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Danielle Bartholomew

Arcadia University, dbartholomew@arcadia.edu

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Danielle Bartholomew

CM213

Research Essay

Dr. Dwyer

“You might be redneck if” you consider yourself one?

If you go see Jeff Foxworthy take the stage in sold-out arenas wearing cowboy boots and an AHRA t-shirt holding a six-pack, you might be a redneck. If you drive a pick-up truck, attend church on Sundays, work hard, and live paycheck-to-paycheck you might be a redneck. Ladies if y'all are blonde, wear sundresses, and strive to maintain a spotless reputation, you might be a southern belle. If you go to private school, drive a Mercedes, and go on lavish vacations...you might be a redneck? Growing up in small town that many would consider 'hick' and that most young people try to escape, I had always assumed that being considered a 'redneck' was not a desirable thing. Even though there were lots of rednecks in my town (my family included), there were also many that looked down upon the 'country' way of life. After I left my little town and the sheltered bubble it provided, I was surprised to learn that to some being a 'redneck' is idealized and at times even desirable. I first noticed this when I was on Twitter. I follow several country life accounts and I was surprised to see tweets along the lines of, “cruising around in the Benz with the top down listening to country music #countrylife”. This confused me and my inner country girl was yelling, “You can't hashtag country life! You're not even driving a Chevy!”

Through this experience I started thinking about modern country music and what it represents because rednecks and country music tend to go hand in hand. In 2012 country music was one of two music genres that had an increase in sales and five of the ten most popular albums of the year were by country artists. Much of last year's country success was due to Taylor Swift, one of today's most popular artists. Swift alone sold over three million

records. Two other popular country artists of the year were Luke Bryan and Brad Paisley. Bryan also had a successful year selling over one million records and gained over a million followers on Twitter and Brad Paisley enjoyed a similar success. In many of Swift, Bryan, and Paisley's songs it is not uncommon to hear lyrics that reflect the stereotypical image of rednecks and southern belles. Images of tailgates, beer, slamming screen doors, and blondes with blue eyes flicker alongside the fiddles, acoustic guitars, and honkey tonk twang. On the surface it seems that these artists are the perfect representation of what it means to be 'country'. However, if one does a little digging into the background of these stars some interesting facts emerge. Luke Bryan and Brad Paisley are both college educated and come from reasonably well-off families, a contrast to many of the lyrics they sing in their songs. Taylor Swift spent her youth traveling to New York City from her hometown in Pennsylvania to audition for Broadway shows, a far cry from her apparent 'southern roots'. There are many examples of prominent 'country' figures with very different backgrounds than what one would think. Through these stars' backgrounds it would appear that many try and strive to seem 'country', when in reality they may not have the country background that we are lead to believe. This realization surprised me and I began to wonder why people feel this way and why people wanted to be considered 'country', which was at one point was considered low-class and 'trashy'. 'Country' now appears to be more of a popular style that people want and *try* to be rather than an actual social class. This raised many questions in my mind and I wanted answers, so I dusted off my saddle, pulled on my cowgirl boots, and travelled down a red dirt road to find the answers (I apologize, I had to include at least one cheesy country metaphor).

The first question I set out to answer was what exactly makes a 'redneck' or a 'southern belle' and when the terms first come about. According to writer Tom Leland, the term 'redneck' was first used in Scotland in the 17th century and was a slang word for

Scottish Covenanters, or supporters of the National Covenant, that did not agree with the Church of England and wanted the Presbyterian form of government. The supporters of the National Covenant signed documents in their own blood and wore pieces of red cloth around their necks in a form of protest and were thenceforth dubbed 'rednecks'. It is likely that the Scottish immigrants brought the term across the pond with the influx of immigrants to the American colonies in the 17th century. Leland also states that many researchers agree that the term 'redneck' was used in early America in the 17th century to describe white workers in the agricultural sector who toiled under the sun all day and had sunburned necks; thus being called 'rednecks'. The Industrial Revolution played an important part in pinning the term to reflect people from the south. The Industrial Revolution took place mainly in the northern United States which left the farming to southern states that relied heavily on that sector to survive; thus, the term 'redneck' was then centralized and referred mainly to southern 'country folk' or farm workers because that is where the majority of farm work was still being done. In the 17th century the term redneck was used to describe Scottish political rebels and southern farm workers, but both of these things had negative connotations and are a far-cry from the glamorized life of today's redneck elites.

