white, and consequently successful peers. She states, "girls who were passing, or metaphorically cross-dressing, had to negotiate their 'inherited' identity from home with their 'chosen' public identity at school" (p. 50). Like me, these girls purchased and used certain products to make them appear middle-class. Whether it was clothes, shoes, lipstick or makeup, these products literally became the girls' "transitional objects," or rather their "material stepping stones" (p. 43) to privilege. While the girls may not have been middle-class, many of them passed as such which, at times, involved a great deal of sacrifice. After all, it is one thing to perform middle-class if one has the means to do so; it is quite another to be working-class and try to acquire the means to pass as middle-class.⁶ For me, acquiring these means meant working one to two part time jobs. The girls in Bettie's (2003) study reported similar sacrifices. Our desire for mobility came at a cost.

⁶ The cultural capital that most people display is a direct consequence of the material and cultural resources to which they have had access (Bettie, 2003).

While I find many similarities between the girls Bettie (2003) studied and myself, there is one difference that separates our pursuit of privilege: race. To gain social acceptance, I only had to “act middle class.” The working-class, Mexican American girls who desired privilege in Bettie’s study had to do much more: in addition to “acting middle-class,” they had to “act white” because, when they did, their chances of being placed on a college preparatory track as opposed to a vocational track were significantly increased. To “act white” these girls wore little to no makeup, involved themselves in school activities that were populated by their white peers, separated themselves from working-class Mexican American girls, and sacrificed their racial/ethnic identity to succeed in an educational curriculum that was Eurocentric, colonialist, and uncultural. Their mobility came at a higher cost than mine. I share this because, even though my participants and I may not have the capital affiliated with our race, our white skin affords us certain privileges not available to those with darker skin (Yancy, 2012). As DiAngelo (2006) notes:

Regardless of one’s other locations, White people know on some level that being White in this society is “better” than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors Whiteness opens, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations (p. 54).

Though Jackie and my participants did not use “transitional objects” to elevate their class status, they used other strategies like distancing and normalization. I cannot pinpoint why these strategies were used, but my presence, as a former trailer park girl turned academic, might have influenced them to act in such a manner. I know if I were in my participants’ shoes, I would have felt the “hidden injuries” (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) that arise when one compares herself to

another at a higher social level and I would have tried to perform as if I were on a similar level to minimize such injuries.

The Insider-Outsider Dilemma

My fieldwork, in addition to revealing the complexity of class, revealed the complexity of my position. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), researchers who share an identity, language, and experiential base with their participants are considered insiders; those who do not share these traits with their participants are considered outsiders. “Insiderness” and “outsiderness,” however, are not fixed or static positions; they are complex, fluid, and ever-changing (Merton, 1972). As someone who straddles a line between the working-class and educated elite, I exist between these binary positions (LaPaglia, 1995). I am an insider-outsider or what Collins (1998) refers to as an “outsider-within” who does not “belong to any one group” and instead exists in a liminal space between acceptance and exclusion. The hyphen conjoining these binary positions is where I dwell. “This hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). My liminality, however, is not unique as ethnographers can never be fully inside or outside the communities they study; their relationships to these communities are bound to change based on everyday interactions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Naples, 1996). Complexity is inevitable, and thus I embrace and reflect upon my “dual positionality” (Acker, 2000; Ellis, 2004).

As a member of both the academy and working-class, I often find myself moving between two different worlds, which was difficult throughout my fieldwork. Instead of being able to comfortably immerse myself into the working-class communities and families I studied, I

felt pressured to make choices about how I looked, acted, and spoke. I dressed “down” in jeans and a t-shirt, behaved modestly, and refrained from sounding verbose. I wanted to blend in, but I also didn’t want to seem fake. I worried that my participants would see right through me and think I was disingenuous. My insider-outsider position made me hypertensive to their voices, experiences, and opinions. Perhaps I brought this pressure upon myself, but I wanted them to know that I cared. I wanted to be included, to have them see me as a member of their working-class. As LaPaglia (1995) states, when speaking about her experiences as both a member of the working-class and the academy: “Although I recognize that dissimilar domains exist, I want to be in every place...to have the best of both worlds.” (p. 186)

I agonized over my first visit with each of the families. The night before I met Mary, Steve, and their children, I tossed and turned in my bed, thoughts racing through my mind.

Should I bring a snack? Some hummus and veggies, perhaps? No, I didn’t even know about hummus until graduate school. I’d probably seem like a pompous ass. Cheez-It crackers? Nope. They would think I am trying too hard to blend in. But why am I assuming they would like those crackers? Better yet, why am I worried about a snack? I should be more worried about how I am going to present the IRB paperwork. Is there any approach that won’t make me seem like a data miner? Probably not.

My heart was beating so heavily, I could see the thin sheet on top of me shifting. The questions continued.

What will they think of me? Will they think that I think I am too good for them? I hope not. What should I wear? When should I write my fieldnotes? Should I bring a notebook with me? Or just write the notes once I leave? What will they think if they see me writing? What details should I focus on? How can I let them know that I have their best interests at heart?

This anxiety lasted for hours until I was so worn out I finally drifted off to sleep. Every night before I met with my participants followed a similar pattern. To stifle the nerves, I would try to take care of “business” at the beginning of each visit, which usually involved either reviewing and signing paperwork or providing compensation for their time. I hoped that completing these transactions early would give us more of an opportunity to connect. I wanted so much to feel close to my participants, to feel like an insider. Whenever they spoke, I listened intently, valuing the knowledge of their lived experiences over any books or other forms of scholarship. I tried my best to minimize my academic self and maximize my working-class self instead. When they shared experiences I could relate to, I let them know. I chimed in when Mary complained about the lot rent because my mother was always frustrated about it, too. I told Ben and Ellen that I shared the same joy they did when moving to sunny Florida after surviving many Northern winters. Paula, Fred, and their children were frequently reminded that our family structures and interests were similar.

My approach was inherently relational (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013) and in the aforementioned moments of overlap my working-class self outshined my researcher self and bonds were forged. Conversations flowed naturally and I no longer felt like intruder. I felt at “home.” These moments, however, were few and far between. No matter how hard I tried, at the end of the day, I was less of an insider than I had anticipated. The setup for each visit was too contrived for me to be anything but. At Paula and Fred’s house, for instance, chairs were always placed in a semi circle and all electronic gadgets were put away so that the moment I arrived, the “business” of research could take place. It’s like we were at a job, and I was their boss. My differing status become more evident once I took the advice of Ellis (2004) and got outside of my own experience to think about their experience and how my presence was likely shaping the

stories they were revealing. Had my participants not known that I was working towards a Ph.D. I am not sure they would have discussed their own educational pursuits—a choice that seemed to not only establish our commonality but their credibility. Furthermore, I am not sure they would have criticized others, such as their neighbors, to elevate their status in front of me. As Durham (2014) states, “Anybody who bears witness to their life story is implicated in its reproduction because our very presence impacts how the performative event of storytelling is delivered, interpreted, represented, and enacted” (p. 105). Looking back, I can see that my “academic self” was more obvious than not. Despite the connections I attempted and sometimes managed to forge with my participants, I was always primarily a data miner who was coming to collect what I needed and then leave. No performance could mask this fact, and that I thought it could, that I thought I could become an insider, now seems audacious. Immersion is a lengthy process (Merton, 1972), requiring the kind of time I did not have and the open arms that I am not sure they were willing to extend in such an abbreviated relationship.

At the end of the day, my participants and I both knew I had bought their time. I paid them to give me stories that I could use to not only challenge mediated representations but to ultimately establish my career. Regardless of the care and compassion I have for them, my academic obligations require me to capitalize on their immobility to foster my mobility—a point that is difficult to admit. My motive is paradoxical, a combination of both compassion and selfishness which with I continue to grapple. I find myself walking yet another tight rope, similar to the ones I have walked before and continue to walk, between insider and outsider, working-class and academic. I hope I can keep my balance.

CHAPTER FOUR:

“IT’S LIKE WATCHING A CAR ACCIDENT”: WHEN THE LIVED AND MEDIATED EXPERIENCES OF WHITE WORKING-CLASS INTERSECT

In previous chapters I described the experiences of participants and my lived experiences to highlight the complexity of working-class life. This chapter continues that work by focusing on how we make sense of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and other films and television shows featuring white working-class people. Drawing from data that emerged from the interactive focus groups I held with each family, my goal is to explore what happens when living and mediated bodies intersect and the understandings of class that emerge as a result. This is important for two reasons. First, inspired by the work of scholars such as Dunn (2012), Boylorn (2008), Durham (2014), and Projansky (2014), I am able to include those who are marginalized in the critical/cultural research process. I speak with, not for white working-class people, recognizing that they are, that we are, active consumers of media whose experiences and responses are unique. I seek to avoid what Chilisa (2011) calls “academic imperialism,” the “tendency in intellectual and scholarly circles to denigrate, dismiss, and attempt to quash alternative theories, perspectives, or methodologies” (p. 55), which results in knowledge from oppressed groups being suppressed—I challenge this by including the knowledge of white working-class people. This is especially important given that we, as members of this population, negotiate representation in ways that may be unintelligible to those who cannot recognize or relate to our standpoint (i.e. position) in society. Second, including the knowledge of participants informs my

work in productive ways because it shows how and why media sites featuring white working-class people are polysemic. Furthermore, it also sheds light on the social and material consequences of these sites, thus expanding my critical lens. As Fiske (1986) argues, media audiences are comprised of diverse groups of people who do not passively accept what they see, but actively derive meanings that agree with their social experience(s). As such, all mediums are capable of producing a variety of meanings; for a media site to be popular, it must be polysemic.

