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# NASCAR and the “Southernization” of America: Spectatorship, Subjectivity, and the Confederation of Identity

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Written against the backdrop of the exploding popularity of NASCAR auto racing, the authors argue that the American South’s post-Emancipation mediated history—and the signifiers through which it has been mediated—legislate a lingua franca of White privilege, White supremacy, and patriarchal hegemony. Under the auspices of a seemingly natural “heritage culture,” the authors surmise that “the South” actively stands for *something*. The authors use this article to make the case that when it is brought to life by way of public spectacle, such as the spectacles of the neo-Confederate sporting local, this imaginary South resurrects the power structures that have long influenced the lived experiences of the region. They conclude by arguing that under the auspices of a Bush-inspired, post-9/11, anti-affirmative action backlash, a hyper-White, neo-Confederate NASCAR gives license to the resurgent regimes of the most vigilant factions of the ethnocentric American White Right.

**Keywords:** *NASCAR; neoliberalism; neoconservatism; Whiteness; Southern culture*

NASCAR is a breakout sports sensation. It is also—let’s just come right out and say it—the Whitest sport in America. The drivers are White, the pit crews are White, and it has become a cliché to note that at most races, Confederate flags outnumber African American fans. For good or bad...at a time when professional sports seems to be embracing hip-hop culture, NASCAR is heading in precisely the opposite direction.

—Nevius (2003, p. CM12)

In his bestselling sojourn, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches From the Unfinished Civil War*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tony Horwitz (1999) offers a timely journalistic anthropology of a contemporary American South still

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wrestling with the last vestiges of an antebellum-borne, Jim Crow-era-refined, and segregationist-practiced social and cultural history. Making use of sharp prose and an exhaustive sociological fascination, Horwitz guides his readers through the negotiations and contestations of everyday life within the region—stopping along the way to mediate on both the enchantments of a charming regional vernacularism and the specters of recalcitrant racism and hyperpatriarchal sexism that still haunt the life experiences of many Southerners. Perhaps most importantly, *Confederates in the Attic* offers inspection—and to some degree, introspection<sup>1</sup>—of the ways in which the spaces (many of which remain segregated), symbols (such as the Confederate flag), identities (located in the discursive disgorges of terms such as “redneck,” “nigger,” “hillbilly,” and the like), and histories (both recovered collective memory and revised traditionalism) of the Old South incontrovertibly constitute the region’s current cultural and political economies.

The principal objective of Horwitz’s (1999) book, since followed by a growing quantity of like-themed manuscripts that have made their way to press in recent years (cf. Blight, 2001; Goldfield, 2002; J. M. McPherson, 2007), seems to be fixed on illuminating the “meaningfulness” of Southern identity and the reemergence of what the author refers to as a “neo-Confederate” Southern eth(n)ic. This strand of neo-Confederate recalcitrance is thrust forward in two parts: (a) as a reclamation of masculine White privilege resuscitated in imaginaries of a modern-day supremacist Southern faction; and (b) as a much softer romanticization of Southern “tradition,” the gentility of plantation life, and, to quote from the slave minstrel “Dixie,” “old times there not forgotten.”

Although it may seem that the parochial nature of such an intellectual project reaches its limits in the explanatory theses of local identity and tradition, in light of a recent upsurge of all things “Southern” in the North American popular, this striation of inquiry paints a much wider brushstroke across a contextually specific post-9/11 conjuncture that has come to increasingly inhabit the spaces of everyday life beyond the (fictionalized) “heart of Dixie.” Indeed, the “conservative values” of a “proto-fascist” Christian “moral majority” (cf. Diamond, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Goldberg, 2007; Hedges, 2007; Kaplan, 2005), the “red state” polity of cowboy politicians (i.e., George W. Bush; cf. Phillips, 2006), the “redneck” balladry of country western crooners (i.e., Gretchen Wilson or early Dixie Chicks), the “blue collar” humor of Southern comedians (i.e., Jeff Foxworthy, Larry the Cable Guy, or Rodney Carrington), and the hyper-White physicalities of the idealized Southern sporting Man(ning) (i.e., NFL Super Bowl-winning quarterbacks Peyton and Eli Manning) now dominate the public sphere. Thus, it would be hard to argue against the notion that in contemporary America, the South (or, at least, a particular discursive iteration thereof) has indeed “risen again.”

Considering the contextually specific import of all things Southern, a more meaningful theme emerges in Horwitz’s (1999) contemplations as well as those of his contemporaries: The current popularization of the South has been used to suture the political and economic imperatives of free-market capitalism to broader contortions of what has commonly been referred to as “neoconservatism” (and

vice versa).<sup>2</sup> And following Horwitz's conclusions, it could be posited that the socio-geographic dimensions of the South—those of White supremacist biker bars in Kentucky, of Confederate flag rallies in South Carolina, and the sprawling plantations of many of Dixie's "genteel elite" spread throughout the region—have provided a cultural seedling from which national (and indeed global) hyper-White, hypermasculine, (neo)conservative mediated identities have been sowed, nurtured, and, in terms of political and cultural capital, harvested. As this imaginary, emergent South has expanded and become reified through the multi-platform, hyper-mediated dealings of Hollywood film houses, Fox News Channel, Comedy Central, the popular diatribes of conservative writers, and other popular media machinations, it has brought with it new pedagogies of "what it means to be a Southerner" (Cash, 1941/1991; Faust, 1988; Foster, 1987; Hale, 1999; Hoelscher, 2003; Hufford, 2002; T. McPherson, 2003; Williamson, 1984).

In turn, this imaginary South—as an accumulation of physical, social, and cultural spaces—has been transformed into a highly commercialized, deeply politicized space of identity and identification, one that is inextricably linked to a broader neoconservative ideology that currently saturates the North American popular political sphere (T. McPherson, 2003; Reed, 1986; Wagner, 2002). In George W. Bush's neoconservative America, where policies and rhetoric are created to stimulate economic growth under free market regimes of (corporate) capital accumulation, the symbolic South has been transformed into cultural tender for *reproducing the conditions of production and consumption*. That is, the South, in its numerous discursive iterations, has been refinanced as the acculturated currency of Bush-era corporate capitalism by way of the identity politics of a "White masculine global patriarchy" (Kusz, 2007, p. 79). Under such a neoconservatism, "corporate America" as tautology now extracts political and economic capital out of these Southern-identity politics (through album sales, pickup truck brands, campaign fundraising, Wal-Mart merchandising, the collection plate on Sunday, and so forth)—to the point that the process of identification itself is governed by the laws of the market through active forms of consumption. In short, Southerners (and non-Southerners alike) now buy their local identities back from (non-Southern) corporations and politicians alike.

This contextually specific confederation of Southern culture, neoconservative polity, and neoliberal economics is perhaps most apparent with respect to the prevailing imaginaries of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, or what is more commonly referred to by the acronym NASCAR. At an impasse of a contemporary North American sportscape constituted by a National Basketball Association languishing in a post-Michael Jordan malaise, a Major League Baseball hacking away at its own steroid-injected (stag)nation (e.g., the controversy surrounding Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, and the Mitchell Report), the legal spectacles and cheating scandals of the National Football League (e.g., Michael Vick, Adam "Pacman" Jones, Bill Belichick, etc.), and a waning interest in professional hockey following the 2004–2005 lock-out (and subsequent loss of its ESPN broadcast agreement), NASCAR has witnessed an accelerated rise to the upper-echelon of the North American sporting popular.

