“WE ARE THE BAD POOR”: GENRE AND WHITE TRASH IDENTITY IN GRIT LIT

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ABSTRACT

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This project explores the Southern white trash's fraught relationship with difference through Grit Lit—literature by and about the white trash. In a historical moment where poor whites have been (sometimes rightfully) scapegoated as key cogs in Trump's demagoguery characterized by hateful speech and reactionary rhetoric, Grit Lit is a coming-to-terms with its whiteness and trashiness. It is an ongoing search for a usable, unshameful identity amidst a centuries-old construction of the white trash as racially, economically, and regionally as waste people. As this project articulates, to reckon with an inherently liminal and marginalized community, one long associated with (again, sometimes rightfully) assumptions of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny, Grit Lit is only able to come to that identity through a sometimes painful acknowledgment of difference.

One key way Grit Lit accomplishes this is through its experimentations with and reconceptualizations of genre. Beginning with Harry Crews and progressing chronologically to the present (through Larry Brown, Dorothy Allison, Rick Bragg, and Tom Franklin, among others), foundational Grit Lit authors, are studied in relation to their generic choices (ranging from autobiographical realism and literary naturalism to revisionist westerns and detective fiction) and their impact on the literature's identity politics (including race, gender, sexuality, and disability). As the "Rough South" aesthetic continues to expand beyond the South and into new mediums—comics, television, film—a theoretical basis for understanding white trash

identity from the inside provides much-needed (and perhaps unlikely) allyship in a cultural moment marked by racial and social injustice.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Joy Arnold and Jim Ploskonka, my wife, Sarah, and my kids, Roland and Wiler.

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Early on in my undergraduate studies, I told my Mom I was struggling with my major. I thought I wanted to do Political Science, but I wasn't enjoying the courses. She asked me, "What do you like doing most?" I said, "Reading books." She said, "There ya go," and I became an English major. Thanks, Mom.

Dad likes to joke that it took him less time to complete his PhD than it did me, and I like to remind him that, unlike him, I completed mine before I was thirty. Dad was a source of great wisdom and comfort throughout the degree. Never forget: "The goal of a dissertation is to get it done." Thanks, Dad.

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INTRODUCTION: WHO ARE WE AND HOW DO WE TELL OUR STORIES?

"Don't need no PhD for a hundred-dollar car

Just find a crooked cop and that doctor disregard

Cause when it's either the mine or the Kentucky national guard

I'd rather sell him a line than be dying in the coal yard

Now, papa, he ain't hungry no more

He's waiting for a knock on the trailer door"

—Old Crow Medicine Show, "Methamphetamine"

Growing up in rural Kentucky, I thought I was about as enlightened as they come.[1] I was a strong student, listened to alternative music, read a lot of books, and made a calculated effort to go against political-cultural grains. I was open-minded, sometimes defiant, and usually antagonistic to my life in the sticks. Plus, my parents were educated transplants from Pennsylvania—carpetbaggers—and they were divorced, another strike. Unlike the majority of other families, we were not "from the soil," a defining characteristic of the cultural South. We couldn't claim generations of former glory, we didn't put noodles in our chili, and we didn't have anywhere to go for lunch after church. Much as I was proud of being a semi-outsider, of being able to distance myself from my surroundings, my Southern dialect would get made fun of when I visited my parents' families, even though I'd swear I barely had one. And so I was pulled in different directions. My mother was a music teacher with some hippie inclinations, and my father

[1] Outside of the South, and perhaps in the Deep South, there is a feeling that Kentucky doesn't count as "Southern," maybe because they were neutral during the Civil War or because it lies on the border with the Midwest. In response, I simply suggest that those people go to Kentucky and ask the people there if they consider themselves to be culturally Southern.

moved to Cleveland, where rural or blue collar areas were given the suffix "'tucky."[2] Outside of home, school, and my trips to the North, I was rebellious and indulgent, intrigued by the seedier sides of town. I resented the rude people to the North, and I felt right at home in trailer parks. But it wasn't until I went to college that I realized I might be white trash