Prior to my fieldwork, I had no idea the multiple meanings participants would find in the clips I showed. I entered each interactive focus group with a yearning to be understood, assuming my negative opinions about the ways white working-class people are depicted in the media would be validated, that participants would see the issues I saw and seek to challenge them. What emerged, however, was more complex. Participants responded in a variety of ways, which can best be explained using Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model.

Hall's model was developed in 1973 as a response to his dissatisfaction with media effects research, which posited audiences as cultural dupes who passively receive messages in homogenous ways. The encoding/decoding model consists of two basic steps: first, media products are encoded with meanings by producers; second, these meanings are decoded in various ways by audiences. Within this model, there is no guarantee that the producer's preferred meaning is the one that will be accepted or understood by an audience. In fact, Hall posits that audience members play an active role in decoding messages and that this process of decoding is dependent on their background: variables such as age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and level of education impact how one decodes or rather receives and interprets a message.

Hall (1973) claims there are three primary positions from which to decode a message: (1) dominant/hegemonic, (2) oppositional, and (3) negotiated. Audiences who employ a

dominant/hegemonic position decode a message the way it was encoded. For this to happen, audience members need to be located within the dominant point of view and thus share the same cultural biases as the producer(s)/encoder(s), leaving little to no room for misunderstanding. Audience members who operate from an oppositional position recognize and understand the dominant meaning of a message but, due to differing backgrounds and opinions, reject this meaning and form their own instead. The negotiated position involves a mixture of acceptance and rejection. Those who take a negotiated position acknowledge the dominant meaning of a message but do not completely accept it. This simultaneous act of acceptance and rejection allows them to modify the meaning in a way that reflects their own experiences and interests. As Hall (1973) states:

...decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule" (p. 137)

I engage films and television shows featuring white working-class people from all three positions. I laugh when producers want me to laugh (dominant), laugh with a guilty conscience (negotiated), and refuse to laugh though I am clearly invited to do so (oppositional). However, given my past, and the negative characteristics that I perceive were attributed to me and my family (e.g., stupidity) because of how white working-class people are portrayed in the media, I most commonly occupy an oppositional position. Much to my surprise, participants did not take this same position; instead, most offered negotiated responses, involving both identification and dis-identification, a constant push and pull. The moments during which they identified with the clips were particularly compelling.

Identification

According to Cohen (2001) identification occurs when audience members discover they are similar to a character on screen. This recognition allows the audience to imagine themselves as the characters and to receive and interpret the text from the inside, as if the events on screen were happening to them in real life. Audience members essentially suspend awareness of their social role as “audience members” and adopt the identity, goals, and perspectives of the characters with whom they identify. This increased involvement with the text can decrease chances of critical interpretation, which was evident in the focus groups I held. For example, instead of critiquing the prevalence of mud-covered characters in the clips we watched, specifically its contribution to the stereotype of white working-class people as dirty, each family pointed out how playing in the mud was fun.

Mary says the following after watching an episode of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* that took place at the annual Redneck Games, where many of the activities involve mud: “Mud wrestling! When I was growing up, every summer there was a carnival that would come to town and they had mud wrestling. It was so much fun.”

While watching the same episode with Fred, his wife, and their three children, Fred comments that he likes playing in the mud and then turns to his daughter Jackie and asks, “Would you go to a redneck festival like that?”

“I wouldn’t, no,” she answers.

“It depends on what they’re doing,” says Eric, Jackie’s brother.

With a crooked smile, Fred comments, “Well, we do go to the Pasco County Fair.”

“Oh! That’s right,” Paula notes, laughing. “So I guess we do attend redneck festivals.”

Fred's identification with the Redneck Games is so strong that he begins to act as if he were judging the "Mudpit Belly Flop" contest on screen.

After the first contestant takes her turn, Fred shouts, "Oh she didn't belly flop. Disqualified!"

"And that guy slipped," interjects Eric, joining his father as a judge.

"Now if you could do a flip and land on your belly," Fred says, turning to Eric, "that would be awesome."

Eric nods his head and Fred turns back to the screen to see Chubbs, a member of the *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* family, take her turn in the competition. "There you go! Yea!" he shouts. "Nice! Good extension!"

In addition to relating to the activities on screen, participants identified with their material struggles. For example, the first episode of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* includes a scene where the girls and women in the family wash their hair in the kitchen sink because there is only one bathroom for seven people.

While watching this scene, Mary says, "I've done that before when I couldn't get in a bathroom."

Cindy, the girlfriend of Mary's son, Brandon, nods her head in agreement. "Yea. It's not that bad actually. It does the job."

"It's better if you've got the hose," Mary notes. "I know because I used to do it in the kitchen sink, but now if I'm just washing my hair I'll duck my head under the faucet in the tub. I need to start doing it in the kitchen sink again because the faucet in the tub is small, and it's kind of hard to get all the hair in the back of my head."

When the episode is finished, I ask Mary about her overall impressions.

Taking a moment to reflect, Mary says, “We can relate to these people cause we do live in a trailer and we do rely on family.”

Cindy agrees. “Yea, Mama June is still there for the pregnant daughter. She didn't kick her out or say, ‘You gotta get rid of the baby.’ We would support the daughter, too.”

Similar moments of identification occurred after showing a clip in the focus groups from *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*.

For example, Ben, the father of the third family I worked with, says, “I just can't relate to any of them.” Ellen, shocked by her husband's response, raises her voice. “How could you not relate to that? Their houses are painted. They have tires in the front yard. The same tires we have. You can't relate to that? They're also not running around with Corvettes, and the people are a little flamboyant, similar to us.”

Mary, who also commented on tires in our focus group, makes another connection. “We can relate to the drinking in *Welcome to Myrtle Manor*,” she said with a laugh. “Look in our fridge.”

“And the shelf in my room!” Brandon interrupts with a smile, boasting about the amount of alcohol he consumes.

Participants in each of the focus groups made additional connections with the characters, but they were temporary and often varied in intensity, as most moments of identification do (Wilson, 1993). Interestingly, identification was often met with a striking amount of disidentification. Participants distanced themselves from what they saw on screen as if they understood how they were being viewed from the outside.

Disidentification

After watching all of the clips with Mary and her family, I ask, “Did you notice any similarities or differences between yourselves and the people on screen?”

“Definitely,” Mary says, without skipping a beat. “I mean *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* portrays the typical trailer trash.”

“And we're not really trailer trash,” Brandon explains.

Cindy agrees. “Yea. We know when to hold our bowels and we know not to talk with our mouths full of food.”

“Yea,” Mary says. “We were brought up with manners.”

“We know when to say ‘please,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘yes mam,’ and ‘no mam,’” says Cindy, supporting Mary’s point.

This exchange illustrates moral judgment, a common reaction to RTV shows (Hill, 2005; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). This type of judgment is common since most shows within the RTV genre invite a middle-class gaze, encouraging viewers to mock the poor and working-class people who are increasingly present in the genre (Lyle, 2008). Interestingly, some of the strongest moral judgments come from working-class viewers who seek to elevate themselves above their class (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). According to Moseley (2000), these viewers will assume a position of class- and taste-based superiority by making material and cultural distinctions between self and other. Mary’s point about using manners, unlike the family on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, speaks to this.

Moral judgment was also present in the focus group with Ellen and Ben’s family, particularly when I asked them, after we watched *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, “When you watch a show like this, how do you feel about yourself?”

“Oh, I completely feel superior to them,” Ellen says.

“Can you elaborate?”

“Mentally and physically. I’m like a heavy chick, but I see Mama June and I’m like holy shit she's disgusting.”

I turn to Ben. “What about you Ben? How do you feel?”

“I feel superior to those people,” says Ben, “because they're so ridiculous.”

“They’re like inbreds or something,” Mary interjects, leaning in. She continues her train of thought. “I’d say they're white trash. They're not redneck. Redneck just means that you hunt and own tractors and that your neck is red from being outside, not that you're fat or disgusting or missing teeth.”

“They're like backwoods hillbillies,” Ben adds, agreeing with Mary.

“I mean they're really like ignorant,” says Mary. “But, if the mother is like a slob, the kids will be too. So what are you gonna do? I mean they're slobs. I think it's ridiculous that they have a TV show.”

The disidentification I witnessed in the focus group with Paula, Fred, and their children was much the same. Jackie, for example, makes the following observation: “The way they talk was just shocking. They didn't seem to have good grammar.”

“We are way different from those people,” Fred adds.

His wife, Paula, nods her head in agreement. “I don't think my kids need etiquette lessons.”

We’ve brought our kids up completely differently,” Fred says. “They have manners. They know right from wrong.” He turns to Eric. “They have common sense.”

Eric agrees. “I don't do stupid things like that.”

“You don't disrespect yourself,” interjects Paula.

The family's responses illustrate the distancing strategy detailed above, where people separate themselves from others who better fit an existing stereotype—in this case, the “white trash” stereotype. Fencing, a particular form of distancing where internal differences are constructed within a community (Kusenbach, 2009), occurred in the following exchange between Paula and Fred.

“The whole surrounding situation in *Welcome to Myrtle Manor* is different from ours. We don't actually live in a family park here. This neighborhood is more for individual people.”

“Yea, well,” Paula says, “we stay away from those people anyhow. It's more problems to be friends with neighbors than acquaintances.”

Fred agrees. “I just try to be cordial. ‘Hey how you doing?’ Polite, and that's about it.”