Often lauded as “America’s fastest-growing sport,” NASCAR has successfully translated the provincial, if not seemingly bucolic, nuances of Southern sport culture into a highly consumable (and consumed) mass-mediated universe of driver-celebrities, primetime network “reality TV” melodramas, merchandise with corporate logos, and 200,000-fan weekly mega-events. NASCAR is now in the second year of an 8-year, \$4.8-billion TV contract with ABC/ESPN, Fox/SPEED, and Turner networks, with Nielsen ratings for these telecasts surpassing all other televised sport content except professional football (Lemke, 2005). NASCAR owns 17 of the top 20 attended sporting events held the United States and has 75 million fans who purchase more than \$2 billion in annual licensed products (“Irwindale Speedway,” 2004). Also, NASCAR events are broadcast in 150 countries in more than 20 languages (“NASCAR Partners With TSN,” 2007).

However, there is more to the rise of NASCAR than viewership numbers and earnings statements. In contemporary sport culture, NASCAR is made important, and simultaneously problematic, by its Southern dialects and dialectics. Stepping outside the benevolent musings of most who contribute to the popular discourse on the subject, syndicated *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, C. W. Nevius (2003), recently suggested that this seemingly natural synergy of NASCAR, the contemporary American South, and the sport’s (nearly) exclusively White spectatorship has not only advanced the sport’s popularity but made for a more lucrative enterprise.

Could there be an undercurrent of racism to NASCAR’s popularity? Consider, 4 out of 5 NBA players are African American, 67% of NFL players are minorities, and last season, 23% of Major League Baseball players were born in Spanish-speaking countries (an increase of 40% from 1989). All of those sports, except football, are experiencing a dip in popularity. Meanwhile, the conspicuously white NASCAR is on an unprecedented run up the profit chart. (p. CM12)

In what follows, we argue that NASCAR has been, and continues to be, a significant cultural technology in the processes of signification through which new, neo-conservative Southern identities are constructed. We make the case that modern day stockcar spectacles legislate a lingua franca of White privilege and White supremacy (not to mention hegemonic patriarchy) under the auspices of a seemingly natural “heritage culture.” In more succinct terms, we surmise that “the South” *stands for something* in contemporary NASCAR: It symbolizes and represents the confluence of a romanticized history of White privilege and a localized (re)mediation of (neo)conservatism. These re-articulations of an imaginary “South” resurrect the “mystic chords” of a collective memory (Kammen, 1993), a new “Southern-ness” that is constituted by a *mélange* of time (new identities and old power structures) and space (local subjectivity and global plurality), and whereby the burgeoning sport of stockcar racing currently articulates an *Old* South cultural vernacular and racialized power structure with more recently popularized neoconservative identity politics.

As the epigraph to this article suggests, then, the sport’s almost exclusively White fan base—both as product and producer of this particular, discursively constituted

(while at the same time imagined and performed), overtly White American South aesthetic—has positioned NASCAR as the preferred sporting fare for an overrepresentative faction of the United States' conservative White majority. And under the auspices of a Bush-inspired, post-9/11, anti-affirmative action backlash, "the South's national pastime" at once gives license to the resurgent regimes of the most vigilant factions of the ethnocentric (American) White Right while simultaneously profiting off of the race-based identity politics imbedded therein.

In the tradition of radical contextualism (Andrews, 2006; Grossberg, 2005), we strip bare the seemingly naturalized spaces, spectacles, and identities of NASCAR to reveal the cultural politics and politics of oppression that underpin the (sport) cultures of this (Southernized) American popular. To do this, we examine the cultural and sporting fulcrum of the neo-Confederate South—"NASCAR Nation:" a double entendre that refers to both an imagined spectator community dominated by "rural, small-town, mostly White, Southern fans of America's fastest growing spectator sport" (Derbyshire, 2003, p. 29) and to the broader idioms of American nationalism, which are concurrently and dialectically bound to the same precepts of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. In the consonance of the term's multiplicity of meaning—whereby it is quite common within the sport and beyond to refer to stock car racing fans as members of "NASCAR Nation" and also to evoke the term in describing the political and cultural trajectory of a national imaginary mesmerized by a strategically controlled, theocratized cultural technology that normalizes the moral, political, economic, and ideological dimensions of George W. Bush's post-9/11 brand of neoconservatism—lies the problem that we seek to address. This interchangeability is bound by two interrelated (Southern) banalities: the cultural veneer glossed over apoliticized renditions of the South and the seemingly ludic nature of regionalized (read: racialized) sport spectatorship.

Drawing on observations taken during a year-long ethnography,<sup>3</sup> we strip the spaces and spectacles of stock car racing from the banal axioms that constitute membership in each "Nation"—or what Lauren Berlant (1997) more accurately refers to as a discursive articulation of *citizenship*. Correlatively, we explore how, in both the "NASCAR Nation" of Brian France (the chairman and CEO of NASCAR) and the mediated public sphere of George W. Bush's "Southernized America," subjectivity is (re)organized around the normative amalgamation of masculinity, Whiteness, and neo-Confederate regionalism. In so doing, we mean to unsettle those shared values, identities, commodities, and experiences constructed in and through the spaces and spectacles of "NASCAR Nation." More important, we formulate an analysis of the ways in which those ideologies, wares, and subjective practices that dominate "NASCAR Nation" are both *shared* and *performed*. In simple terms, this is a study of the NASCAR spectacle as a revelatory site for (a) the constitution of subjectivity and (b) the construction of identity in a post-9/11 American empire defined by rampant global capitalism under the throws of neoliberalism and a resurgent sociocultural fundamentalism under the auspices of neoconservatism. Although these two processes are most often situated as antithetical to one another—particularly in the digressions of agency versus structure,

autonomy versus determinacy, and the local versus the global—we aim to implode such a diametric logic. We examine these dialectics of neoconservatism and neoliberalism and the mutually reinforcing processes by and through which each is made normal in the spectacles and spaces of NASCAR. In sum, we explore the borderland between the subject and subjectivity, particularly as located within the physical, imaged, and performative spaces of “NASCAR Nation.”

### Theorizing the Semiotic Geometry of “NASCAR Nation”

Perhaps the best starting point for an analysis of the spaces of NASCAR’s neo-Confederacy is by outlining the conceptual origins and meanings of the notion of space and delineating the distinctions between “space” and “place.” At the collision of the juggernaut of late capitalism as context (cf. Giddens, 1990; Jameson, 2001; Mandel, 1975) and postpositivism as paradigm (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000), one of the more substantial contributions to the conceptualization<sup>4</sup> of space and place was formulated by Michel de Certeau. For de Certeau (1984), the former can be understood as a kind of locus, specifically as “a plane, which is the order in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence” (p. 117). Place is the cognitive, dynamic, representational, codified, and signified mechanism of meaning in practice. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) surmised that “place is constituted by a system of signs” (p. 117). In navigating the relation between place and space, de Certeau located the notion of space as a frequented system of the experienced, mobilized by and understood as an “intersection of moving bodies” (cf. Augé, 1995). In one sense, then, space is a physical and imagined geography constituted by dynamic elements that meet, intersect, unite, cross each other, or diverge. Or, as de Certeau (1984) posited, “space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (p. 117). Taken together, the relationship between space and place can be described in this way: Place is a “fixed position,” and space is a “realm of practices” (Crang, 2000, p. 138); or, more simply put, “*space is practiced place*” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117; emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup>

This relationship between space and place is located at the heart of the NASCAR problematic, as the signification processes acting on spectating subjects demarcate stock car spaces as *places in “NASCAR Nation”*—places that reveal a reactionary neoconservative moral order and collective fears of the Other. On race day, hundreds of thousands of (almost exclusively White) NASCAR fans filter through super speedway venues that are cloaked with Confederate flags, anti-immigrant banners and T-shirts, racist paraphernalia, and backlash narratives. NASCAR fans are often lauded by marketing mavens and sociologists alike for their proclivity toward all forms of emblemization: adorning their bodies with corporate insignias, blanketing their automobiles with flags of sporting and national imageries, and conjuring up performative texts of a unique, overtly fanatical sporting citizenship. In this way, gear, garb, banners, consumable wares, and the symbolic fabric of sporting Whiteness transform the racetrack space into



a veritable village of racially coded signifiers, a neo-Confederate "place" whereby Whiteness is normalized and made powerful and where identities of difference are pushed onto the margins. Here in the spectacular, on the visible plane of what Jean Baudrillard (1983) might refer to as the "frontal" representations of NASCAR space, the complex assemblage of artificial signifiers and human movement—from the preponderance of corporate logos to the layout of buildings and pathways to the flow and deportment of bodies therein—is manufactured to reproduce the dominant ideological fanaticism of a neoliberal/neoconservative conjuncture to which each is equally bound.