Today's image of a redneck, in a way, still reflects southern farm workers and politics. Artists like Luke Bryan and Brad Paisley sing about those things in their songs there, but as stated before these are 'country folk' that never worked on a farm and are not from the south. Today's modern rednecks and southern belles have come to represent much more than a sunburned farm worker; to many being a redneck or belle symbolizes hard work, faith, independence, and pride. The blog *The Enlightened Redneck* describes the modern redneck's ideals and philosophies as follows:

"It means being independent. It means knowing how to fix things when they break. It means not being helpless outside the modern urban island. It means knowing the difference between right and wrong, and knowing how to apply my best judgment. It means knowing that there

are things more important than my own comfort and my own skin, and that those things are worth fighting and dying for.”

The author of the blog, Danny Glover, says that to be a redneck it does not matter if one is from the south, from the county, or even if one is white. He says that rednecks are black, white, city-slickers, college-educated, self-taught, and can even be from California. Glover says, “It’s never really been about where you’re from, or who you were born to; it’s always been about the decisions you make.” Reading this blog post raised another important question of whether the majority of modern rednecks share the same belief as this self-proclaimed *enlightened* redneck. Throughout history the word has been associated with a distinct group of people, a stark contrast from the inclusive language that Glover preaches.

When discussing the history and the meaning of a redneck, it is hard to ignore the racial/racist implications that the word holds. As stated the term ‘redneck’ was used to describe a white, low-class southern male and left many races and backgrounds out. It is common knowledge that throughout history in the southern United States there were rigid racial tensions in which the term redneck is closely associated. The controversy surrounding this word continues and is still apparent in the current culture of the southern United States. In 2007 in North Carolina at Cordington High School there was a quoted ‘race riot’ in which white students, self-proclaimed and described by the press as ‘rednecks’, fought with their fellow black students over race. In February 2013 in Jacksonville, Florida former spokeswoman for the Duval county public schools, Jill Johnson, was thrust into the spotlight after she described her husband as a redneck. A discrimination complaint was filed against Johnson by Kandra Albury, a black coworker. Speaking about this incident William Link, a professor of history at the University of Florida stated, “African-Americans might regard redneck as a term that may be threatening because of the history of violence perpetrated on blacks, often by a class of whites seen as rednecks — the lynching or urban riots that you had in that period”. Lest we forget about country music superstar and college-educated Brad

Paisley's new single 'Accidental Racist'. The song is a duet with rapper LL Cool J about Paisley, as a white southern man, wearing the Confederate flag on his shirt and what that represents. Paisley sings that it is simply about pride for where you come from and not pride about the history. LL Cool J raps about how it feels for a black man to see a white man sporting the 'red flag'. One of the lyrics reads, "I'd love to buy you a beer, conversate and clear the air but I see that red flag and I think you wish I wasn't here". The main chorus of the songs states:

"'Cause I'm a white man livin' in the southland just like you I'm more than what you see. I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done. And it ain't like you and me can re-write history, Our generation didn't start this nation and we're still paying for mistakes that a bunch of folks made long before we came and caught between southern pride and southern blame".

The song not surprisingly has sparked a controversy. Many say that the song likely came from a good place and if anything if brought the issue out into the light again, but the lyrics are highly controversial. For some the lyrics too controversial. Leonard Pitts, Jr. writing for the Miami Herald commented that in the song Paisley states it is difficult to walk in a black man's shoes and to see things from his side. Pitts calls Paisley out on this stating that he simply never tried to walk in a black man's shoes. While the philosophy of the *Enlightened Redneck* is a hopeful and inclusive definition of the word redneck, based on the current controversies surrounding Paisley's song and similar events, it is likely that not all feel the same way as Dover does.

The historical and modern definition of a redneck is specific and represents a small minority of white, working-class, men. It leaves out other races and classes, but also other genders. When one thinks of a redneck the likely image is of a chubby man, missing his front teeth, and sporting a beer belly. The stereotypical image of women from the country is the complete opposite from the low-class and beer bellied man. A 'southern belle' is a sophisticated, dainty, and beautiful woman. She is usually blonde-haired and blue-eyed,

wears conservative yet fashionable dresses, and sits on her porch carefully sipping lemonade behind a delicate smile. I was intrigued by this stark contrast to the male 'country' stereotype. I wondered how the 'belles' come to be and the expectations that they represent for 'country' women. I found that the history and the ideals of southern belles are quite different than those of rednecks and rather show the women's role in our society now and throughout history.