Paula's mention of “those people” in the previous exchange implies a separation, a fence, between her family and the rest of the people in their neighborhood. Mary's family constructed a similar fence in their responses, as they too had minimal interaction with their neighbors. This strategy of “social differentiation,” as discussed by Berube (1997), is not uncommon; it helps those who live in mobile home communities, and who feel the weight of the stigma it brings, salvage decency. “Residents,” according to Kusenbach (2009), “cannot simply rely on broad social or geographic differences; they need to construct more nuanced, localized boundaries to justify their own placement on the good side of the decency divide” (p. 413). The fact that participants felt the need to salvage their decency made me hyperaware of my privileged, outsider status. I entered their homes with a noticeable recording device to mine compelling data and with a post-graduate education, qualifying me as a poster child for upward mobility. Without these contextual pressures (i.e., the recorder and my education), participants might not have

criticized and elevated themselves above the people they saw on screen; by doing so, however, they were able to performatively redefine their class position to better match what they perceived mine to be. If I were in their shoes, I would have done the same. As Diversi and Moreria (2009) note:

We are all engaged in an endless negotiation of identities, furiously pursuing identities we value and dodging the ones we abhor. Identities are not inside individuals but in the space between interacting individuals. Instead, identity is forever mutated and relational, adapting to the contextual pressures of making oneself feel worthwhile. (p. 20)

Considering the aforementioned observation, I do not find it coincidental that, given my appearance of upward mobility, each participant chose to make claims of mental and physical superiority to the characters they saw in the clips. Their responses, in addition to indicating that they viewed me as someone with whom they wanted to be on a similar level of sorts, have the potential to challenge how they perceive others perceive them: they are not “white trash.”

Negotiation

Apart from disparate moments of identification and disidentification, there were times when these moments occurred simultaneously, illustrating Hall’s negotiated position. I show examples of this to discuss how negotiations of power occurred. As Fiske (1986) states:

The structure of meanings in a text is a miniaturization of the structure of subcultures in a society—both exist in a network of power relations, and the textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power. (p. 392)

This “struggle for meaning” described by Fiske was evidenced in all of the focus groups, highlighting the battle white working-class people face to position themselves in a culture where they are marginalized, frequently ridiculed, and confronted with structural inequalities.

“If you could produce a reality TV show about you and your family, what would it look like?” I ask Mary.

She laughs before answering: “It would be kind of like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, but a little more sophisticated because we know how to act in public.”

“Yea,” says Brandon.

Cindy comments, “We know not to eat with our mouths open.”

This dialogue illustrates a negotiated response because it begins with identification, when Mary explains that her family’s show would be like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and then ends with disidentification when the family points out their high level of sophistication compared to the characters on the show—a clear example of moral judgment as described in the previous section. In the focus group with Ellen, there was a similar, albeit more complex shift.

“I wouldn’t hang out at their house, Ellen says after watching an episode of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. “They come off like they would have a lot of cockroaches, but they look like they’re having fun, I guess. I don’t know. And Mama June didn’t let her kids swim in the water with flesh eating bacteria so that’s a plus I guess (laughs). I don’t know. I just can’t believe that she [Mama June] would allow her kids to put their mouths on pigs’ feet at the Redneck Games. I would die. I would rather die. But it did stand out to me that their clothes are clean, their house was generally organized, and their teeth and hair were brushed. So they weren’t really dirty or dirt bags; they were just not what I would call normal.”

Ellen's statement resembles a game of tug of war as she moves back and forth between identification and disidentification—a tension she seemed aware of when saying “I don't know” twice. This tension remained present throughout our focus group.

“I don't wanna put myself in that ‘white trash’ category,” Ellen proclaims, reflecting on the clips we had just watched. “I would never put a couch on the front porch even if I wanted to, cause I wouldn't want people to be like, ‘What the hell?’”

Laughing at his wife's response, Ben says, “I used to joke about people with a couch on their front porch. I used to say, ‘Oh they're really rich. They have a couch on their front porch.’”

“You're so mean,” Ellen says, while playfully pinching her husband's arm.

Curious about Ellen's earlier comment, I turn to her and ask, “Can you tell me why you wouldn't want to put yourself in the white trash category?”

“Well,” Ellen pauses to think, “I kind of am in that category, I guess. We did move into a trailer, and I live in flip flops, and I painted the whole outside of the house all fucked up. And now the neighbor up the street wants me to paint her house, too. Everyone is going to be like, ‘She infected the place.’ And then I wear those sundresses, too, which can almost be considered moo moos; really, they're like fancy moos moos.”

After a slight pause and some laughter, Ellen's eyes open wide and she says, “Oh my God, maybe we are like those people.”

“I think when you watch these shows you're like me,” I say, trying to connect with and make sense of her reaction. “You identify with some things and you don't with others. Okay, so you wear flips flops—”

“And fancy moos moos,” Ellen interjects, laughing.

“But you're also getting a Ph.D.,” I add.

Ellen nods her head in agreement. “Yea, so it like doesn't fit in.”

Here, Ellen and I engaged in sensemaking (Weick, 1995), creating a shared and plausible understanding of our negotiated responses based on our individual and collective experiences. Reflexivity, in addition to sensemaking, played a role in the focus groups. While sensemaking enabled me and the participants to comprehend our negotiation, reflexivity—at least in some instances—caused the negotiated responses to emerge in the first place.

“I feel guilty judging the people on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*,” Paula says to me after reflecting on previous judgments she had made about the family.

Curious about her sudden change of heart, I ask, “Why is that?”

“I mean, look at them--”

Before she can finish her thought, Fred interjects. “I don't feel guilty. I think that's why they're there.”

“But the kids on the show are minors though,” Paula says.

Fred, with an air of confidence in his voice, asks, “And where do they get it from? It has to come from somewhere.”

“Yea, but I still feel conflicted,” Paula says. “It's like, Jackie watches *Toddlers and Tiaras* and I hate it because of how the girls who are minors are treated and stuff, but I like to see them perform.”

Paula exhibits the same tension when responding to *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*, particularly after her son, Eric, makes the following statement: “I think the show is funny because that's who they are. They do the stupidest things and get in arguments.”

“But we do stupid things, too,” Paula notes, trying to identify with and defend the characters.

“But not like that,” Jackie says.

Eric agrees. “We don't get in fist fights.”

“And we're not on national TV,” adds Fred. “It stays right here.”

Paula follows suit. “It doesn't make the newspaper.”

“I know every family does that stuff,” Fred says, acknowledging his wife’s observation, “but when you publicize it, you can’t expect people not to judge you.”

Together, Paula, Jackie, and Eric nod their head—a nonverbal expression of disidentification: they may identify in some ways with the characters on *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*, but they don’t air their dirty laundry on television.

Though a negotiated position was the most common position from which participants engaged the clips—alluding to the multilayered, diverse, and contradictory ways media messages are decoded—there were moments when participants employed an oppositional position as well by disagreeing with what they saw on screen.

Opposition and Critical Engagement

According to Schiappa (2008), all media sites are open to multiple interpretations and sometimes audiences find meanings that contradict what the producers of these sites intended or anticipated. This type of opposition occurred in each of the focus groups when participants rejected what they saw, particularly in regards to class. Because I tend to approach films and television shows about white working-class people from an oppositional position, I felt encouraged when participants did the same, as if after years of searching, I had found people who knew how I felt and validated my thoughts and opinions. These bouts of encouragement, however, were fleeting. Because of the complex ways people engage with media sites, I knew

this sense of camaraderie would slip away. So, I include them here, in writing, to provide tangible proof of the ways participants pinpointed, rejected and formed their own meanings about oppressive portrayals of white working-class people. I also show that, by viewing films and television shows about white working-class people from an oppositional position, participants were able to point out their material and social consequences. A space for active and critical engagement was opened up and explored, highlighting the importance of including their voices.

Much of the opposition that appeared in the focus groups was centered on rejecting the stereotypes that films and television shows reinforced about people who live in mobile homes. Mary, for instance, says, “Because of shows like these, most people think of people in trailer parks as trailer trash. And a lot of people are not like that. They're down to earth people.”

Ellen and Ben echo her sentiments.

“When you tell somebody you live in a trailer, they think you're like living like these people. That's the pile they lump you in. They judge you. They assume that people in trailers are trashy, which isn't the case,” Ellen says.

When I ask what she means by trashy, John answers, “Low class.” “Uneducated,” Mary says, followed by a back and forth exchange with her husband debunking many of the negative characteristics attributed to this population in the media.

“People that steal from you.”

“Thieves.”

“Drug addicts.”

“Drunks”

Jackie's opinions are similar. "These shows just reinforce a bad stereotype and the only reason people like watching them is to judge and laugh at the people." Her father, Fred, picks up where she left off, calling special attention to reality television, and the layer it adds when stereotypes about people who live in trailers are framed as real.

"That's what a reality show does," Fred explains. "It puts those stereotypes out there and drives them home, making them seem real. People in trailer parks are not always dumb rednecks or idiots. They don't all talk like that. There's educated people in there, too. Those are just stereotypes, that's all they are, because we're not like that. We're like every other person."

Fred's wife, Paula, agrees, her next comment reinforcing Foucault's (1979) recognition that discourse constitutes material reality. "These shows place a bad stereotype on people who live in trailers. And if people were to know we lived in a trailer they might start thinking of us that way."

Jackie continues the line of thought. "I hate the stereotypes associated with trailers because my friends are like, 'Hey I live in a house, where do you live?' 'Oh I live in a trailer' And they're like, 'You said that you lived in a house.' I'm like, 'What does it matter where I live?' They're like, 'Well you just didn't seem like you would live in a trailer.' I guess enough people associate trailer with the 'white trash,' so they don't actually think certain people are different."

Leaning in, Fred says, "Yes and that's what I can't stand."

