



## Preface and Acknowledgments

This idea for this book grew out of a place where nothing much happened and no one really gave a damn. The people there were mostly white, and mostly poor. There wasn't much of a middle class, except for a few well-educated folk trying hard not to be snotty so their kids wouldn't get beat up at school. There wasn't a real upper crust either—the only rich people were summer folk at the lake and the weekend skiers up from their urban and suburban homes.

It could have been in New Hampshire, or West Virginia, or California, or one of thousands of places across America. A place full of weeds and broken glass, worn-out buildings and faded paint. Here the crumbling walls of an old mill, there the iron tracks of the old railroad, everywhere piles of busted tires laying toppled in stagnant heaps. Broken-down steel machines, rusted in place, are harsh reminders of jobs that came and went. In pickup trucks and trailer parks, AM stations play songs of failure and loss, the twang of bad endings and hard regrets cutting into the air like spikes of old barbed wire.

In church on Sundays and Wednesday nights, preachers preach sermons on hard work, coping with sin, and coming to Christ. Tuesday is league night at the bowling alley: big men, their bellies gone flabby with beer, roll balls at the pins, while their girlfriends and wives smoke menthol cigarettes and drink gin and tonics in the lounge. Thursday is ladies' night and the women bowl for free. Friday and Saturday nights the kids pack into muscle cars and pickups and cruise the town, looking for something—anything—to do. Party at the gravel pit: drink cheap beer around an oily fire, smoke some sticky ditch weed, get hammered, and drive home. I grew up in this kind of place. For a time, my father was the minister of a small local church where members lived in trailers and, in winter,

rode their snowmobiles to Sunday service. Compared to so many in our community, my family had a degree of middle-class stability and respectable status. That is, until my parents divorced. Then, quite suddenly, we were on welfare. I took to hiding in the car when my mother bought groceries with food stamps. Just eleven years old, I knew there was shame in being too poor to pay for your own food. I knew the common names given to the people like us who inhabited these broken-down worlds, and so do you: *cracker*, *redneck*, *hillbilly*, and *poor white trash*.<sup>1</sup>

As I began the research for this book, I found myself drawn toward trying to understand more about how these places and peoples have come over time to be imagined and perceived. Why, for instance, does the above description of small-town life seem stereotypical and hackneyed to some readers, even as it rings true for me, one who lived it? Where do stigmatizing stereotypes—as I call them, *stigmatypes*—of poor rural whites come from? What gives them their power? How and why do they enter the culture and what purposes do they serve? What role do they play in bringing about human misery? How and what kind of power do they really have? Asking these questions set me on a rather strange intellectual path.

I opted early on for an interdisciplinary approach, primarily because that is what the topic seemed to demand. So many different forms of disciplinary knowledge had been called upon to construct the image of poor white trash that relying on a single disciplinary approach seemed to me to be a sure way to fail. Interdisciplinarity is fraught with many conceptual and methodological difficulties and dilemmas and, at times, I felt like every single one of them dogged my research. One thing, however, is clear: truly interdisciplinary work satisfies almost no one. Historians may find that this work does not rely enough on primary sources, or treats its historical periods too breezily; sociologists may fault it for relying too much on primary sources or for not being methodologically sound or rigorous; literary critics may dismiss it as lacking an adequate theory of representation or for being indiscriminate in the way it handles texts; anthropologists may find the discussions of ethnic groups and culture to be poorly grounded in observation; and so on. The problem is, all are more or less right in their critiques. At times, therefore, I have felt compelled to engage arguments from history, sociology, anthropology, and half a dozen other subfields. In order to improve readability and in order not to

distract general readers with these border skirmishes, I have placed most of these arguments in the notes. Interested readers can find them there and, while important, they do not represent the main ideas in this book. It is with no small degree of irony that I confess that immersing myself in an interdisciplinary project has warmed me to the seductions of disciplinary perspectives. However, this work does not wish to be, nor does it pretend to be, disciplined. My hope is that whatever may have been lost by sacrificing disciplinary depth has been offset by gains in interdisciplinary breadth.

I consider myself very fortunate to have met many wonderful guides and fellow travelers in interdisciplinarity, beginning with my first undergraduate mentor, Susan Harding. Warm thanks to my dissertation committee: José David Saldívar, for impressing upon me the importance of cultural boundaries, border crossings, and hybrid identities; Michael Omi, for pushing me to think sociologically and for his calm patience with me as I repeatedly mangled his theories of racial formation to suit my own perverse intellectual needs; and to the late Michael Rogin for, among many other things, requiring me to think beyond the narrow confines of class analysis. Howard Winant, as the unofficial fourth member of my committee, generously offered his intellectual insights and his enthusiasm for this project from its earliest stages.