We have seen this before. In his seminal work on the physical spaces of the industrial-era Parisian arcades, Walter Benjamin (1999) situated the blurred dyadic of commercial and ideological spaces within the notion of "phantasmagoria." For Benjamin (1999), this type of phantasmagoria was an archipelago of "rapidly shifting scenes of real or imagined things" (p. 9), forever swarming, constantly charming, always seducing the consumer subject. Within what one might call the "NASCAR Arcades," the hyperconsumerist impetuses of neoliberalism are layered onto the visceral geography, forging an inseparable bond that beckons the consumerist *flâneur* into a corporate sport phantasmagoria, an enchanted capitalist dreamworld that stimulates both reflexes of alienation (and the opportunity to escape that alienation and connect to the imagined NASCAR collective through the consuming and signifying act) and the (restrictive) exclusivity of citizenship (cf. Benjamin, 1969).<sup>6</sup> That is to say, NASCAR's racetrack spaces offer fans more than a natural or neutral spectator venue (indeed, no such space exists in the Disney-fied, commercialized sporting contemporary): Instead, an intricate assemblage of images, experiences, geometric order(s), and social relations mediate the nodes of engagement by which spectator identities are formulated; and through which the mechanisms of consumer capital are made powerful and the identity politics of neoconservatism's moral-political rationality are made meaningful (more on this later).

In the "central business districts" of "NASCAR Nation" (i.e., the raceway and its commercial armatures), the flow of human bodies and human interaction is organized around—if not made cohesive by—the logics of consumer capitalism (cf. Friedman, Andrews, & Silk, 2004; Ritzer & Stillman, 2001; Soja, 1989). Our observations of a race in Martinsville, Virginia, speak to the engineering principles of these stock car pseudo-cities.

There is an abundance of entry points into the expansive village surrounding the track....Fans are not required to show credentials or tickets to gain access to the activities or merchandising tents that encompass the track. Once in these areas, tens of thousands of people weave through the maze of merchandising trailers, interactive games, and "NASCAR experiences." Although the rows of merchandising trailers snake around the hills outside the track, creating a uni-directional path leading to the gates of the track, VIP tents and "Hot Pass" areas are restricted to those subjected to corporate entertainment or those who have paid large sums of money to gain access. Signs stating *Entry Prohibited* and *Not Open to the Public* meet those who deviate from the preconfigured course of movement. (Fieldnotes, June 22, 2007)<sup>7</sup>



In these conceived NASCAR spaces, physical space is structured so that spectator fans are allowed open access to the various sites of ancillary consumption (merchandise, media technologies, concessions, etc.) and restricted from other spaces requiring “credentials” (representative of both active consumption and signifiers of social [classed] belonging) to gain access. On race days, the NASCAR track and the bodies flowing through its surrounding physical spaces are not only transformed into corpses of commodification (in the archaic, living sense) but are also indeed themselves commodified—a gesticulating materiality that gives way to consumer-driven material culture. In this way, representations of NASCAR space create a spatiality that is conceived in the mold of an asphalt shopping mall, where “invariably ideology, power and knowledge are embedded in this representation” (Merrifield, 2000, p. 174).

Meaningful praxis within this playground of consumerism is organized through a series of concentric circles of capital, starting at the epicenter: a circular track filled with moving billboards careening at 200 mph and jam-packed with consumer revelers of the highest devotion (those willing to pay up to \$20,000 for the “opportunity” to be “in the pits”); surrounded by a grandstand packed with corporate embossed bodies and undergirded by a phantasmagoria of concession-based foodstuffs and merchandised wares; and ultimately encircled by an outer crust of encircled spectator bodies encircling the cylindrical arcade filled with Exxon-embroidered leather jackets, Bud-logoed beer cozies, and “Race Girl” bikinis. Ironically, active consumerism and the adornment of corporatized “badges” of citizenship represent not only the convergence of spectator–consumer identity, NASCAR driver celebrity, and corporate sponsors’ benevolence but also the exaltation of prevailing hegemonic structures of neoliberal corporate capitalism (see also Newman & Giardina, in press). As we noted in one of our early observations from a NASCAR race track in Richmond, Virginia,

The presence of corporate logos, corporate hospitality tents, and corporate merchandise—ranging from Skoal to Crown Royal to the latest HDTV technologies—is staggering. The ancillary commercial spaces span the perimeter of the track, which is nearly one mile in circumference. Interestingly, NASCAR fans and spectators engage these highly commercialized spaces as if they are part of the sporting event, arriving at the track hours before the race to take in the temporary shopping mall of NASCAR sponsoring wares and experiences. Even more interesting is the considerable diffusion of corporate signifiers through the ornamentation of the spectating body with these same symbols. In a procession of the commodified corporeal, these spectators parade toward the NASCAR spectacle and its mesmerizing qualities. (Field notes, October 22, 2006)

## Contextualizing NASCAR’s Neo-Confederacy

### *Flags on the Infield*

The consumptive spatial orientation of capitalist relations at NASCAR events outlined above is important to understand when we consider that, more than any

other North American professional sport entity, there is an *equally* powerful hyper-commercial spectacle of *neo-Confederate* signs, symbols, and ideologies at work in these spaces (Wetzel, 2006). In the first instance, the Confederate symbol, much like the corporate insignias that cloak NASCAR's celebrity drivers, extracts "sign value" as a socially profitable marker of citizenship. In the same way as iconic logos of corporate sponsors operate as extensions of neoliberal corporate capitalism, the symbols of the (neo-)Confederacy are adorned, consumed, and mediated by spectating bodies at NASCAR races act as extensions of neoconservative Whiteness.<sup>8</sup>

As such, the flag as signifier has evolved into a culturally powerful signifier with both a dominant, or preferred, reading and a resistive, or oppositional, reading. The preferred reading for those tens of thousands of (exclusively White) flag-waving consumers of the Confederacy is hence encoded in the discourses of power, racial hierarchy, and neo-Confederate narcissism. In this way, consumption, signification (of body and space), and all-consuming presence of the flag at most NASCAR events discursively reinforces the dominant meaning of the symbol as marker of a White Southern pride and heritage and the "preferred" place of White identities within these spaces. Although popular counternarrative of the flag as marginalizing, oppressive, iniquitous, symbolically violent symbol is gaining credence within the public sphere (e.g., the declarations offered by conservative politicians such as Republican Presidential candidate John McCain and old-time sport icons such as University of South Carolina head football coach Steve Spurrier), such a discourse of resistance is entirely absent from NASCAR spaces.

However, the plurality of the flag is perhaps less important than its collective affectivity—and the effective collectivity of those subjectivities located under its sway. As Adorno (1991) suggested, what any given cultural product means to any individual matters less than the overall organization of power through these forms of public culture. As such, the cultural power of the flag as a representative symbol of "NASCAR Nation" lies in its effectiveness as a *marker of territories*—the territories of race and the imaginary citizenships of a dominant ethnic (NASCAR) nationalism that has historically acted on social relations in the region (and beyond).<sup>9</sup> And, as most NASCAR fans would attest, if the number of Confederate symbols at each race is any indicator, "*NASCAR Nation*" is a *(neo-)Confederate state*. Our observations from a race in the fall of 2006 at a Southern racetrack echo those of sports journalist Dan Wetzel (2006), who wrote after attending a race in Talladega, Alabama, "In America...a NASCAR race is the last major sporting event where the Stars and Bars is still so prevalent, still so prominent" (p. 1).