"I feel like people who watch these shows associate what they see with anybody who lives in a trailer," says Eric.

"It's society's stereotypical ways," Fred explains. "But that judgment also depends on how you carry yourself. Don't live to the stereotype. Just carry yourself in the way that you want

others to perceive you. We live here, but we don't carry ourselves as trailer park people or trailer trash.”

Fred’s comment is striking because it is steeped in neoliberalism, providing an individual solution (i.e., “don’t live to the stereotype”) to a structural problem: class inequality. His words reinforce the neoliberal idea that the poor are blameworthy for their misfortunes, including the judgment they endure (Harvey, 2007). As such, Fred carries himself a certain way to avoid judgment. My data about him is limited to the five hours we spent together, but this is how I read his body; it is fit, clean, and well-groomed. He sits tall and erect and refrains from associating with the people in his neighborhood. He speaks with confidence and clarity, mindful of his words. His red t-shirt and jean shorts bare no stains, holes, or wrinkles. In short, his comportment is vastly different from the manner of white working-class people in the media. He lives in a trailer but presents himself as a middle-class U.S. citizen. A tension emerges between his living condition and his outward appearance. This is a tension I know all too well, having spent most of my life engaging in a middle-class performance to deny my working-class roots. Fred’s comment indicates that he works diligently to avoid stereotypical traits the media attributes to those who live in mobile homes—tattered clothes, crooked teeth, obesity, dirt, and smell. How he moves in the world, his body, is produced via neoliberal discourse; the same can be said for his family who, in the previous exchange, allude to an awareness of the social and material consequences derived from mediated portrayals. Foucault’s (1978) notion of biopower, that we cannot separate the discourse of bodies from the bodies we inhabit, comes to life. Biopower specifically refers to “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (p. 140). These “techniques” (e.g., scientific knowledge) create discourses of normality to which individuals such as Fred are expected and pressured to

conform. What this shows is how productive discourse can be. Fred produces behaviors that emulate the middle-class as a result of living in and through normative neoliberal discourses about class. This connection of discourse and bodies was also evident in focus groups when participants talked about the children who were in the clips we watched.

“Why would you want to put yourself out there like that?” Ellen says, after watching *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. I get that it’s for the money but not only do you put yourself out, you put your kids out, too. So even if her kids become normal human beings and actually grow up and have normal jobs and live nicely, they’re always going to be known as dirt bags who sucked on pigs’ feet at a redneck event. That’s screwed up. It’s like YouTubing your kid naked or something. It’s not a good idea. Why would you do that to your kid? You can never take that back.”

Paula expresses a similar concern. “People are going to see those kids on the show, and it’s going to affect them. I wouldn’t let our family do anything like that because there’s too many people who judge, like we’re sitting here and judging them.”

Intrigued by Paula’s comment, I ask, “So, hypothetically, if somebody were to come and say, ‘Hey we’ll pay you thousands of dollars an episode’, would you ever be on a show?”

“Sure!” Fred says without hesitation, “depending on what it is. Money is money. Everybody needs it.”

“I don’t know,” Paula says, hesitantly.

“It depends on the show,” Fred explains.

“The world is harsh,” Paula says. “I don’t want to put my kids through something where they’re going to be judged because—“

“Because,” Fred interrupts, “like she said, the world is harsh. Once you put it on the tube for everybody to see, then you're going to get all the backlash that comes with being in that spotlight. So how can you deal with that?”

The previous exchange, representative of what was discussed in most of our focus groups, has cultural salience given the popularity of reality television and the current age of new media where “ordinary” people, such as those who are poor and working-class, are increasingly becoming visible in media sites (Turner, 2004). This visibility allows for reflections of class that would not have been possible in previous decades. These reflections elucidate a unique bind that poor and working-class people may find themselves in if invited to participate in a RTV show. Because of their placement on the lower rung of the class hierarchy, members of these populations are vulnerable to criticism, but RTV invites them to increase this vulnerability in exchange for money, which they often need—hence the bind. Either they continue struggling to make ends meet or they join the ranks of poor RTV stars and experience material gain and the criticism that accompanies it. No choice is ideal. However, based on the issues of immobility I discovered throughout my fieldwork, I can see why the latter choice would be attractive. Extra income could have a significant impact on the families I interviewed in terms of access to better childcare, healthcare, housing, and more. Looking back, I think my family would have been willing to endure increased ridicule if it meant we could have obtained the money we needed to move out of our dilapidated trailer.

Though participants were ultimately opposed to the idea of starring on RTV shows, their opposition, combined with their insight as both insiders and viewers, fueled critical engagement about the increased visibility of poor and working-class people in RTV, revealing the social and material consequences therein. A similar shift in focus occurred when participants’

aforementioned opposition to mediated stereotypes about people who live in mobile homes inspired a critical reflection of the possible impact of these stereotypes on bodies. Calling attention to this shift is important since the opposition participants expressed often revealed the critical lens through which they engaged mediated representations of white working-class people, a lens that warrants more attention since it can expand our understanding of these representations. As Fiske (1986) writes:

We must first identify the semiotic excesses of the text, those potential meanings that escape the control of the producers of dominant culture. This will enable us to identify where and how members of subordinate subcultures can use these semiotic opportunities to generate meanings for them, meanings that relate to their own cultural experiences and position, meanings that service their interests, and not those of cultural domination. (p. 405)

Reflecting on Fiske's words (inspired by Hall's [1973] active audience approach to research) as well as what I observed in the focus groups, I understand the value of observing how those who exist on the margins generate meanings from messages. The variety of responses that emerged, as I have illustrated thus far, demonstrates this value. While it is fruitful to describe the various meanings that people make of messages (particularly in terms of emphasizing the polysemic nature of media messages), I believe it is also helpful to highlight their ability to critique these messages in unique ways—a quality often ascribed to scholars who are trained to critique these messages in specific contexts (e.g., academic conferences and journals), using the theoretical vocabulary and analytical tools of the academy. As Schiappa (2008) notes:

Many critics see themselves as “expert” readers of socially significant texts. As professional critics, they assume that they “see” and understand texts in a more

sophisticated manner than the general public—that, after all, would be the point of an advanced education and training in theories of communication and culture. (p. 36)

However, from what I witnessed in my focus groups, critical work is being done outside of the academy and I seek to show what this work looks like and how it can inform scholarly analyses and critiques of white working-class people in the media. If we value media criticism produced in scholarly communities and university classrooms, we should also value the criticism produced outside of these academic spaces, specifically by those who are implicated in the media sites they critique (Projansky, 2014). My approach is guided by Shohat and Stam's (2014) conceptualization of "polycentric multiculturalism," which analyzes representations from multiple perspectives but sympathizes with the oppressed, recognizing them as active agents who have an "epistemological advantage" (p. 48) to deconstruct dominant discourses because of their familiarity with both the center and the margins. In other words, they are ideally positioned to be critics.

Among the many critiques participants offered, one of the most remarkable concerned the setup of the films and television shows we watched. For example, after explaining the origin of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (see page 43), Ellen says, "So the family basically became faces of the nation over bad parenting." Her comment calls attention to the fact that the deviance consistently attributed to Alana and her family is what prompted the series in the first place, an issue I had not yet considered. Consequently, viewers are invited to recognize that this family, no matter how hard they try to succeed at being middle-class, will always fail, leaving no room for redemption. Fred makes a similar observation about the lack of redemption, as evidenced in the following exchange:

“Do you think there is a difference between the clips I have shown you and other shows about white working-class people like *My Name is Earl*, which you mentioned earlier?”

Fred replies, “*My Name is Earl* was specifically a comedy. It wasn’t dubbed as a reality show. It was a comedy sitcom.”

“So it was scripted?”

“Yes, and it was funny. It was that dumb kind of humor you know? But it always had something good come out of it, unlike what we have watched [with you].”

In addition to recognizing the limited possibilities available for characters in the clips we watched, participants also questioned and provided insightful critiques about the “reality” component. For example, after watching *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, Mary turns to me and says, “The whole family needs etiquette lessons.”

Cindy nods in agreement.

“But you know,” says Mary, “in real life they're probably not like that. That's all script.”

“How can you tell that?” I ask.

“I mean, you can't expect someone to be that gross,” Brandon explains.

“They fluff it up,” says Mary.

“Yea,” Cindy agrees. “They make it look worse than what it really is to get more ratings.”

Ellen echoes their sentiments. “The show has to be over dramatized,” she said. “There's no way that the family could be that disgusting. No mother who makes sure that their kids’ teeth are clean and that they are taking showers and that their clothes are clean is going to let them wipe their nose on the couch. I mean it just doesn't make any sense.”

Ellen, along with her husband, also questioned the “reality” in *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor*. “I suppose they have to add the fighting and drama for effect. Who's going to just watch a bunch of people walking around a trailer park? I think it's all fake. I mean it's relative, but it's fake.”

“Could you see yourself creating a show that shed a more humane light on people living in trailers?” I ask.

“I don't think anyone would watch it,” Ellen says. “Who would watch that?” She then turns to John. “Who would watch us all day?”

“I don't even like to watch us all day,” John says, joking, his words filling the room with laughter.

“Yea who's gonna watch us all day doing nothing? I think people would watch us fighting, and then it would be like watching *Jerry Springer*. But really, nobody would take time out of their day to watch me and Ben sit here and decide what we're having for dinner.”