And it was in my own backyard that I realized this. I didn't move away like I sometimes said I would (my brothers did). Turns out, there was a fancy private liberal arts school twenty miles away, in the closest "big" city outside of making the trip to Lexington. They had a Walmart, movie theater, and a Taco Bell. I'd gone there my whole life, but I'd never paid attention to the college bubble. I moved into the dorm, began interacting with my classmates, and, although I was a "townie," never felt so further from home. Not only was I not enlightened, I was backwards, a hick. I thought I was intelligent, even countercultural, but I had never met a Jew, a Muslim, or an openly gay person. I went from feeling like the smartest person in high school to being petrified that the professor would ask me to identify the direct object of a sentence. Many students were also from Kentucky, but not many seemed to be from my part of Kentucky.

I eventually accepted, at first begrudgingly and later proudly, being the redneck of my friend group. I began to feel more authentic than my private school peers (even though, of course, some of it was always performative). I began to like "newgrass" and alternative country music. By my senior year, I would raise my hand and volunteer to recite the opening lines of the Canterbury Tales in Middle English with a slightly exaggerated Southern drawl. But even as I began to feel that my budding Southerness somehow made me exceptional, I began to learn

[2] For example, Brunswick, a town south of Cleveland with a reputation for being redneck, is widely referred to as "Brunstucky."

about the violence of Southern exceptionalism, the breadth of historical inequality (beyond the scant recognition offered in my public education and my own willful and conditioned ignorance), and my own privilege. Should I be ashamed to be proud?

Also around this time I read my first Grit Lit story, a particularly deranged short story by Larry Brown that my professor described as "Southern Gothic on steroids."[3] I was shocked by its ferocity. Here was a Southerner who seemed to lay bare my regional anxieties and brutally articulate a lesson I'd glossed over: there are many different Souths. There's the Souths of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, the Souths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Zora Neale Hurston, the Souths of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, and there's the Souths of Harry Crews, Larry Brown, Dorothy Allison, as well as my own collection of contested Souths—ones I feel like I belong to, ones I feel denied access to, ones I'm fiercely proud of, and ones I'm deeply ashamed of.

Naturally, as countless Southerners have done, and despite my continued resentment, I moved to the Midwest and took my regional identity baggage with me.[4] By this time, I was determined to parse Grit Lit's place in Southern literature and white trash's place in Southern culture. In graduate school, when I would bring up what I wanted to study, I'd either get laughs or indignant warnings. Watch it, they seemed to say, that might be a tricky line to wall. And, of course, it is. But as the promise of a post-racial America dwindled post-Obama, class divisions deepened, monuments fell, some flags flew and others burned, and poor whites of the South

[3] The short story was "A Roadside Resurrection" in the posthumous collection *Tiny Love* (2004) and the class was Mark Lucas's excellent Flannery O'Connor seminar.

[4] I fully admit, therefore, that I'm another example of the Southern escape narrative, where someone escapes their Southern raising, only to look back on it with fondness and, perhaps, exploitation— a Southern expatriate who can complexly consider their Southern upbringing only once they've escaped it (see J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* [2016]).

became a key cog in Donald Trump's demagoguery, it only strengthened my resolve to push further.

So I live in the Midwest and study the South, an outsider by blood and an insider by a combination of choice and acculturation. Not dissimilar, I imagine, to Grit Lit writers trying to produce authentic (but also always slightly performative) art in the shadow of elite Southern literature. They seemed to agonize over their craft, culture, and identity. It often left them bitter, jaded, and sometimes dead. But they looked deep and spoke up, and that's often a painful process, not just because you're frequently made to feel less than—a discredit to your race, a piece of trash—but because you're also a participant in a centuries old project of making others feel less than. As Larry Brown once said, "Whatever good is in this world has to have teeth in it if evil is to be dealt with" (35). Grit Lit, literature by and about poor whites, shows that to deal with evil you have to deal with difference, to understand yourself you have to understand others, and to change people's perceptions you have to change our own. Paralleling my own, this project follows the development of a Grit Lit identity.