The Confederate flag is incontrovertibly imbedded in the socio-spatial fabric of NASCAR. Looking out over the vast expanse of temporal domiciles congregated for the race, a considerable number (literally thousands, in total) are adorned by some semblance of the "Stars and Bars." There are renditions of the Old South signifier flying all around, often (ironically) situated next to the American flag, in the vast expanse of NASCAR symbols, and often incorporating sport and non-sport icons of today in evoking a distinctively Southernized, in not hyper-racist phantasmagoria. (Fieldnotes, September 9, 2006)

In this instance, the congruity in meaning between White bodies' performing identity within "NASCAR Nation" and the Confederate symbolic authorizes a dominant neo-Confederate accord between this brand of signified and practiced neo-conservative (Southern) Whiteness. It creates a "sense of belonging to an imagined community" (Coombe, 1998, p. 33); it unites the collective configuration of idealized Southern Whiteness under the banner of historical dominance. This racialization of space and spatialization of racist, genetic entrepreneurialism (the inheritance industries of White privilege) is given currency by symbolic knowledge, nostalgia, and power; a cultural currency through which journalists, political officials, religious leaders, and governing bodies have intervened in attempts to either reconnect, or disconnect, the flag's representational politics from the South's incendiary material history. In turn, this symbolic territorialization of NASCAR tracks and their ancillary spaces as an exclusively White, neo-Confederate place gives a geometric power to the prevailing idioms of Whiteness (and White supremacy). In other words, within these neo-Confederate spaces of "NASCAR Nation," meaning is not produced through the free play of signifiers alone. The sign empowers and dis-empowers, based on the artificial link made between the individual and the racialized, commodified (we will return to this later) symbol. The 'Rebel flag' thus authorizes an antiquated power structure and rearticulates the normative discourses of identity and ownership within this American South region and beyond while simultaneously reinscribing the regimes of symbolic violence which alienated and oppressed Southern brown- and black-bodied 'Others' under its dominion (Bonner, 2002; Coski, 2005).

In the same way that the Confederate flag resurfaced in the South during the Civil Rights era—and particularly in spaces of White privilege—the meaningfulness of the flag is sutured to the context in which it is being evoked. Kristen Ross (1988) suggests that signified space such as that found at NASCAR tracks "is not an immutable thing. It is made, it is remade, every day" (p. 91) through social practice. The interactions of the body—or embodied practice—and anthropological space coagulate to create an *aura* of 'place,' a sense of representational location grounded in the logics of White-bodied collectivity, the [naturalized] non-existence of non-White spectator-subjects, and the iniquitous antiquities that give a discursive palate to these logics. At NASCAR events, signifying practice and practices of signification manifest themselves in multifarious form and function. Spectators paste a number of topical Confederate- and Southern-themed signifiers on the personal spaces they inhabit—from their automobiles, to their temporary quarters in NASCAR's many campgrounds and RV parks, to their (performance-based) physicalities (Field notes).

But it goes beyond the Confederate flag itself. Throughout our travels in "NASCAR Nation," we encountered a proliferation of what Roland Barthes (1967) might refer to as "logotechniques" of a conspicuous reclamation of productive power imbedded in neo-Confederate identity politics. As researcher-*flâneurs* wandering about the spaces surrounding NASCAR tracks (in the spirit of a situationist *dérivé*), we encountered temporal, domestic, and corporeal spaces emblazoned with a vast array of White reclamation narratives and projects—namely, in

the form of bumper stickers, T-shirt script, banners, and other artifacts of visual culture, such as the following:

- "Stop Southern cultural cleansing";
- "It's not racial, it's regional" (accompanied by an outline of the states of the Confederacy);
- "I'm offended that you're offended" (set against a Confederate flag backdrop);
- "Politically correct is another way of sayin' anti-Southern";
- "I love the flag and car racin";
- "Heritage not hate";
- "My ancestors fought the first terrorists" (suggestive of the "War of Northern Aggression");
- "Pride not prejudice";
- "We may be politically incorrect, but we vote too";
- "You've got your 'X,' We've got ours" (alluding to Malcolm X versus the Confederate flag); and
- "Hey y'all, remember, racin' is a Southern sport." (Fieldnotes, multiple dates)

These signifying acts, each of which was conjoined in illustrative form to some element of the Confederate symbolic, speak to a prevailing logic in contemporary "NASCAR Nation." *White bodies* in almost exclusively *White spaces* are "under attack" and are calling upon the socio-political magazine of post-9/11 reactionary rhetoric in the fight to maintain their entitlement.

Thus, and as a floating signifier of a contextually specific passage of both neo-conservative moral-political rationality and neoliberal polity (embodied though the spectacularized practices of Southern Whiteness), the Confederate flag acts as a "signature of authenticity"; it "registers a real contact, a making, a moment of imprinting" (Coombe, 1998, p. 169). As one of the authors concluded in field notes from the spring 2007 race in Darlington, South Carolina,

The flag seems to symbolically locate *every* fan or spectator within the boundaries of Southern heritage. By way of its omnipresence, it simultaneously offers an imaginary space through which the track and its surrounding areas can be connected to popular constructions of Southern Whiteness. The flag is everywhere—on tents and trailers, on spectating bodies (both by way of adornment of T-shirts and ball caps and literally tattooed onto the flesh). Today's race featured an aircraft flying high above the track, pulling behind it a large banner that read: "Don't Forget Your Roots." The few "bodies of difference" at the race avoid spaces where the Confederate symbol is most intense. As the flag canvases both the geometric spaces outside the track and the corporeal spaces within, it infuses race and privilege into those spaces. In these spaces, White privilege reigns supreme. (Fieldnotes, May 13, 2007).

Importantly, these geometric features and signifying acts bind the dominant subject position (Southern, White) to a collective sense of place activated by the discursive stylings (symbols, narratives, spatial configurations) and cognitive reflexes (collective memory of the Old South romantic) of performative spectatorship. It must also be pointed out that the uncontested, normalized nature of the Old South symbolic and the unequivocal White exclusivity in these spaces are

undoubtedly not lost on non-White subject-spectators who en masse stay away from these events.

This spatialization of the corporeal is problematic when those symbols of “Dixie South Whiteness” (Newman, 2007) and those conspicuous practices of racial exclusivity organize the signified constellation under which this unity in spatial discourse is constructed. As Lefebvre (1991a) postulated, “Every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and non-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical. In short, every social space has a history” (p. 110). The spatial imaginations of NASCAR spectator-subjects are dialectically intertwined in the perceived and experienced possibilities of the neoconservative, post-9/11 signifying system from which the track and its ancillary geography as place are immersed.

To such an end, the exclusionary racialized performances of many of NASCAR’s neo-Confederate subjects come into sharp relief by way of ephemeral spectacles of White supremacy in and around the track space. For example, when shopping for the “hottest merchandise” in one of the *NASCAR-sanctioned retail spaces* outside the track, we encountered the “Top Ten” apparel vendor. One of the T-shirts on offer from the vendor at the 2007 Darlington race was imprinted with the following racist mockery:

“TOP TEN REASONS There’s No Black Race Car Drivers”

10. Have to sit UPRIGHT when driving.
  9. PISTOL won’t stay under front seat.
  8. Engine drowns out the RAP MUSIC.
  7. Pit crew can’t work on car while HOLDING PANTS up at the same time.
  6. They keep trying to CARJACK Dale Jr.
  5. POLICE CARS on track interfere with race.
  4. No passenger seat for the HO.
  3. There are no sponsors for CADILLAC.
  2. Can’t wear HELMET SIDEWAYS.
- and the #1 Reason why BLACKS can’t be Race Car Drivers:
1. When they crash their car, they can’t BAIL OUT and RUN.