In this moment, Ben and Ellen, as with all participants, expressed an awareness of the spectacle that is central to films and television shows about white working-class people. This awareness is important given the fact that talk and RTV, more than any other genre, relies on exploiting the disenfranchised by making entertainment out of their hardship filled lives (Grindstaff, 2002; Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Johnston, 2006). Ben and Ellen's recognition of the process of making entertainment illustrates their critical engagement with media; this is why they questioned the reality of reality shows to which they were exposed. Participants also mentioned the role of the camera when questioning this reality. Fred, for example, says, “I don't see how reality TV is real. I think it's, ‘Hey there's a camera here, let me see how I can get attention.’” Ellen's recognition of the camera's influence was much the same. “Reality shows are so stupid,

because they're not reality. Even if you're as real as you can possibly get, its still not reality because you're in front of a camera. You're going to act differently if you're on camera.”

Apart from debunking the myth that these shows are real, participants also made comments about voyeurism. “You have to have a really shitty sense of humor to find these shows amusing,” Ellen says, reflecting on the clips we had just watched together.

“Yea, it requires a different kind of humor for sure,” I note.

“It's not humor,” explains Ellen. “It's like watching a car accident. That's what it's like. It's like watching a car accident, cause who wants to watch a car accident? But you can't help it. You're like ‘huh I wonder what's going on over there. Does the guy have a head?’ It's like the same thing.”

Ellen’s comment resembles my earlier idea of poverty porn (see page 12)—a common occurrence in media, driven by the likelihood of increased ratings, where viewers are invited to gaze upon those who are less fortunate. Poverty porn is a voyeuristic trope that exploits the poor and their surrounding conditions. In addition to recognizing and critiquing this trope, participants expressed an awareness of the production process and its role in shaping this trope. This awareness, though subtly present throughout the focus groups, was most evident in the following exchange.

“Last time we talked about the reality TV show *American Idol* didn't we?” I ask Fred and his family.

“Oh yea,” Paula says.

“Fred, I think you were saying that you would audition and would be one of those people who would purposefully act goofy to get on the first episode.”

“Yes,” Fred says, “and that’s a perfect example of what we’ve been talking about. I’d be on TV for acting goofy and would have never made it anywhere on the show. But I don’t normally act goofy, so it wouldn’t be true reality.”

“Right. And we would get a certain impression of you,” I say.

“Right, and it wouldn’t be correct at all.” Fred turns to his wife. “Can I show her that picture that I took with Larry?”

“No,” Paula says with wide eyes.

“Well, that would be a perfect example. She’s been over here twice. Let’s see what she thinks.”

“Fine.”

Fred retrieves the picture from his bedroom and hands it to me. In the picture, Fred is in a pool hall surrounded by people who appear to be his friends. Instead of wearing his usual t-shirt and jeans, Fred is clad in a short jean skirt, fishnet tights, and a tight black ruffled top. He is also wearing a bright pink bra, placed over instead of under his black top, making it the focal point of the picture.

“That is fantastic,” I say with a smile, after studying the picture. “Where did the bra come from?”

“A female friend. I did it for breast cancer awareness.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Just proves the point, that’s all. From being over twice and getting to know more about me, you probably would have never pictured me doing that. But what if you looked at the picture first? You would have had a very different impression.”

“Sure,” I agree. “It’s interesting the assumptions we can make from just one picture. It makes me wonder what kind of assumptions we and other people might make about the characters in shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.”

“Not everyone is like them,” says Paula. “That’s just a certain family chosen to be on TV to increase ratings because they are humorous and people like judging them. People like belittling other people.”

“To make themselves feel better,” Fred adds.

Paula nods her head in agreement. “It’s just Hollywood, that’s all it is. Like, we have corny little things that we do around here, but they could have taken that and just kept replaying it, and then made a show out of it that other people could laugh at. It’s just Hollywood.”

Here, Paula recognizes the role of producers in shaping the final product. Without being “trained,” Paula, comparable to most participants, was able to point out how the identities of characters on reality television shows are fabricated—a point I discuss at length in Chapter Two—justifying my belief that these families have the ability to offer critiques of films and television shows similar to those provided by academics.

More importantly, the critiques participants offered suggest that white working-class people do not always perceive themselves the way they are ostensibly represented (they wouldn’t have offered critiques otherwise), which reinforces the scholarly observation that this population is misrepresented. By recognizing and integrating their critical input, scholars can understand things about white working-class people and media sites centered on their experiences that they might not have been able to through a textual approach. For example, in addition to learning that members of this population do not always agree with how they are represented, I was able to expand my critical understanding of shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which I now see,

thanks to Ellen, were inspired by “bad parenting.” I gained more insight into the material and social consequences surrounding the increasing presence of poor and working-class people in RTV. Moreover, participants’ critiques raised a series of questions that will factor into my future work concerning white working-class people: What would white working-class people consider to be an ideal representation of their population? What should writers and producers do to create this ideal representation? Is this even possible? Questions such as these have made me realize the importance of creating alternative possibilities for representing and interpreting the experiences of white working-class people, which I am dedicated to pursuing.

New Voices, New Directions

Reflecting on the various negotiations, responses, and critiques offered by participants in the focus groups has opened my mind in a multitude of ways. For example, I can now see positive elements, including the potential for identification, in films and television shows about white working-class people that I did not before. Instead of occupying an oppositional position, where I am prone to rejecting representations of white working-class people in the media, I now occupy a critical position, which allows me to embrace and integrate new perspectives and insights, such as those provided by participants. However, given my past, which was permeated with ridicule, and my selective attention to how the media articulates and reinforces structural inequalities, which has been nurtured in the academy, the critical position I now occupy contains oppositional elements that impact how I see and what I say about these media sites. As feminist media scholar Dow (1996) notes, the arguments within textual analyses are more telling of the researcher than the site itself. This is a big part of why I believe it is important to listen to, be informed by, and incorporate the responses of others, too. As Justin Lewis (1991) declares, “If

we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or ‘texts’) as they are understood by audiences.” (p. 47)

While audience members may not be professional critics, their responses can be productive and diverse, inspiring new ways of interpreting and critically analyzing popular culture artifacts. In other words, audience research can advance and reinforce the criticisms scholars provide; this is especially important given the fact that critical media scholars are often guided by what Schiappa (2008) refers to as “rhetorical salience,” which means they pay attention to features of a text that are most interesting or important for their purposes but they do not make explicit their selectivity. I have done this, finding moments in shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* that support my oppositional tendencies without calling attention to this fact. However, incorporating the varied responses of participants, though an admittedly messy and complex process, has enabled me to push past my oppositional bias to employ a critical position wherein I show how and why messages are polysemic, resulting in more layered and complex critiques of media sites featuring white working-class people.

My process of incorporation has primarily been inspired by the work of Projansky (2014) who employs multiple methods (i.e., close textual analysis and ethnography) to analyze and integrate the responses of young girls to texts about young girls. Her primary goal is to challenge the multitude of books and people declaring that media representations of girls are awful and have damaging effects. After spending several weeks observing how students in a third grade class interpret representations of girls in the media, Projansky finds that the girl students—contrary to popular belief—do not position themselves among a damaged group of gendered media consumers. Instead of passively accepting and becoming victimized by these

representations, the girls are highly critical of them, pinpointing complex and nuanced ideas about gender in the media. Projansky's work mirrors my own in many ways. Though I did not approach my project with a desire to challenge the assumption that mediated representations of white working-class people are damaging—mostly because I agreed with this assumption—I did end up finding that white working-class people are, like the girls in Projansky's study, critics. Through this discovery, I have been able to create a space that recognizes the voices of white working-class people and the active, informed, and meaningful ways they negotiate the films and television shows in which they are implicated. The insight they provided has equipped me to offer unique critiques that do not simply rehash already well-established arguments about oppressive representations in the media, but instead pinpoint the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings derived from these representations in new and exciting ways, which I use the concluding chapter to explore.

CONCLUSION:

**A NEW BEGINNING: MERGING CRITICAL/CULTURAL AND
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES**

In this final chapter, I merge critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives to: (1) discuss how my perspective of films and television shows featuring white working-class people has changed throughout the course of this project, (2) describe how this change was spurred by listening to the experiences and responses of white working-class people, (3) pinpoint why explaining this change matters in that it reveals not only the complexity of negotiating texts, but also how discourses shape and influence our material reality, and (4) explain how the knowledge I gathered from this process can add to scholarship about mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people. I begin with a second analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

Echoing Boylorn's (2008) words, "I am both a fan and a critic of reality television" (p. 423). I am simultaneously entertained and repulsed by shows that reiterate stereotypes about white working-class people. I find myself embracing some representations, rejecting others, and ultimately finding a piece of myself—and other white working-class people I know—in them. However, my main response remains critical, with elements of opposition that are influenced by my standpoint as a white, educated, critically-minded, feminist woman who hails from a trailer park in rural Minnesota and now exists in a liminal space between the working-class and middle-class. Developed in 1986 by feminist scholar Sandra Harding, standpoint theory suggests that

what one knows and perceives is impacted by where one stands (i.e., their position) in society. An individual's standpoint is determined by a multitude of variables such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and level of education, which intersect to influence how they engage with and understand the world around them. In short, standpoint theory is guided by the notion of layered understandings. My layered understandings, especially my critical mindset and my class-based liminality, mean that I am disturbed by representations of white working-class people who drink, smoke, fart, burp, break the law, sleep around, and spend money frivolously. These representations do not fully resemble my experiences, or the experiences of other white working-class people I know, and they cast material struggles as rooted in individual problems, which is often not the case.