STUDYING WHITE TRASH

In History and Popular Culture

Grit Lit's emergence into mainstream popular culture put it in conversation with historical popular conceptions of the white trash. An excellent source for this is Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016). Beginning with colonial America, Isenberg tracks the ways in which "waste people" have been perceived by the general

public.[5] William Byrd II describes the "lubbers" of North Carolina's Dismal Swamp.[6] Benjamin Franklin's focuses on human biology, claiming that reproductive labor was an imperial asset and predicting that idleness would be bred out of the population in twenty years.[7] Thomas Paine promised that revolution and republic would solve waste and idleness. Jefferson also wrote of breeding, describing an "accidental aristocracy" that would arise from his model of breeding out the "rubbish."[8] Pre-revolutionary America was a class-conscious place that brought an anxiety about idleness, shiftlessness, and the hereditary problem of trash over from England.

An important figure who shook up typical ideas of poor whites was Andrew Jackson, America's cracker president. With the opening of the Northwest Territory, a new wave of "squatters" was brought to the public attention.[9] These "crackers" were violent and shiftless wanderers who were boastful, distrusted civilization, lived in crude habitations, loved liberty, and exhibited so-called degenerative patterns of breeding. Jackson was initially decried as a Tennessee cracker, but he was recast as a sort of backcountry Moses. The first westerner to be elected president, Jackson rose to public attention through violence,[10] and his policy reflected his "Old Hickory" persona of toughness and forceful expansion. Realizing its potential as a political

[5] "Waste people" refers to the practice of England sending over its criminals, vagrants, its lumpenproletariat. These cast-offs created the enduring association of the lower-class with trash; poor people are waste people.
[6] James R. Masterson describes the six charges Byrd made against North Carolina: 1) a barren environment, 2) laziness, 3) religious apathy, 4) weak government, 5) "a natural asylum for outcasts," (154), and 6) a common subject of ridicule from outside observers.
[7] A preeminent scientist of the time, Franklin applied human biology to the question of class. As Isenberg summarizes Franklin's 1751 "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind": "Franklin predicted that Americans would double in population in twenty years. Idleness would be bred out of the English constitution. Large families encouraged parents to be industrious. Children would be put to work, imitating their parents, and spurred on by the will to survive. Class formation would occur, but it would be in a state of flux and adjustment, as people spread outward and filled the available territory" (66).
[8] In his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson describes his "American Breed," an "accidental aristocracy" resulting from a "a fortuitous concourse of breeders."
[9] Isenberg characterizes the squatters of the Jacksonian era: "For a people who wouldn't settle in one place, 'obsquatulate" gave an activity of sorts to the American heirs of English vagrants . . . it was their dirty feet and slipshod ways that defined them" (116).
[10] Jackson and his bloody heroics at the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812 vaulted him into the national spotlight.

tool, David Walker created a cracker-versus-beau dichotomy, where those who weren't of the common man were dandies.[11] By the election of 1840, both Whigs and Democrats claimed backwoods status. The frontier-opening cracker had become a romantic figure in popular culture, setting up the dual approach to poor whites: they are bastions of freedom, individualism, and masculinity (usually reserved for hillbillies), or they are caricatures, as depicted in the wildly exaggerated humor of the Old Southwest.

By the Civil War, the negative connotations of squatters took on a regional association. The term poor white trash came into common parlance to describe the waste people of the white South. Throughout the antebellum period, poor white trash were used as handy strategic tools for both pro-slavery proponents and abolitionists. Pro-slavery advocates pointed to poor whites as living proof of why the Southern caste system needed to be preserved: poor whites are biologically inferior and therefore deserve to remain exactly where they are. Abolitionists such as Stowe Argued that the poor whites are yet another detrimental result of the Southern plantation system. During the Civil War, Confederate ideology claimed racial unity in order to enlist the poor white to fight. Northern generals fought to end slavery and liberate poor whites. Post-reconstruction, the "New South" saw a massive shift away from an agriculture economy towards a more industrialized society. With this came the promise of careers for poor whites hamstrung by tenant farming and sharecropping. But the mill system that dominated poor white employment closely resembled the plantation system, with factory owners exerting complete control over its workers' lives and livelihood. And while strikes and efforts to unionize occasionally occurred, the enduring cultural values of the South safeguarded against sustained