Although our empirical encounters would suggest that many within “NASCAR Nation” would cringe at this callous, racist imprint, the shirt (as well as numerous other garments of an equally detestable bent) nevertheless maintained a conspicuous, uncontested presence at the Darlington race. It was, as the vendor proclaimed, “one of [his] best-sellers” (Fieldnotes, May 12, 2007). More to the point, symbolic wares of this nature are commonplace, *almost normalized*, markers of identity within most events in “NASCAR Nation” (and particularly those in Darlington, SC; Bristol, TN; and Talladega, AL).

In the imaginary and geometric realms of “Sweet Home Alabama,” these types of costumes—often sutured to the Confederate banner in its endless iconic permutations—have come to signify both the centrality of Whiteness and the control over “embodied otherness” (Bishop, 2001, p. 32). Moreover, NASCAR fans are commonly subjected to (and consume) “best-selling” neo-Confederate

brand accoutrements such as, "If the South would have won, we'd have it made!" and the number "8" (Dale Earnhardt, Jr.'s, number) or the number "3" (his father's number) positioned in center of the "Southern Cross." As signified commodities, these goods affix the authority of Whiteness squarely in the politics of race and exclusion in "NASCAR Nation." Furthermore, they reify the central position of the Confederate flag and other symbols of White supremacy, and particularly those that mark the spectating bodies of "NASCAR Nation," in a discursive conjoining of the sign, the social institutions of race and racism, and the hegemonic social construction of signified White privilege.

### *Re-mediating NASCAR's "Diversity"*

Interestingly, although these and numerous other symbolic iterations of the Confederacy swirl about the spaces of "NASCAR Nation," most fans seem to have amended or reconciled the race- and slavery-based impetuses for which the Confederate-symbolic stands. Those who would actively use the NASCAR spectacle for their neo-Confederated ends performatively and emphatically reject the general consensus among most Civil War historians that slavery indeed held primacy for the "Lost Cause," and instead place the burden of "ignorance" squarely on the side of "bleeding heart," "Yankee," politically correct, "femi-Nazi" liberals (Field notes). And thus, as the neo-Confederated super speedway space is transformed into a discursive formation evoking a normalized post-plantation aesthetic, in the same instance it operationalizes signifying action therein to create a quasi-sterilized, strategically intermediated cosmos of solidarity under the arches of Southern Whiteness. In other words, many NASCAR spectators, and particularly those of a hyper-Southern resolve, have constructed a spectacular phantasmagoria of "heritage, not hate" and "pride, not prejudice"; (re)mediating the meaning of the flag in the order of a dominant, Southern, White (often masculine) cultural history and silencing that history and its critics by taking ownership of the spatialized discursive formation through which such a knowledge/power dynamic is forged. This resuscitation of the Old South, or what many scholars have referred to as a cultural "revisionism" (Ayers, 1993; Barrett, 2005; Bonner, 2002; Bontemps, 2001; Cowden, 2001; Egerton, 1974; Faust, 1988; Foster, 1987; Goldfield, 2002; T. McPherson, 2003; Rubin, 2002), colonizes both *collective memory* and *the process of remembering* under the dominant position of White subjectivity. Moreover, this solidarity in the absolution of the signifier from the signified, or the liquefaction of the "preferred reading" of the sign, has turned the revisionist simulacrum into historical reality for many members of "NASCAR Nation."

In turn, and while for the (White) majority, the neo-Confederate symbolic spaces of NASCAR harmlessly connect the referee (the modern-day "Southerner"—always White, almost always a man) to the reference (Old South politics), they equally enact spaces of oppression for those subjectivities that have long suffered under its banner (cf. Barthes, 1972; Williams, 1981). A recent Chevrolet advertisement illustrates this

pseudo-absolution: In the ad, two of NASCAR's most popular drivers, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. and Tony Stewart, are tailgating in the infield of a NASCAR track, with the famous Lynard Skynard anthem, "Sweet Home Alabama," serving as the sonic backdrop. In what becomes a strange interjection, Southern rap artist TI drives through the crowd (and the song immediately takes on a hip-hop beat accompanied by rap lyrics) in what is assumed to be a "tricked out" Chevrolet coupe. In an awkward gesture, Earnhardt, Jr. takes the key from TI, as though accepting both car and culture of the "interloper," and drives away from the scene. The second assumption that the viewer is expected to make, and one that would contradict the exclusively White experiences of NASCAR spectators, is that TI is joining the NASCAR party (both the infield fête featured in the commercial and the bigger spectacle of "NASCAR Nation"). Amid a throng of overrepresentative female and multi-ethnic fans, the convergence of "traditional" stock car culture and "the new NASCAR" is meant to redefine consumerism and identity in the boundaries of "NASCAR Nation." As a consequence, the media text reader is expected to engage a suspension of disbelief in decoding Chevy's multicultural stock car faux-topia.

Another popular example of this mass mediated absolution of stock car racing's racial and cultural homogeneity can be found in the 2006 film *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. The movie follows the trials and tribulations of Ricky Bobby (played by *Saturday Night Live* alum Will Ferrell), a driver on NASCAR's top circuit. Following a series of life-altering comedic highs and lows—each playing to overblown stereotypes of a bucolic, Southern, White, working-class vernacular (divorce and infidelity, lack of education, caricaturized faith, overprivileging the kitsch aesthetic, etc.)<sup>10</sup>—Ricky Bobby faces the definitive moment of his racing career: a return to the fabled Talladega Super Speedway in his last act of racing redemption. In spite of the fact that the Talladega venue is notorious in NASCAR circles as one of the most Confederate-flag-saturated tracks on the circuit, the symbol is strangely absent from Hollywood mediations of the space. Moreover, the track is transformed into a site of tolerance rather than of exclusivity in the film—as the protagonist reconciles his homophobic jingoism in the film's dénouement (a gay, French Formula One driver of Middle Eastern ethnic heritage named Jean Girard, played by famous English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen of *Borat* fame).<sup>11</sup>

This commercialized signifying system actively transforms the praxis and symbols of "NASCAR Nation" into what Umberto Eco (1976) refers to as 'a lie,' or, as Mark Gottdiener (1994) prefers, "something that stands for something else" (p. 156). Problematically, both the commercial and the film "liquidate the real" (Bishop, 2001), becoming Southern simulacra of the racially divisive material realities of "NASCAR Nation." Moreover, this dream world featuring (a) a multicultural fanscape, (b) a Confederate-flag-free celebration of *all* Southerners (and non-Southerners), and (c) a veneer of opportunistic egalitarianism—an inclusive "NASCAR Nation"—surgically grafts the myth of "a new NASCAR" while simultaneously reinforcing the hierarchical desires of this form of ethnic nationalism or "neo-tribalism" (Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1995). Selective correspondence of "encoding" and "decoding" (Hall, 1980) of these NASCAR signifiers is thus



two degrees separated from slavery, segregation, the Confederacy, and so on; thus creating a false dimension of the NASCAR empirical, all the while situating heteronormative White masculinity at the center of power within its "Nation."