I want to see alternative representations on mainstream films and television shows that shed light on the material struggles and the immobility that white working-class people face. However, the more absurd representations are about marginalized populations within reality shows, the more successful these shows become (Pozner, 2004; Slade, Narrow, and Buchanan, 2014). Sadly, I see why—a realization that becomes especially evident in the moments I laugh at what I see. For me, however, these moments are met with a sense of guilt that ties my stomach in knots, which makes me stop laughing...until I laugh again a moment later. I feel schizophrenic—angry, entertained, guilty, joyful, bothered, righteous. Back and forth. Push and pull. Smiling with a furrowed brow. I wonder how it is possible to experience all of these reactions in such a short period of time. I get frustrated thinking about it. Why am I laughing at the stereotypes that I am desperately trying to write myself and my participants out of? Am I too far removed from the white working-class life? Am I one of the few who has these mixed reactions? Before listening to participants, who I assumed would oppose what they saw, I thought I was. But now I see these

shows in a new light, one that enables me to reframe the tension I experience as a viewer. Instead of seeing this tension as a hindrance, I now see it as a productive force that inspires me to offer new, varied, and innovative critiques about mediated portrayals of white working-class people.

A Second Analysis

I turn on my recently acquired smart TV, sign into Amazon, and click on a random episode of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, “Big Girls Wear Lace Ups” (Season 2, Episode 8). In this episode, Mama June and Sugar Bear prepare, with the help of their children, for their upcoming commitment ceremony. Midway through the episode, as all seven family members are sitting on the stained light brown microfiber sectional in their living room, Alana asks her parents if they have thought about their first dance. Mama June says, “Ain’t gonna have a first dance.” Sugar Bear disagrees. “Got to have a first dance,” he says as he stands up and grabs June by the arm. Together, they dance in an exaggerated manner, arms flailing and steps far out of sync, to get a rise out of the kids. Anna, the oldest, laughs and yells, “Spank the tushy, Sugar Bear! Spank it!” Sugar Bear obliges, lightly tapping June on her butt, as he says, “Dancing is all about hand placement.” The entire family bursts out in gut-wrenching laughter and everyone begins to dance, without inhibition, as club dance music plays in the background.

I can’t help but smile at the sheer joy expressed in this clip—a joy that makes me question one of the main critiques I provided in my original critical/cultural analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*: this series reinforces the “myth of the happy poor” (Thomas & Callahan, 1982). As I watch the family laugh and dance, I realize how my critique foreclosed the possibility of actual happiness, which permeated the show, and how participants framed their lives, evidenced in the following exchange:

“Mary, what do you think would be the ideal life for you? If you could have anything the way that you want it, how would you have it?”

“I don't think I would change anything,” Mary says confidently, her words boggling my mind. How could an ill woman who lives in a decaying mobile home with an immobile husband she has to care for 24/7, be pleased with her life? My struggles and complaints seem so trivial in comparison—a feeling made more visceral after speaking with Ellen and Ben.

“I just live life to the best of my ability you know,” Ben says earnestly, with a smile and a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “And I've had a lot of hardships, like the stroke. I mean I'm lucky to be alive, but I bounced back. And you know, we pay our bills. I don't have to get up and go to work every day at a job I hate and I can sit on the front porch in the sunshine. It's a decent life.”

Ellen smiles and nods.

Ben continues. “I have no complaints. And I would really be an asshole if I did complain about my life.”

“He's very content.”

“Yea I'm happy with nothing. I used to have credit cards up the wazoo: I couldn't even apply for one now.”

“Which is fine,” Ellen interrupts. “We don't have credit cards and stuff and the bills are paid. I really don't stress, cause worse come to worse I can got out to the garage and sell a textbook online or something. You know what I mean? There's always something that comes through. I don't know how but it does.”

“We're poor,” Ben says, “but we get along pretty well.”

“We have everything we need,” Ellen adds.

“Yea, I mean we're happy with very little.”

“We’re happy with what we have.”

Ben and Ellen, in the previous exchange, affirm the “myth of the happy poor” when they explain they are happy though they don’t have much money. To my surprise, all participants expressed happiness despite their struggles. Whether or not this happiness was genuine and/or motivated by getting attention and \$150.00 for being part of my project, I will never know, especially given the short time frame I had to work with participants. What I do know, however, is that the happiness they expressed encourages me to revisit my past. Instead of focusing on what I didn’t have, I yearn to resurrect past moments of joy and pleasure, moments I have covered behind layers of anger, shame, pain, and resentment.

I stare back at the screen and, as I gaze at the Honey Boo Boo family happily dancing in their living room, a visceral memory comes rushing back.

July 2009. Five months before Mom’s untimely death.

I am 25 years old and seated in the back of my mother’s recently acquired Dodge Durango—her prized possession after years of driving rusted out sedans. Mom is in the front, driving and my 16-year-old brother, Sidney, is seated next to her. We are headed home from one of our final rehearsals of Annie Get Your Gun, the fifth summer musical we have been involved in with a local community theatre. These musicals have become a summer family tradition, but this one is likely my last as I am one month away from getting married and moving to Tennessee.

I open my script to study the music when Mom suddenly turns up the volume on the radio. “Say Hey,” a popular R&B song by Michael Franti and Spearhead blasts through the speakers. “I love this song!” Mom says as she starts to chair dance and sing along at the top of her lungs.

My brother rolls his eyes and slouches in his seat. I echo his sentiments, as I stare at a 45-year-old woman subtly grinding to a summer hit that has captured the ears and hearts of adolescents all over the United States. Mom continues to jam without a care in the world. I don't blame her. The beat is catchy and the tune is one that sticks in your head for hours. I resist the urge to dance for as long as I can, but then I give in. I can't help it. Mom's joy is contagious, as it always has been. I begin to move my head from side to side and let the movement travel to my hips, all the while harmonizing with Mom's voice. As our movements grow and the sound of our harmonies rise, I peer at the reflection of my brother through the side mirror and see him crack a smile. I turn away, hoping he doesn't see me looking. I then hear his voice, softly at first, until he completely gives in, breaking out of his angsty adolescent demeanor. Mom's joy continues to spread, filling the Durango, as all three of us dance and sing with reckless abandon.

This memory, one of the first in a long list of recollections that ease the pain of my mother's death, might not have been resurrected had I not revisited *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* with my participants in mind. Their stories, struggles, happiness, perseverance and multidimensionality have motivated me to think beyond past trials and tribulations so I can fully appreciate the working-class culture that helped shape who I am today. I feel more of a connection to this culture as a result of this study than I have in a long time, but this presents a challenge because, as a critic, I am obligated to recognize that what participants expressed in the interviews and focus groups—even their happiness—is just as much of a construction as the films and TV shows I analyzed. Their words necessitate critical reflexivity so I can understand where they come from and how they are situated in a cultural context.

At the same time their expressed happiness encourages me to think more optimistically about my past, this happiness reinforces structural inequalities. Statements such as, “We’re happy with very little” (Ben) and “I wouldn’t change a thing” (Mary)—while seemingly optimistic—resemble the “therapeutics of self” prevalent in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* where the white working-class characters express contentment with their lives despite their material disadvantages. I do not find this resemblance between what the characters and participants express coincidental given the current era of neoliberalism, which seeks to eliminate welfare. This rhetoric of contentment used in RTV shows, which often function as a technology of neoliberalism, justifies the demise of welfare by mitigating the material struggles faced by those who are disenfranchised. The fact that participants used this rhetoric to make sense of their experiences illuminates the power of larger cultural discourse: structural inequalities remain intact when happiness is used as a panacea. While being or stating they are happy does not negate that white working-class people have limited resources and opportunities, it does obscure these limitations, and therein lies the problem. If members of this population have learned to be happy despite their circumstances, we are given the message that nothing needs to change. But based on the issues related to healthcare, housing, education, and childcare I discovered in my ethnographic research, structural change is imperative. As such, I will never fully understand how or why participants seemed content with their limiting situations—perhaps this is the most viable response to cope in a cultural context where poverty is framed as an individual problem and resources are consequently scarce. Their optimism is helping me understand why white working-class people negotiate films and television shows the way they do.

For example, prior to working with participants, I watched *Trailer Park: Welcome to Myrtle Manor* and my focus was on the alcohol, fighting, perverse language, and crime that

permeated the show. My chest tightened and teeth clenched as I witnessed repeated and damaging stereotypes about white working-class people. I was convinced participants would feel the same as I, but they didn't.

“What are your impressions of *Welcome to Myrtle Manor*?” I ask Mary and her family after viewing a clip where the main characters are first introduced.

“Well, they have a really good community,” Cindy says.

Mary leans in. “They have it so much better than we do. Like if you called management to say your water was leaking into the bedroom and causing black mold, which happened to us, they would do something to fix it, without even making residents pay for it. Plus, they had a pool.”

“I love pools,” Cindy says, smiling.

“In relation to trailer parks,” Brandon says, “I’d give it five stars. I mean, they have their own security.”

Paula, in the focus group I held with her family, also had positive responses: “I like how the management of Myrtle Manor was trying to make the neighborhood better, like a community, something you want to be a part of. I like that.”

Where I saw stereotypes, participants saw caring communities, which suggests that this show may not be performing the sort of cultural work I originally surmised. Upon further reflection, I realize that my training in critical thought, combined with the melodramatic tendencies I have had since I was young, influence my predominately negative reading of the show. This is why getting outside of myself to listen to and embrace their responses is important; it enables me to offer multidimensional analyses expanding the terrain of white working-class media studies. I now see *Welcome to Myrtle Manor* and other reality shows in a new light.