[11] Davud Walker was a congressman from Kentucky who defended Jackson's actions during the Seminole War, pitting "sweet-smelling" beaus against the "hard and weather beaten General [Jackson]" (Isenberg 124).

worker solidarity. Also around this time, "redneck" came into public existence.[12] Rednecks were largely associated with Reconstruction-era Democratic demagogues who relied on the excitability of poor whites to amass political power. The "local color" period of Southern literature is perhaps most responsible for reproducing stereotypes of the poor southern white. Moreover, the white trash became a key figure of study in developing a scientific basis for eugenics, as popularized by Francis Galton.[13] Heavily influencing public policy, most notably through Theodore Roosevelt, the South's poor whites became synonymous with eugenic backwardness, along with African Americans and native peoples, punctuated by the forced sterilization of the lower-class Carrie Buck.[14]

Indeed, the early-twentieth-century's popular approach to the white trash was as a public policy problem. Authors such as Erskine Caldwell were instrumental in bringing the poor white to wider attention.[15] The Great Depression served to even the playing field a bit as poverty became a national concern rather than being limited to the South, with Steinbeck epitomizing this sympathetic reappraisal of poor whites. While the New Deal devised programs that made some progress toward solving individual problems--such as the Resettlement Administration led by Rexford Tugwell and the Tennessee Valley Authority, efforts intended to bolster the infrastructure, education, and industrialization of the South--they were unable to really curb

[12] Redneck originally referred to the sunburnt necks of white outdoor workers.
[13] Combining his statistical concepts of correlation and regression toward the mean and ideas of genetically inherited intelligence, Galton pioneered eugenics. Eugenics systematically promoted selective breeding and sterilization for the purpose of raising the mean intelligence.
[14] It should be noted that this is also the historical moment when disability and class histories intersect in a significant way. Eugenics conflated poor white trash and disability. Indeed, intellectual disability became the primary way that eugenics was able to solve the problem of weeding out members of their own race.
[15] It is often forgotten how popular and widely read Caldwell was at the beginning of the twentieth century. It should also be noted that Caldwell was a proponent of eugenics and sterilization of degenerative poor whites in the South.

poverty in the South.[16] At this time, the poor Southern white also became the subject of sympathetic studies, as seen in Howard Odum's discussion of their "folkways."[17]

While World War II made house trailers common as symbols of both freedom and poverty, something modern and anti-modern. By the 1950s "trailer trash" had become popular parlance. Trailers flourished particularly in the South, where its thinly insulated design favors warmer climates, property ownership is highly prized (with trailers presenting an affordable chance to own a home), and rural areas makes subsidized housing is limited, along with the larger, national interest in freedom (i.e., the mobility of a mobile home). Pulp fiction and drive-in films of the time cashed in with titles like *Trailer Tramp* and the *Trailer Park Girls.* Trailers were presented as dens of iniquity and unchecked lust and violence.

It is also at about this time that the "white trash" figure merged with the "hillbilly" in popular conception. According to Anthony Harkins, the history of the hillbilly mirrors that of the poor white in striking ways. The hillbilly, like the poor white, could connote degradation, violence, animalism, and carnality. It could elicit fear, anger, and pity. And yet, the American hillbilly also had another perception that persisted throughout much of its history. The hillbilly could be romanticized as a mythical figure of pioneer heritage, independence, and cultural and ethnic purity. While their histories run more or less parallel, the hillbilly figure managed to retain this other meaning while the poor white was viewed predominantly with scorn. While the poor white was in the middle of the eugenic push, the hillbilly changed again into being represented as a savage mountaineer, a fearful and feral figure. Like their poor white cousin, the hillbilly went through a reassessment during and after the Great Depression. This can be best seen in the

[16] See Wray and Isenberg.
[17] Commissioned by the Hoover administrations, Odum's comprehensive study, *Southern Regions of the United States* (1936), became a key text in the New Deal's planning for the South.

comics of Paul Webb's *Mountain Boys*, Billy Debeck's *Snuffy Smith*, and Al Capp's *Lil' Abner*. All three emerged within months of each other and they all provided reassurance that rural poverty was not as bleak as it appeared. Indeed, they could be looked to as "models for the traditional American values needed to save the nation from the twin threats of unfettered industrial urbanism and unregulated capitalism" (Harkins 104). Of particular importance here, in a post-New Deal, industrialized society, is individualism, self-reliance, and masculinity, a way of distinguishing rural manliness from their unmanly urban counterparts.