Many of the ideas in this book were generated during the long discussions and arguments I had with those with whom I organized the 1997 Berkeley conference “The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness.” That three-day conference, funded by the University of California Humanities Research Institute, garnered international attention and drew over 1,000 participants. That experience established for me the significance and seriousness of the topic of whiteness studies and inspired me to move forward with a research project that at times had seemed frivolous. “White trash? Are you kidding?” was often the response I got from anyone who asked about my research. The Department of Ethnic Studies at Berkeley not only generously cosponsored that conference, they also provided the following year a dissertation fellowship that proved decisive in helping me deepen my research. A university travel grant allowed me to conduct research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, where I was graciously assisted by Thomas Rosenbaum, and at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories, where

Clare Bunce of the Carnegie Library proved informative and knowledgeable about the Eugenics Record Office. At Humboldt State University, Marianne Ahokas, Michael Eldridge, and the late Eric Rofes proved to be outstanding colleagues and provided good food and constant cheer as I finished my dissertation.

My postdoctoral research at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History was guided by Pete Daniel, whose knowledge about all manner of things southern and historical is simply unmatched. Other Smithsonian fellows, particularly Cindy Ott, Elena Razlogova, Lauren Sklaroff, John Troutman, and Todd Uhlman, read several chapters, offered patient criticisms, and helped create a productive atmosphere for interdisciplinary intellectual exchange. Warm thanks also to Tony Kaye for showing me by example how to bring social theory and historical analysis into new and productive relationships.

At the University of Nevada, three consecutive years of course reductions granted me time to rethink and reorient my project in ways that were, for me, extraordinarily fruitful and productive. In addition, a 2002 summer fellowship permitted me to conduct archival research I had been unable to finish during my stay at the Smithsonian. Jane Nichols, Mike Rentko, and George O'Connell graciously assisted in helping me search for the still buried mysteries of the Carroll-Caton estates, and Mary Jeske of the Maryland Historical Society helped interpret historical census data. At Lied Library, UNLV, Susie Skarl located the source of obscure images when no one else could.

I learned a great deal from those who participated in the forum discussions where I presented different stages of this research: faculty colloquia in the Departments of History and Sociology at UNLV; the sociology colloquium at Northwestern University; and the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In addition, my deep appreciation goes out to all the members of the Las Vegas Huntridge Writers Group for reading parts of the manuscript and giving valuable suggestions and encouragement. Graduate students in my cultural sociology seminar, especially Dana Maher, Katy Gilpatric, and Megan Hartzell, provided useful comments and criticisms as did many nameless interlocutors who commented on my presentations at meetings of the American Sociological Association, Southern Historical Association, American

Historical Association Pacific Coast Branch, the American Studies Association, and the Modern Language Association.

I am especially grateful to Eric Klinenberg, Eric Porter, Catherine Ramirez, and Vron Ware, for encouraging me on my haphazard journey from rural idiot to cosmopolitan intellectual, a journey they will all assure you is far from complete. I owe a special intellectual debt to John Hartigan Jr., from whose work I have learned more than I can say. Ken Wissoker, editor-in-chief of Duke University Press, saw the potential for this topic very early on and has proven himself to be one of the most patient and able editors on earth. Thank you, Ken! The four anonymous readers Duke provided made excellent suggestions that helped improve the manuscript, and assistant editor Courtney Berger gave generously of her time and energy to enhance some of the illustrations. My friend Sara Miles provided extraordinary editorial assistance. Needless to say, any and all errors in thought and execution are entirely mine.

In the years that I have worked on this book, I have been sustained by the companionship and affection of family members and loved ones: H. Donley Wray and his partner Carol Delle kept me supplied with free books and good cheer, and Janette Wray was my number-one fan. My deepest thanks go to Jill Gurvey. She has accompanied me in my wayward academic progress from one coast to the other and most of the way back and she never failed to supply emotional support and intellectual enthusiasm for my work. In my life, this gift has been exceeded by only one other: the arrival of our children, Zachary Lang and Maxine Ava. It is with love and affection that I dedicate this book to them.