Instead of being so resistant and hyperfocused on the ridicule and overdramatization that permeates these shows, I can see redeeming attributes such as happiness, community, strong familial relationships and more. I can also see how these attributes—the positive and the negative—work together to expose the mundane and subtle ways in which neoliberalism, for instance, functions. My view of the cultural work these texts are performing is deeper and wider. This change inspires me to revisit my original analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

I open Chapter Three and begin reading carefully, holding the words and experiences of participants in mind. I stop, stumbling across a line that now seems to lack substance. “Throughout *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, producers use Alana and her family to demonstrate and reinforce working-class limits to propriety.” This line is hollow because I do not explain what these limits are (e.g., affordable healthcare) or how they manifest. I gloss over the immobility white working-class people experience because, prior to engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, I didn’t fully know what it entailed. I hadn’t experienced it as they have. I always had aspirations to move out of the trailer park and realized that, at some level, I had the resources—a strong support system, quality education, and several scholarships—to make that happen. Participants, on the other hand, continually hit road blocks.

While this chapter does provide new understandings about how a marginal form of whiteness is authenticated, it does not show how this marginality is experienced. I feel the burden of this limitation, for it is one thing to say that white working-class people are marginalized but to use rich and vivid stories derived from interviews, focus groups, and personal experience to show what this looks like, is quite another; it can expand not only what we know about white working-class people but also about the relationship between discourse and

materiality. For example, I now see the aforementioned complacency expressed by participants as an individual response to systemic neoliberal discourses about eliminating welfare, which has material consequences—this is what ethnographic work with living, breathing bodies enabled me to discover and what my use of autoethnography has encouraged me to reflect upon and critique. For this reason, it is productive to combine critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives. Working at this intersection can contribute to more theoretical and experiential understandings of how media images and lived experiences are intertwined, which I expand upon in the following section.

A Fruitful Merger

By merging critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives, new narratives with which to make sense of white working-class people and other marginalized folk can emerge. Incorporating autoethnographic narratives in critical/cultural scholarship is beneficial, especially when recognizing that some people are more persuaded by a good story than a good argument (Fisher, 1984). Stories are powerful. They can, as Griffin (2012) indicates, “expose the intricate workings of power, and bring complicity and complacency with domination to light; they can also behold resistive power and liberatory potential and spark the possibility of identification and trust between and among different identities and interests” (p. 151). When autoethnographers tell their own or other’s stories of oppression, they offer knowledge from the margins, knowledge that can raise consciousness and ignite social change (Chávez, 2012). Furthermore, because autoethnography is written in an accessible, relatable, and engaging manner that attracts both academic and nonacademic readers, the knowledge offered has a wider reach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 1998)—a development that contains critical potential.

Another benefit of this merger is that it gives equal attention to and reveals the dialectic between structure and agency—a productive and informative move since critical/cultural studies tends to privilege structure whereas autoethnography privileges agency. To further clarify, the critical/cultural studies approach asserts that who the individual is and what the individual does is largely determined by social structures (capitalism, for instance). By placing an emphasis on structure, individual experiences are not often a focus (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Autoethnography, on the other hand, foregrounds individual experiences, focusing on how individuals, as agents, navigate through larger social structures to construct, reconstruct, and give meaning to their world. This is explained by Spry (2011): “Autoethnography has allowed me to position myself as an active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonizing dominant cultural myths that restricted my social freedom and personal development” (pg. 711). In short, autoethnography does not deny the existence of social structures, it just accesses these via how individuals find their way through them, which can sometimes mitigate the influence these structures have. This is why merging autoethnography and critical/cultural studies can be meaningful: critical/cultural studies can help autoethnography integrate a greater concentration on how social structures, and the power and inequality within them, produce and influence lived experiences; autoethnography can help contextualize, exemplify, and ground the structural issues on which critical/cultural studies tends to focus. Through this combined approach, I have been able to account for lived experiences of white working-class people and show how these experiences, and how individuals make sense of these experiences, are impacted by the neoliberal agenda. What results from this merger is a more rounded mode of inquiry, shedding rich insight on how agents interface with the structures by which they are produced, influenced, and bound.

Looking back, the most important benefit of merging autoethnography and critical/cultural studies is the second order of reflection it brings. Though both approaches are inherently subjective, and recognize that position affects perspective, autoethnography takes more responsibility for this subjectivity by openly engaging in self-reflexivity (Ellis, 2004). Critical/cultural studies, on the other hand, while an inherently self-reflexive approach since it always questions how knowledge is produced, does not make this aspect a focus of the work.

Because open reflexivity is a vital component of autoethnography, I was encouraged to think about and share how my standpoint impacted what I concentrated on and concluded about films and television shows starring white working-class people. Through this reflexive process, the oppositional lens through which I viewed these texts became increasingly clear and I realized that my reading was one among many—an idea expanded upon by Schiappa (2008) in the following statement:

Texts are silent until experienced. We not have access to the Pure Text, or to its single correct interpretation. All we have is the phenomenal text—the text as its various readers perceive and experience it. Each textual encounter is partial in the sense that it represents one of many possible ways to encounter any given text and in the sense that our individual histories, abilities, values, and interests influence the meaning that we glean from a text. (p. 61)

Since there are infinite ways to read a text, Schiappa (2008) believes that a text is not constituted until it is read. By incorporating autoethnography, I had an outlet to openly reflect on this constitutive process and therefore make explicit my subjective role in the interpretation of critique of various films and television shows starring white working-class people. Incorporating autoethnography also inspired me to revisit how I viewed these texts after I engaged in

fieldwork—a step I would not have taken otherwise. In doing so I was able to realize and openly admit how much my perception had changed after listening to the stories and responses of other white working-class people. My work is imbued with this kind of metacognitive awareness, which makes it messy but, more importantly, honest and responsible.

Challenges and Limitations

As I begin to reflect on the entirety of this project, I would be remiss not to mention the limitations and challenges I encountered along the way. First, I was limited by the number of participants I was able to find for the study. I spent several weeks asking friends and colleagues if they had any connections as well as driving around Tampa distributing recruitment flyers, making calls, and sending e-mails to over twenty mobile home communities. Despite my best efforts, I did not hear back from many families; looking back, I am not surprised. If I were in their shoes, I wouldn't want a stranger, a member of the “educated elite,” coming into my home to ask about stereotypes that my family fought to distance ourselves from and deny. Furthermore, committing to three one to two hour sessions was a lot to ask of these families, many of whom lead incredibly busy lives. For these reasons, I am thankful I was able to find three families who fit within the study's perimeters and who were willing to participate. I realize though that having more participants, or more time with the participants I did have, might have led to a wider variety of responses and patterns.

Class was another hurdle that presented itself throughout this project because, as previously explained, it is a messy, complex, and contested variable; its performative and fluid nature makes it hard to pin down, to use in a way that does not offend or essentialize people. While alluding to the fluid nature of class did allow me some freedom when describing the

identities, experiences and responses of participants who exceeded how the working-class has been historically conceptualized, I felt linguistically limited. I had to use the working-class label for the sake of clarity and consistency despite its limitations. The problem, however, is that not every participant identified with this label, which alludes to the difficulty of doing ethnographic work centered on class, especially when class labels mean different things to different people.

Apart from doing research centered on class, merging critical/cultural and autoethnographic perspectives was another major hurdle. I had trouble being attentive to my position in this work while maintaining a critical eye. I wanted to connect with participants, to preserve an allegiance to their stories and responses by fully embracing and trusting what they shared, but the critical voice in the back of my mind kept reminding me that their words were constructions that I needed to interpret and analyze. This hindered my ability to fully connect with participants. I struggled to be equally attentive to structure and agency, wanting to give credence to the agency of participants, to heed their political subjectivity, all the while recognizing that this agency was embedded within and determined by social structures (e.g., neoliberalism) that my critical self would be negligent not to recognize. My work, as a result, became messy—a constant back and forth between structure and agency and back again. This mess is not conducive to my Type A personality, which hindered the research process. I wanted to clean up what I could not and, as I realize now, should not.

My insider/outsider status, which I allude to in Chapter Three, was also a challenge. I entered this project thinking it would be easy to return “home,” to similar neighborhoods in which I grew up. I anticipated being welcomed with open arms by the people in these communities whose lives I thought I could relate to and understand. Instead, I felt like an outsider more often than not. My educational status and material privilege slapped me square in

the face, prompting a slew of insecurities. I know, deep down, that I still identify with many of the values and lifestyles of white working-class people:

- I know what it's like to live from paycheck to paycheck, so I constantly think about money: how much I have, how much things cost, and how reckless others are with what they spend (Orbe, 2014).
- I have negative net worth because of student loans.
- I work my ass off, primarily because I fear that debt will someday conquer my life.
- The academy often feels like a foreign environment to me (Lubrano, 2004).
- I lack the discursive capital to effectively participate in “legitimate academic speak” (Kosut, 2006, p. 250).
- I persevere in times of adversity, and laugh to cope along the way (O’Dair, 1995).
- I make fun of snobbery and pretentiousness (Skeggs, 2011).
- I value mutual responsibility, fairness, human dignity, and democracy over self-interest that fosters greed (Zweig, 2011).

As Barney Dews and Law (1995) indicate, “crossing from one world to another is never fully achieved for the working-class academic; the transformation is never complete” (p. 7).

Socioeconomic status is a lifestyle that does not necessarily change with a larger income (Orbe, 2014). The hidden rules, patterns of thought, social interaction, and cognitive strategies of the class in which people are raised will often stay with them (Payne, 2003). I know this based on experience, but my participants did not know this about me, and I shouldn’t have expected them to. As far as they were concerned, I was a member of the “educated elite,” a data miner, who was coming to pry into their lives for a moment in time and then leave. They may have appreciated my background, but it was hard for them to see me as one of them; we do not face the same

issues. Though I am currently limited in financial terms, I have recently secured a job that will, when combined with my spouse's income, change this fate. I cannot say the same about them, hence our lack of connection, and coming to this realization was hard; the experience continues to boggle my mind.