Indeed, the mediated and material realities of "NASCAR Nation," and particularly those we observed in the past year, are devoid of an oppositional or alternative subjectivity—this is a "closed system," as Joe Bageant (2007) might say. As anyone who has attended a NASCAR race would surely attest, there is some dynamic at play that orchestrates, and is orchestrated by, intermediaries of the White, heteronormative, social conservative, moral-panic-plagued, Fundamentalist, Southern Right. It comes to light in the absence of non-White consumer subjects on the track, in the stands, and in NASCAR's corporate hierarchy itself. Consumer subjects are confronted by these intermediaries' attempts to veil—if not completely erase—the realities of a "NASCAR Nation" that, to this day, has no women drivers and only one "minority driver," the accomplished Formula One racer, Juan Pablo Montoya (or, as NASCAR commentators have recently nicknamed him in the linguistic cleansing of his ethnic difference, "JPM" or "Johnnie Montoya").<sup>12</sup>

### *Performing Citizenship in Dubya's "America"*

During one detour through "NASCAR Nation" in early 2007, it became readily apparent that "Johnnie" Montoya is now one of the central "villain figures" in the pantheon of stock car driver-celebrities, despite no reasonable on-track explanation as to why such a reaction is warranted. Indeed, it is common practice during pre-race introductions for many NASCAR fans to hurl beer cans and racially charged epithets (such as "go home Chico" and "Go back to Mexico, Montoya") at NASCAR's only full-time minority Cup driver (Field notes). Returning to the double entendre of "NASCAR Nation," the overt demonization of Juan Pablo Montoya parallels not-so-coincidentally with the dialectics of neoconservative backlash against non-White interloper/immigrants in both the spaces of NASCAR and the broader formations of American society. In "NASCAR Nation," xenophobic Senatorial legislation, a "Great Wall of Mexico," the jingoistic rantings of intolerant cable news pundits (e.g., Michelle Malkin, Ann Coulter, and Bill O'Reilly), and the distorted racial profiles of a media-constructed "homeland (in)security" are celebrated through the signified space and paranoiac physicalities of the sport's neo-tribalist contingent. "These anxieties," posits Lauren Berlant (1997), "are about whose citizenship—whose subjectivity, whose forms of intimacy and interest, whose bodies and identifications, whose heroic narratives—will direct America's future" (p. 6). By way of the Confederate flag, White "NASCAR Nation" marks its territory. By way of these adversarial gestures toward the interlocking "Other," the Nation more clearly surveys "aliens" in its midst.

Throughout our travels, we encountered a number of rather anxious signifying acts representative of the politics of paranoia festering within post-9/11 White America, as follows:

"I want YOU...to speak English" (borrowing from the World War II recruitment posters featuring Uncle Sam);  
 "Tired of pressing 'I' for English";  
 "Illegal aliens are not immigrants, they are criminals";  
 "Illegal aliens: uneducated, unlawful, unsanitary, & unwanted"; and  
 "Stop the invasion: Build a fence, secure our borders, enforce laws." (Fieldnotes, multiple dates)

Drawing from the intellectual labors of Benjamin and Foucault, Berlant (1997) refers to this type of exercise in antithetical power as "hygienic governmentality," or a "ruling bloc's dramatic attempt to maintain its hegemony by asserting that an abject population threatens the common good and must be rigorously governed and monitored by all sectors of society." She continues, saying,

Especially horrifying are the ways the ruling bloc solicits mass support for such "governing": by using abject populations as exemplary of all obstacles to national life; by wielding images and narratives of a threatened "good life" that a putative "we" have known; by promising relief from the struggles of the present through a felicitous image of a national future; and by claiming that, because the stability of the core image is the foundation of the narratives that characterize an intimate and secure national society, the nation must at all costs protect this image of a way of life, even against the happiness of some of its own citizens. (p. 175).

In 2007 America, the overriding locus of the mediated ruling bloc lay in the lies of talking heads such as Malkin, Coulter, O'Reilly, Beck, Limbaugh, and their ilk, who dominate the nightly cable news broadcast or radio airwaves.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, "straight-talking," "good ol' boy" politicians such as George Allen, Mitt Romney, and George W. Bush, who regularly deploy racially incendiary terms that speak to their right-wing political base, are crowd favorites in "NASCAR Nation." To give but one example, George Allen (R-VA), former governor of Virginia, U.S. Representative (VA-7), and U.S. Senator, lost reelection to the Senate in the 2006 race in large part because of his usage of the term "macaca" directed at S. R. Sedarth, who was in attendance at a campaign rally in Breaks, VA, on August 11 of that year. The term, which means "monkey" in some francophone African nations, was seen by many as denigrating to the Indian-American Sedarth. Although Allen laughably denied knowledge of the term (he claimed at one point to have just "made it up"), his use of it brought to light other allegations of racial slurs (particularly "nigger"<sup>14</sup>) and a pronounced affinity for the Confederate flag,<sup>15</sup> which cast his campaign in a downward spiral as Jim Webb would go on to defeat him.

Where is this hate speech coming from? Better yet, in whose interests is it serving? And to what extent is it imbricated in the larger discursive system of signs operative within the Bush hegemon since 9/11? It can be surmised that in George W. Bush's "NASCAR Nation," such a discursive system is a two-part Confederation: (a) a confederation of selectively apolitical, dominant, White, (Southern) neo-Confederate identities and (b) a confederation of the subject to broader forces of neoliberal subjectivity—subject to the culture of fear built on incessant terrorism, endless war, fears of losing influence, fear of the [immigrant, Black, feminine, gay

and lesbian] Other. Frank Furedi (2004) has argued that this culture of fear "is underpinned by a profound sense of powerlessness, a diminished sense of agency that leads people to turn themselves into passive subjects who can only complain that 'we are frightened.'" Ever since the events of 9/11, Bush and his politicians have tapped into this fear, *a fear which they themselves have helped to promote at every chance offered to them and their callous armatures*. Whether it is color-coded terror alert warnings, numerous airport security (non)"events" covered live on CNN, the "threat" posed by Saddam Hussein, the "threat" posed by al Qaeda, the "threat" posed by (dark-skinned) terrorists, to name but a few instances, or even just our Fearless Leader reminding us at every speaking engagement about the "evildoers" who are out to get us, an ever-present specter of (manufactured) fear has emerged.

Ever since 9/11, Bush has parlayed this sense of manufactured fear and White male resentment into a *campaign of fear*, one that, during the 2004 Presidential election, offered the (power of the) vote as recourse to those who felt frightened, passive, and concerned for their safety, future, and well-being. Arlie Hochschild (2003) chronicles one particular iteration of this discourse, writing that, "Instead of appealing, as [President Richard] Nixon did, to anger at economic decline, Bush is appealing to fear of economic *displacement*...offering the NASCAR Dads<sup>16</sup> a set of villains to blame, and a hero to thank," in effect "strip-mining the emotional responses of blue-collar men to the problems his own administration is so intent on causing." Here Bush's hyper-masculinized phallic hero identity takes center stage. Hochschild's (2003) analysis is worth quoting at length:

Unhinging the personal from the political, playing on identity politics, Republican strategists have offered the blue-collar voter a Faustian bargain: we'll lift your self-respect by putting down women, minorities, immigrants, even those spotter owls. We'll honor the manly fortitude you've shown in taking bad news. But (and this is implicit) don't ask us to do anything to change that bad news.... Paired with this is an aggressive right-wing attempt to mobilize blue-collar fear, resentment, and a sense of being lost—and attach it to the fear of American vulnerability, American loss. By doing so, Bush aims to win the blue-collar man's identification with big business, empire, and himself. The resentment anyone might feel at the personnel officer who didn't have the courtesy to call him back and tell him he didn't have the job, Bush now redirects toward the target of Osama bin Laden, and when we can't find him, Saddam Hussein.

[...] Whether strutting across a flight deck or mocking the enemy, Bush with his seemingly fearless bravado—ironically born of class entitlement—offers an aura of confidence. And this confidence dampens, even if temporarily, the feelings of insecurity and fear exacerbated by virtually every domestic and foreign policy initiative of the Bush administration. Maybe it comes down to this: George W. Bush is deregulating American global capitalism with one hand while regulating the feelings it produces with the other. Or, to put it another way, he is doing nothing to change the causes of fear and everything to channel the feeling and expression of it. He speaks to a working man's lost pride and his fear of the future by offering an image of fearlessness. He poses here in his union jacket, there in his pilot's jumpsuit, taunting the Iraqi's to "bring 'em on"—all of it meant to feed something in the heart of a frightened man. (n.p.)

Issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality (both seen or unseen) and their location to backlash politics are burned into every word of Hochschild's cogent analysis; in the 2004 election, fear and loathing of "the Other" became embedded within a modern-day "Southern" electoral strategy.

In broader terms, the ever-changing, enlightened modern world has been put on trial against the imagined simpler times of the "good old days" for which neo-Confederate commentators continuously argue. Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis (2000) explain that such nostalgia for the so-called "good old days" of a perceived better bygone era is clearly "associated with a set of discourses that recode White middle-class identity as the identity of the oppressed...[in which]...The professional middle-class suburban dweller has appropriated the radical space of difference, the space of social injury, of social victim" (p. 328). In this way, defining one's identity through the negation of the other (what Nietzsche called "ressentiment") is a process governed by the strategic alienation of the other in forms of knowledge building, genres of representation, and the deployment of moral, emotional, and affective evaluation and investments (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2005). In so doing, it projects a mythologized suburban worldview out into the social world as the barometer of public policy, displacing issues of inequality and poverty and replacing these with demands for balanced budgets, tax cuts, greater investment in surveillance and security, and calls for "moral values" to be promoted in schools. All of this is accompanied by a deep-bodied nostalgic investment in Anglo American cultural form and its European connections (McCarthy et al., 2005, 157).

But if the American people, and particularly its dominant faction, are *running from something* (or someone), they must in turn be *running toward something* as well. Which brings us back to the opening question posed by C. W. Nevius. For many, NASCAR (and the so-called "Southern" cultural forms more generally) can be seen as advocating "a set of values that are simple, down-home, and pleasurable—for both the producer and the consumer" (Smith & Wilson, 2004, p. 182). Put differently, as George Lipsitz's (2005) reading of Ronald Reagan's emotionally laden rhetorical skill for celebrating personal feelings and family ties over the realities of politics, war, and freedom reveals, it is NASCAR's spatial, spectacular, and popular discursive formations that re-narrate a post-9/11, confederated "nostalgia for the Whiteness of the pre-civil rights era with the affective power of nationalist narratives rooted in private family obligations and the responsibilities of paternal protection" (p. 99).<sup>17</sup> In short, NASCAR's increased import—and the (Southern) cultural qualities it features and on which its rival professional sport goliaths have yet failed to capitalize—is *incontrovertibly bound to its seductiveness as a consumer-based expression and market-oriented extension of (neo)-conservative White paranoia*.

### Coda: NASCAR's (Commodified Spaces of) Whiteness

Throughout this essay, we have tried to elucidate the notion that although "NASCAR Nation" acts as a social destination or cultural conduit, it also forms the boundaries of an important—if not emergent—intensely White subjectivity. In

this way, and following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the rhizomatic multiplicities of consumer-based identities within "NASCAR Nation" collapse under the auspices of a unified regime of identity politics—that of an anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-gay, exclusively conservative, fearful, "Southern" Whiteness. This adhesive quality, or defining unifying feature (what Deleuze and Guattari have referred to as *unité*) of NASCAR fandom, is reiteratively performed in and through the spaces of "NASCAR Nation." When assembled at these races, NASCAR fans act as semiotic organisms of spatialized norms and normalizing space: subjected to the laws of what de Certeau (1984) refers to as a cultural "strategy" and thus subjects that reproduce the "imposition of power through the disciplining and organizing of space" (Crang, 2000, p. 137).

This anti-pluralist indemnity creates an insider/outsider dichotomy, whereby spectator identification empowers those dominant subjectivities that have marked NASCAR spaces as places of a particular formation of overdetermined Whiteness. As "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault, 1984, p. 252), the proliferation of these hegemonic, White Southern identities and Southern aesthetics within NASCAR spaces has been used to empower neoconservative identity politics (and those subject positions authored around such politics). The conjoining of spaces of the imagination with the physical spaces of NASCAR spectacles has brought to life the collective thrusts of "normalizing judgments" ordered around Southern Whiteness.

Although these formations of power may seem to be natural extensions of the socio-political traditions of the region, they are neither natural nor neutral. Within the collective imaginary of "NASCAR Nation," geometric discourse is reconfigured into an illusory space of unification. That unity of discourse is a transferable source of cultural capital accumulation. The articulated solidarities of citizenship, space, and the semiotics of Whiteness (as a locus of representation) comprise the knowledge-power basis that transposes the ideological onto the physical—grafting imagined collective configurations of White privilege onto the geometric layers and social fabric of stock car spectacles. In other words, performing one's Whiteness (in effect, *being White*) in "NASCAR Nation" means to belong to the collective articulations of a particularized "we." In this way, corporeal iconicity is a linkage to sentimental belonging, to a seemingly banal citizenship in a singular ethnic nationalism.

By no means are all NASCAR fans seething arbiters of White supremacy—far from it. Rather, we are suggesting that to exist in the spectacularized spaces of "NASCAR Nation" means to be subjected to the strategically deployed strands of sign-valued Confederate symbols, neo-Confederate identities, and imperialist hegemonic Whiteness. Borrowing from Foucault's (1982) double interpretation of the "subject"—"subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his [sic] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (p. 212)—it can be argued that within the spaces of "NASCAR Nation," that "self-knowledge" and the discursive formations from which it is constituted are indeed "free-floating" (Andrews, 1996). Both are pushed and pulled in multiple, often contradictory, directions—some

political, some economic, many cultural. They are contemplated, contested, and manipulated by cultural intermediaries, the “citizenry” of an imagined sporting community, and dissidents and hegemony who seek to make the sport meaningful. They are brought to life in the physical spaces surrounding NASCAR tracks (the geometric circuits that give order to “NASCAR Nation”), the identity-based symbols of subjectivity (fluttering Confederate and American flags), and the spectacular practices (the act of making both identity and subjectivity *visible*).

In the truest sense of hegemony, however, the spectacular nature of NASCAR fandom (re)produces the very systems of oppression that simultaneously alienate, divide, and normalize iniquitous formations that dominate everyday life. In the spaces of “NASCAR Nation,” fandom as a “new technology of the self” (Foucault, 1988) fails its emancipatory potential and instead is framed in the cultural physicalities of Southern Whiteness (and particularly Whiteness as an extension of the “theater of power” active throughout the region’s configurations of identity).

In some ways, then, this form and function of Southern sporting Whiteness seduces—and indeed is made powerful—because it re-inscribes *old* identities and *old* subjectivities in the *new language* of sport and “the South.” In other words, and unlike Eric Lott’s (1993) postulations of Whiteness and the “vital center” (in which the author imagines a subversive, yet all-encompassing center of power), or Henry Giroux’s (1997) “invisible” Whiteness (in the context of affirmative action, political correctness, post-9/11 immigration debates, and a blue-state resurgence in the political spectrum), commodity spectatorship in “NASCAR Nation”—whether in South Carolina or Illinois—situates a particularized “Southern” sporting Whiteness as a normative performance of identity whereby an overt *theater of White power* is brought to life in and through the celebrity cultures and neo-conservative iconographies of the new sporting South. Thus does the individual create her or his identity through subjected consumption of subjective privilege. At the crossroads of a contextually specific order of neoliberal corporate capitalism and neo-Confederate hyper-White (Southern) nationalism, “NASCAR Nation” may be more parallax than paradox: seen by some as a burgeoning, yet innocuous, celebration of the norms and values that “make America great” and by others as a site for reproducing the “terrors of neoliberalism” through the social currency of an anti-immigration, veneer multiculturalist, post-9/11 “ethnocentric monoculturalism” (Sue, 2004, p. 761).

