

Book review:

Homo Redneckus: On Being Not Qwhite in America, by William Matthew McCarter

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Reviewer: **Vicki J. Sapp**

William Matthew McCarter's original and provocative *Homo Redneckus: On Being Not Qwhite in America* accomplishes the two best things a work can do: make you think about something you never thought to think about, and make you redefine your own self and relation to others. To quote McCarter reading Freire, here we find "thinking that is concerned about reality" (65), a relatively rare quality in academic writing, as McCarter himself aptly observes. His interweaving of personal experience, reality-motivated thesis and exuberant scholarship provides us a careful study of a question, long overdue within the Bartholomew Fair of "otherness"-studies in graduate programs and trendy scholarship: "How do you posit Whiteness against Whiteness?" (47).

The challenge thrown at us in the very title bespeaks McCarter's sensitive exploration of his own duality as an ethnically White man who is all the same not "qwhite" in America due to his geographic and national origins and socio-economic status. This coinage, with its Derridean whiff, playfully yet purposively identifies a hegemonic rupture in Whiteness, one unnoticed for complex reasons by Whites themselves. McCarter argues that the Anglo landholders who founded America and have governed it ever since have a strong vested interest in this rupture, including the use of a White marginalized subculture to offset problems inevitable to the presence of a post-slavery free Black subculture. This White subculture itself, variously called throughout the book by "white trash cracker hillbilly peckerwood bubba etc." signifier chains, has the obvious vested interest in its ethnic whiteness—an easy escape into false security—while it provides much of the labor foundation of the *true* white America that scorns and marginalizes it. The redneck, by the dominant White culture deemed "morally and culturally bankrupt" (40) as a result of his tendencies to drunkenness, wild partying, violence and pseudo-rebellion in the form of both hollow and real threats to kick someone's ass, nonetheless shows up at the factory Monday

morning to sweat out his hangover and earn more beer money for the weekend. The White factory/plantation owner profits and repays by marginalizing the workers into an abhorrent but necessary not-qwhite subculture bought not on the block but rather at the bank:

Because those of us who are not qwhite are seen and see ourselves as being white, we exist within the ‘paradox of privilege’ and because we see ourselves as being a part of the dominant white power structure, we reinforce the very structure that oppresses us and prevents us from ‘naming the world’. (48)

For me, a white female raised in a lower-middle-class (economically, at least) Deep South family, such talk speaks directly to some of my traditional insecurities and raises questions about my own identity processing. Having been raised in apartheid during the 50’s and 60’s, I am used to the hegemonic notion of whiteness set ever triumphantly against a “colored” other. However, as an impecunious American sensitive to social class slights and the material minutiae of class invidiousness (see Paul Fussell’s extraordinary empirical study of American class consciousness in his eponymous *Class*), I feel the pain McCarter so sensitively brings to (white) light in both historical and personal experience.

Also as a white American of Scots-Irish origin, I read with keen interest his positing of this heritage as at least a nationally and qwhite possibly ethnically marginalized subculture: “the terms *redneck* and *hillbilly* can trace their origin to the Scots-Irish and the terms *hillbilly* and *white trash* are markers of social class (39).” From McCarter I have learned that if I want to “pass” in White America, I’d better foreground that other white-mutt descendent, the German who contributed my family name Sapp some generations ago.

Finally, as a North Carolinian, I read along with the burning question: *Where is William Byrd in all this?* when that old man poked his non-flat Virginian nose into Chapter 4, “I am Redneck, Hear Me Roar.” Having branded my fellow Tar Heels with what McCarter deems “some of the earliest stigmatizing depictions and negative stereotypes of us poor white trash peckerwood crackers in the North Carolina colonies” (121), Byrd had long ago caught my attention as I taught American Literature I. Although I could not help but agree that many of my people are lazy, have flat faces and, addicted to pork (it is commonly agreed that we “eat everything but the squeal”) find themselves consequently “filled with gross humours” (Byrd)—I nonetheless bristled at this Virginian condescension that endures 300 years to this day (attend a ball game between UVA and UNC, and you’ll better understand my point here). McCarter joins me in this discomfort as he processes, reading Byrd, “one of the first

American texts in which me and mine, us hillbilly crackers, are ‘the watched.’ We are observed with the gaze of a scientist” (125).

Not especially attracted to the study of history, preferring the literary take, I deeply appreciate McCarter’s seamless interweaving of the historical, the theoretical and the autobiographical into a study that well, just makes you wanna stand up and holler, especially if you are white, Southern, Scots-Irish (the cracker half, anyway), working class—or an American who appreciates attending to what might be the last bastion of “politically (in)correct inquiry” in the United States. Even before 9/11, I had suspected that the Muslims might have to bear this burden alone since we seem, at least in the academy, to have exhausted every other possibility of subcultural abjection. But William Matthew McCarter can assure our Muslim brothers and sisters that they have a cultural companion in that small category of groups that can still be safely mocked and scorned, and a surprising companion at that. A Black student of mine, upon reading some of *Homo Redneckus*, looked at me incredulously and asked, “Y’all do that to each other?” I answered, “It would seem so—at least this is a prejudice that I have always sensed but had never seen codified in any study.” (I do now know, and McCarter cites many of them, that these studies exist; it’s just that no one ever thought to point this literature out to me . . .).

My student then asked me, “Is ‘redneck’ to ‘White’ as ‘ghetto’ is to ‘Black’?” I told her that I would like to know more about this, and many such challenging questions spark from William Matthew McCarter’s challenge to monolithic white power. I myself have several for him, primarily involving the role of cracker *sisterhood* in all this; as his study seems grounded in if not male dominance, at least redneck *his-story* and references to women (outside of his scholarly references) are few. But questions are often as telling as answers, and I am sure that McCarter will plunge into all subtopical inquiries with the apparently tireless scholarly vigor and personal commitment that makes *Homo Redneckus* both a highly erudite historical and theoretical text but also a poignant and user-friendly (in the deepest sense) autobiography of a scholar and an American.

As a scholar myself, I feel much the richer for having read this book. My very ethnically and culturally diverse college students are fascinated with it and raise constructive questions with candor and intellectual curiosity. Perhaps the best Composition lesson I’ve had was our brainstorming of a definition essay on “White Trash,” in which we came up with twenty-one synonyms, thus adding a few handfuls more to McCarter’s colorful list. Perhaps the book’s best recommendation is that it seems to exert an attraction-repulsion effect on my White

colleagues. One asked me, upon learning that I would review this book, “Aren’t you afraid of being victim of a hate crime?”

I answered, “By whom?” If you aren’t White, you will enjoy this window into a world that has possibly been misunderstood on some important fronts, especially by Whites themselves. If you are “true White,” you will say, “Yes, yes—he’s got it right, we don’t want those people from ‘the other side of the tracks’ (my mother’s pet “Keep Out” phrase for my millworker schoolmates I might try to befriend) in our homes.” Or if you don’t like it, *we’ll just get drunk and kick your superior candy ass . . .*

But if you happen to be not qwhite in America, or suspect so, you will definitely appreciate being both “watched” and watched out for, from your own side here, especially in a time when our nation seems hell-bent to widen and deepen the gap between haves and have-nots—and to push more and more Americans of all hues and backgrounds to the other side of those tracks.