Among the many challenges I encountered, figuring out how to ethically present participants was the hardest. I wanted, more than anything, to present them as contradictions to common stereotypes about white working-class people so I could confront the judgment that plagued my childhood. At the same time, I knew I needed to honor and remain true to what I observed and what participants shared with me, even if this information reinforced the stereotypes I was trying to debunk. I constantly struggled with what details to share, like Randy's mullet haircut (see page 64) and Ellen's kitschy décor (see page 72). These details were important to the stories I composed but contradictory to my desire to invite readers to understand, not judge white working-class people. This ethical dilemma, which comes with the territory of ethnographic research (Ellis, 2009), continues to impact me as I reflect upon what I have written—an account that I hope is informative, honest, and ethically sound.

A Shift in Perception

Limitations and challenges aside, the discoveries that have come from this project are more than I expected. I began with two goals: (1) to explore the complex and interwoven relationships between mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people, and (2) to challenge one-dimensional, essentializing representations of this population in the media by shedding light on their varied lived experiences. In striving to accomplish these goals, I employed a self-reflective gaze, via autoethnography, that enabled me to understand

myself and my relationship with the media. I no longer see this relationship as a one-way cause and effect scenario where I am a victim of media's damaging portrayals of white working-class people. Instead, I see this relationship as a complex negotiation of identification and disidentification, anger and laughter, understanding and indifference (Fiske, 1986; Blumenthal, 1991; Radway, 1984). I do not know where this leaves me, but what I do know is that I am learning, day by day, to be okay with the precarity, the liminality that has come to define who I am, how I see the media, and how I navigate the world. This situation may be messy and tough to navigate, but I carry on, trying to live the best life I can.

Part of this shift in perception can be attributed to those who agreed to participate in this project. Their stories and responses, which I struggled to articulate in the most ethical and honest way possible, have humbled and changed me. Their ability to look past damaging stereotypes and countless forms of adversity to find happiness and contentment has made me think differently, more optimistically, about my past. I am learning to embrace where I come from but this does not grant me full access to the working-class. My level of education and experience of upward mobility will always make this a struggle. I experience a similar tension in the academy—a space where most people are assumed to be at least middle-class (Dykins Callahan, 2008). I am neither there nor here and while this liminality is frustrating at times, it situates me in a unique position to not shy away from but instead embrace complexity of lived experiences as evidenced in my participants' stories. This is why, as I move forward, I am taking their stories with me. I must, because, in addition to providing personal benefits, they have offered important scholarly contributions by disrupting, in an evocative and grounded way, larger cultural narratives about the white working-class population. These stories, however, would never have been discovered had I not chosen to speak with white working-class people, alluding to one of

the many benefits of including participants in the research process—a point I expand upon in the following section.

The Value of Speaking With

As I have illustrated throughout this dissertation, white working-class people are represented in limited and troubling ways, which has come to influence how they are seen and treated in dominant popular culture. Without a more holistic understanding of this population, the struggles they experience will continue to remain in the shadows. Part of my desire for greater understanding is rooted in the recognition that no studies, to my knowledge, have allowed white working-class people to respond to mediated depictions of their lives. Instead, these critiques have been provided by scholars who are partially (as in my case) if not fully removed from this population and who, despite this, make assumptions about what white working-class people think and who they are in relation to a classist culture.

Through this approach, white working-class people have been given little to no agency when confronting and negotiating representations that implicate their everyday lives. This is precisely why I wanted to foreground their voices, to engage in a process of decolonization, which Chilisa (2011) defines as “conducting research in such a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference” (p. 14). Equally inspired by the work of Spivak (2006), I sought to create an infrastructure where the voices of working-class people, which have been silenced from the academy—a space notoriously associated with privilege (Barney Dews & Law, 1995; Moon, 1998)—could be heard. Rather than speaking for white working-class people, I have spoken with them, punctuating my research with their words and experiences, which has the potential to offer and extend alternative articulations to dominant discourses about this

population.

The grounded approach I employed showed me how Otherness is not an obstacle to avoid, but a springboard from which to jump and discover new knowledge. While I could have avoided ethnographic work and only analyzed films and television shows about white working-class people, or vice versa, I wouldn't have been able to discover and integrate stories and responses that challenged larger cultural ideas about this population and highlighted their implications. As Dow (1996) indicates, texts have both hegemonic and polysemic dimensions, the former discovered via textual analysis and the latter via ethnography. The articulation of either dimension depends on the emphasis of one's research. She adds:

We should choose our approach to the objects we study because of what we want to find out, because of the problem(s) that we want to solve, rather than because we are convinced that one approach leads to truth and the other to conjecture. At the same time, we must always realize that we cannot solve all of the problems or explore all of the possibilities that the text (whether it is a television program or audience discourse about a television program) presents (p. 16).

Because I wanted to understand how white working-class people were depicted in the media and how those who identify as white and working-class negotiate these depictions, both textual analysis and ethnography were necessary. Combining these methods allowed me to add a new dimension to already important scholarly conversations about race and class in the media: one where stereotypes about this population collide with their lived experiences, a task I hope to continue pursuing.

In the near future, I plan to expand upon the work I have done in this project by engaging in an ethnography centered on the role of production in creating popular reality television shows

starring white working-class people. I want to observe and interview the production staff members of at least one of these shows to better understand their role in what gets portrayed. This information could heavily inform my current research because I would not only describe what these shows articulate about white working-class people, but also how and why.

Of particular interest is the recognition that production staff members of reality television shows are some of the most overworked and underpaid employees in show business (Robb, 2014). This presents an interesting paradox for those who work for shows about white working-class people and who are given the task to reinforce stereotypes about a population they are likely to relate to, at least in a material sense. How do they negotiate this tension? This question can be answered by a new vein of research, inspired by Real's (1996) aforementioned call for multiple methodologies to be used within media studies, where approaches to text, audience, and production might be combined instead of divided to illuminate the complexity of film and television today. However, no matter what I end up doing, I will always strive in my research to make accessible different ways of knowing that can raise consciousness about inequality as well as foster positive social change within the classroom and the discipline of communication at large, as well as beyond the confines of the academy.

A New Beginning

Looking back on the knowledge I gained, the personal growth I experienced, and the challenges I confronted and overcame, I am both humbled and amazed by the journey on which this project has taken me. I began opposing mediated representations of white working-class people and have ended with a more open mind as well as a greater awareness of my standpoint. I know that I am positioned to see representations of white working-class people a certain way. I

have my own set of lenses. By incorporating autoethnography, I was able to turn the ethnographic gaze in on itself and provide stories looking through my lenses, stories about how I perceive and have experienced the relationship between mediated representations and lived experiences of white working-class people. My stories, however, do not stop here as autoethnography is intended to provoke other stories (Ellis, 2004). Situated, everyday knowledge and experience can serve as a “point of entry” to investigation (Smith, 1987) but this isn’t where the journey has to end, nor should it.

I conclude my dissertation with the hope of a new beginning: an invitation for scholars to create spaces where stories about white working-class people’s lives are heard, and their active engagement with the films and television shows in which they are implicated is recognized. Whether these spaces come in the form of academic journal articles, books, outlets for public scholarship, community forums, and/or classroom discussions, integrating stories about and responses of white working-class people is important for two primary reasons. First, in terms of scholarship, this integration can richly reveal the relationship between structure and agency, specifically how members of a marginalized population engage and make sense of their lives through mediated representations that articulate and reinforce social structures and inequalities. By observing this process, scholars can provide a deeper and wider understanding of the cultural work that films, television shows, and other media sites perform. Second, integrating stories and responses from the margins has the potential to challenge the essentialism and ridicule that permeates the media sites in which white working-class people are featured as well as the complexity and immobility (e.g., lack of access to affordable healthcare, housing, childcare, and education) that pervades their everyday lives. I hope scholars who are interested in this population seriously consider my invitation. One very important way of obtaining information

about white working-class people is from white working-class people. It is time to listen and to find ways to incorporate what we hear.

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APPENDIX A:

IRB APPROVAL



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

January 21, 2014

Tasha Rennels, M.A. Communication
4202 E Fowler Ave CIS 3057
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00015851
Title: A Critical Autoethnography of White Working-Class People and Their Experiences with Reality Television

Study Approval Period: 1/18/2014 to 1/18/2015

Dear Ms. Rennels:

On 1/18/2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

[IRB Study Protocol-Tasha Rennels, Version 1, 1-9-14](#)

Study involves children and falls under 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving more than minimal risk

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

[Adult ICF Version #1, 1.9.14.pdf](#) [Child Assent Version #1, 1.10.14.pdf](#) [Parental Permission V #1, 1.10.14.pdf](#)

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Schinka, Ph.D.,
Chairperson USF Institutional
Review Board

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tasha R. Rennels studies the complex and interwoven relationship between mediated representations and lived experiences. The primary goal of her research is to raise consciousness about various forms of inequality as well as foster positive social change within the classroom and the discipline of communication at large, as well as beyond the confines of the academy. She earned her bachelor's degree in Communication Studies and Theatre Arts from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. She also has a Master's degree in Communication Studies from Eastern Illinois University. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., she worked as the Promotions Director for 5 Star Radio Group, a radio cluster based out of Clarksville, Tennessee. While employed in the media industry, she was able to pair the knowledge she had gained in her B.A. and M.A. programs with experience—a combination that has since informed her pragmatic approach to research, teaching, and service for which she has won several awards. In the fall of 2015, Tasha will be joining the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, SD.