The term southern belle first came about in the 19th century after the civil war. The war ravaged the American south and its people were defeated and frail. New laws and immigrants from the north challenged the south's traditions and culture, especially the culture surrounding slavery and plantation life; the very culture that the south had fought so hard to maintain. Historians believe that the southern belle was created as a way to idealize and maintain the memory of the antebellum south. Many experts argue that because of this 'southern belles' never actually existed, but rather existed through the literature of the time. Perhaps the best example of a southern belle can be found in the ultimate classic film *Gone with the Wind* adopted from the nostalgic novel of the antebellum south by Margaret Mitchell. The quintessential southern belle is the novel's main character Scarlet O'Hara. Scarlet is the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner and she represents the perfect southern woman. She is charming, classy, and beautiful. Throughout the novel and film, O'Hara overcomes every hardship and obstacle that comes her way by using her infamous charm. At one point in the movie Scarlet tries very hard to cover the fact that she has been working outside in order to go visit her love interest, Rhett, to get his help in saving her family's plantation. When Scarlet goes to visit Rhett, he talks of how Scarlet represents everything wonderful about the south and essentially how she is the perfect southern belle. At one point Rhett touches Scarlet's hands and finds that they are calloused because she has been working in the fields and he is put-off by this realization. This example raises an interesting question regarding gender roles within the 'country' lifestyle.

Throughout history the traditional roles of men and women have been clearly defined. It was not until the past several decades that the roles between men and women began to intertwine. Typically, it was assumed that men have jobs in order to make money and provide for their families, while women tend to the house and care for the children. This can be seen in *Gone with the Wind* because Rhett was turned-off by the fact that Scarlet had been working, and there are uncountable other examples of this scattered throughout history. As much as there has been large steps taken in favor of blurring gender roles, in this regard the 'country' lifestyle still appears behind. Many current country music songs still talk about how daddy works hard and momma is at home. I wondered if this could be the reason why the contrast exists between rednecks and southern belles. Under the 'country' lifestyle the ideal for men is to be hard-working providers for their families, which is also essentially what the stereotypical redneck represents. The ideal for 'country' women is that they do not work but stay at home with the children and keep up appearances, which is traditionally what a southern belle does. I believe that this is the key to understanding why the 'country' lifestyle is idealized and strived for today. In our world that is ever-changing with new cultures and ways of life evolving every day, being 'country' represents tradition and an ideal embedded in previous cultures of the United States.

Today there are many cultural occurrences that may challenge the values and ideals behind the 'country' lifestyle. There has been a strong push to enforce stricter gun laws, little-by-little our society is taking steps to legalize gay marriage, women have a strong presence in the workforce, farms are forced to close, and factory jobs are being sent overseas. 'Country' foundations such as the right to bear arms, Christianity, traditional gender roles, and hard work at a blue collar jobs are being challenged. I believe all of this contributes to the upswing of success in country music and is also why people who wouldn't traditionally be considered

'country' are hashtagging country life in their Mercedes and calling themselves rednecks and southern belles.

When we consider the history of the terms 'redneck' and 'southern belle' it is clear that they both represent traditional ideals. The redneck is desirable because he is hard-working and strong-willed, and the southern belle is desirable because she is beautiful and classy. It's no wonder that people want to associate themselves with the 'country' way of life. Who wouldn't want to be considered hard-working and beautiful? I think this is why in popular culture today there are college-educated artists singing about dead-end jobs, farms, and their mommas. It is not about actually about being a redneck or actually growing up in the south, it is more about how what a redneck represents and being associated with those traditional values. It is similar, I believe, to what *The Enlightened Redneck* Danny Glover was trying to say in his blog; that it is not about watching NASCAR and going to church on Sundays, but rather holding on to and belonging to a traditional culture.

My aim in all of this was not to make fun of or prolong the 'country' stereotypes, but rather to understand the history and mentality behind them. This was a particularly interesting study for me, as I stated previously, I grew up in a small-town with the quintessential redneck for a father and for a majority of my life I identified myself with the 'country' lifestyle. It was not until I left my hometown that I began to question what it actually meant and why others who did not have a similar background to mine also choose to identify themselves with a similar lifestyle. The conclusion that I hope can be drawn from this is that being a redneck or a southern belle is more than what it seems on the surface. There are racial implications and facepalms associated with the terms that cannot and should not be ignored, but underneath there is a traditional culture that comes from humbleness and hard work. I think that this area of American society is worth more investigation, as I fear that this piece may have raised more questions than it answered. Particularly surrounding the racial implications associated

with the lifestyle. I very briefly grazed this topic, simply because it was too big to tackle in a small essay but too important to ignore. Another area that may be interesting to research that is not addressed in this piece is the idea of patriotism and how it is typically associated with country music and the 'country' lifestyle. Through all of this research, I came to the realization that with my background and new ways of thinking, I may also be an *enlightened redneck*. But then again based off of the examples we studied, you might also be a redneck if you simply consider yourself one by holding on to traditional values.

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