By way of the analyses in this article, we have attempted to point out the ways in which being a fan in “NASCAR Nation” means being subjected to the laws of praxis as subjectification and to both the ideological and material orders of neoliberal cultural and political economy and neoconservative socio-political identity politics. As a fixture in the “new sporting South” (Newman, 2007)—a distinctive formation whereby a localized form of sport culture stirs the specters of Old South racial hierarchies and gendered patriarchies while also articulating new expressions of knowledge and old formations of power in the context of global and local pluralism—NASCAR now acts to reinforce the hypermasculine, hyper-White center of power not only in the contemporary South but also in

contemporary American sport more generally. In this new sporting South, the promise of a progressive, egalitarian, and democratic sport culture is seized by the hegemon of conservative traditionalism and corporate capitalism in a confederation of play, performance, and power.

## Notes

1. Although admitting his "non-Southern roots," Horwitz's (1999) rigor and reflexivity take on a deeply invested perspective. Furthermore, he maintains a reflexive voice throughout his travels and writings on "the South" and the people he meets.

2. Our understanding of "neoliberal" and "neoconservative" political rationality is drawn in part from the work of Wendy Brown (2006), who argues that their paradoxical collision—the simultaneous melding of a market–political rationality (a business model) and a moral–political rationality (a theological model)—"contours a submissive, obedient citizen, organizes a post-9/11 wounded and defensive national patriotism" (p. 706) and aids in the de-democratization of the public sphere.

3. In practice, this meant spending entire weekends in "NASCAR country"—sleeping in local motels, eating sausages, and drinking beers hours before each event, wandering about (or what Guy Debord refers to as "*derive*") the spaces and spatial practices of NASCAR, speaking with various strategically identified and randomly selected cultural agents along the way—all the while performing the role of "researcher–fan" (and thereby not contesting or stepping outside the normative boundaries of fan conduct).

4. Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* was printed in 1974, but the first edition to be translated into English came in 1991 (see Lefebvre, 1991b). Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* was first published in English in 1984.

5. Following Maurice Merleau–Ponty (2002), de Certeau likens his notion of place to Merleau–Ponty's notion of "geometric space" or "a homogenous and isotropic spatiality" (p. 24). Geometric space is constructed out of the material world and the language used by human beings to locate fixed objects in the realm of the imagination. By way of distinction, Merleau–Ponty's notion of "anthropological" space is reconstructed in de Certeau's work to refer to the dreams and perceptions defined out of, and by, distinctive spatial experiences. For de Certeau (1984), an "anthropological, poetic, or mythic experience of space" (p. 117) differs from the built environment or physical geography most commonly referred to as "space," as anthropological space is situated within the complexities of interpretation. de Certeau theorizes that place involves a varying level of perception, in that anthropological space is defined out "of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterizing it" (Auge, 1995, p. 81).

6. Manuel Castells (1985) would later outline this connection between oppressive ideological space and ostensibly collective physical space as follows: "Social space produces spaces of hegemony."

7. On speaking with an administrator at one of NASCAR's most popular tracks, we learned that there is a standardized layout that each track must adhere to in order to maximize "traffic" for licensed NASCAR vendors who "set up shop" for each race.



8. This dialogue between the omnipresent Southern signifiers, such as the Confederate flag and the proliferation of White bodies in NASCAR spaces, has created two interrelated arcs of interpretation and consumption for spectators allied with NASCAR. In relation to the meaningfulness of the Confederate symbol, both supporters and critics of the flag's public presence at NASCAR events agree that the meaning of the "Southern Cross" (as the flag is often referred to in the South) is neither fixed nor absolute but rather a malleable discursive formation through which ideologies have flowed since the first star was stitched onto the cotton banner. The flag has at once, and throughout its history, been a source of pride for Southern heritage groups, a marker of identity for White supremacist organizations, and a symbol of racial oppression for the marginalized peoples of the South (Newman, 2007).

9. This colonization, or confederation, of space—by no means exclusive to races held in the South (races in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Delaware are equally as saturated with these signifiers)—greet the consumer—spectator—subject the moment he enters the parking lot. On race days, these otherwise blank geometric canvasses are made meaningful by way of a sea of RV's, SUV's, trucks, and other automobiles casting images of the battle flag of the Confederacy, POW- and military-themed insignias, banners sporting the colors of popular NASCAR drivers, and a variety of American pennons.

10. For example, an article by Baehr and Snyder (2006) from the conservative entertainment Web site, *Movieguide.org*, which is affiliated with the Christian Film & Television Commission Ministry, describes *Talladega Nights* as "a racist, bigoted work that ridicules the Bible Belt, Southern white men, Christianity, Jesus Christ, the family, and American masculinity."

11. The media absolution of race-based tensions in the region were pointed out in a commentary in the *Charlotte Observer* by Leigh Dyer (2007), who noted in the lead-up to the 2007 All-Star Race, "Diversity and especially inclusion are concepts to which most Charlotteans pay lip service.... Racism and intolerance have not vanished from Charlotte or the South" (p. 1).

12. And perhaps further rationale for NASCAR's "diversity dearth" lies in the commodity logics of maintaining an "Other." If "outsiders" are to become "insiders," it might cloud an otherwise unified market segment. Rooted in the language of "brand loyalty," "marketing strategies," "target market," "diversity," and "demographics" and cleansed of its racist, sexist, and elitist cultural polity, the marketing vernacular of "NASCAR Nation" thus not only blurs the regimes of corporate capitalism and neo-Confederate racism, it also in some ways creates an amalgamated celebration of oppression at the vices of each. Under such a consumer-driven, neo-Confederate, late-capitalist condition, NASCAR fuels its bottom-line by renting out vendor space to companies such as "Top Ten" racing and portending to be merely "giving the fans what they want."

13. Take Malkin, for example. The Fox News Channel contributing pundit and CEO of *Hot Air* who made waves in 2004 for her defense of Japanese American internment by the U.S. Government during WWII (and equating such actions to the "GWOT"), is a regular megaphone of hate, decrying liberals for being "weak on terror" and blaming "minorities" and "immigrants" for ruining the country. Or Beck of CNN, who mocked the first-ever Muslim in the U.S. Congress, Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN; 5th district) on the air by demanding, "Sir, prove to me you are not working with our enemies" (November 15,

2006). Or Bill Bennett (2005), who stated that aborting "every Black baby in this country" would reduce the crime rate.

14. Michael Scherer (2006) of Salon.com reported, "Three former college teammates of Sen. George Allen [said] that the Virginia Republican repeatedly used the racial epithet 'nigger' and demonstrated racist attitudes towards Blacks during the early 1970s."

15. Ryan Lizza (2006) quoted Allen as referring to his ownership and display of Confederate flag memorabilia as "I have a flag collection" and his keeping of a noose in his office as "It had nothing to do with anything other than a Western motif in my office." In the same article, Lizza confirmed that Allen wore a Confederate flag pin in his high school yearbook photograph.

16. Though various definitions abound, the term "NASCAR Dad" has generally been deployed to reference White middle-class family men with blue-collar jobs located in the South or bordering states (see MacGregor, 2005). Although not viewed as being overtly political (though they lean Republican), this "branded media paternal" faction is considered intensely patriotic and tends to display very "traditional" (read: normative) values (Vavrus, 2007). In the yearlong run-up to the 2004 election, they were likely to have been hurt by the economy, witnessed manufacturing jobs outsourced to India or China, and may have had a family member serving in the military. The NASCAR Dad, the story says, goes to church, loves to hunt and fish or participate in other such outdoor activities, and considers himself to be part of the cultural mainstream (Vavrus, 2007).

17. We would hasten to add that it is counterproductive and anti-intellectual to assume that those opposed to, say, affirmative action, are simply "racists" or "bigots," as a good number of those on the mainstream left seem to be offering up of late. Rather, the fear of losing one's job—or one's imagined "place" in society—to someone else (whether "Northern elite" or "unseen terrorist") was callously exploited by Bush for partisan political gain. As Larry Grossberg (2006) maintains, the answer to Thomas Frank's question ("What's the matter with Kansas?") is, simply, *nothing*. The problem, rather, lies in the morally corrupt political strategies seeking to further divide the nation along ideological grounds.

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