The 1960s brought a renewed interest in poverty as Lyndon Johnson's Great Society sought to address poverty in the South.[18] The programs designed to help the impoverished in rural America were often controlled by the elite, and as Duane Carr notes, "the local structure through which federal programs were filtered" undermined such efforts. Most of that money designed to aid the poor "was lost in bureaucracy and Southern elites' pet project" (Thompson 47). With such a renewed spotlight on the poor, the hick sitcom emerged on television. The *Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* were among the more popular iterations of the humorous evolutionary throwbacks. While television and film capitalized on mocking the redneck and hillbilly, public interest in the white trash was consistently peaked by an ongoing parade of white trash figures. The white trash remained an object of fascination, humor, and scorn.

As the social programs of the 60s gave way to free market capitalism in the 1980s, globalization and outsourcing "generally exacerbated the economic woes of families and communities in the rural South," forcing them into "direct competition with the Third World countries for footloose industries" (Carr 13). Unable to compete economically, poor Southerners

[18] This was a key component of Johnson's "War on Poverty."

struggled to find jobs amidst an increasingly globalized market. While they continued to be sidelined economically, they remained ever-present in popular culture, from Billy Carter to James Dickey's *Deliverance* to Bill Clinton and Sarah Palin, from *Smokey and the Bandit* to Dolly Parton and Tammy Faye Bakker.[19]

The white trash figure has been presented as a frontier hero, a dangerous and diseased public problem, a caricature, and exemplar of the cult of the common man. Currently, we find ourselves at an interesting moment in representing the white trash in popular culture. On one hand, there is the usual cartoonish representation that deals in long-held stereotypes (e.g., *Swamp People, Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*).[20] These shows bring the sideshow culture of poor whites into American living rooms.[21] On the other hand, in a culture where difficult protagonists are very popular, we also see the emergence of something resembling the white trash anti-hero. Cable and streaming shows like *Justified*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Ozark*, and *Breaking Bad* take traditionally static characters and grant them greater agency.[22] These characters bring to the surface older values associated with the redneck and hillbilly—loyalty, freedom, justice, and charm. At the same time, however, such representations limit their white trash prodigy to a single character. They typically come to align themselves closer with middle-class values, leaving behind the culture that made them undesirable to begin with. These issues are accented by the changing nature of the entertainment-industrial complex, which is increasingly fragmented and

[19] Billy was Jimmy Carter's beer-drinking younger brother, James Dickey's *Deliverance* portrayed poor whites as disabled, violent rapists, Bill Clinton's election to president made people with redneck roots more acceptable in mainstream culture, Sarah Palin's family made headlines for their redneck practices, including the pregnancy of her teenage daughter, *Smokey and the Bandit* romanticized the fast-driving refusal to settle down or stay put, and Tammy Faye Bakker's cable personality eschewed social refinement.

[20] *Honey Boo-Boo*, for example, brought the voyeurism of reality television to the beauty pageants of white trash Georgia.

[21] Speaking of sideshows, the carnival and freak show are also commonly represented subcultures of poor white culture.

[22] Such long-form television favors nuance and change. In *Justified*, for example, the antagonist of the show's first season, Boyd Crowder, begins the series as bank-robbing white supremacist, gets shot and goes to jail, has a religious conversion and becomes a cult-like leader, and ends the series as a largely sympathetic career criminal.

far more voluminous in its output. Suffice to say, we are in the midst of a cultural fascination with the commodities, objects, and material life of poor whites, as well as their racism.

White Trash Ideology

Any discussion of poor whites must take into account ideology, and any discussion of poor white ideology must take into account race. As Chapter Four discusses in greater detail, poor whites' relationship with whiteness is parasitic and exploitative. Camille Gear Rich describes "marginal whiteness" as those who have "more limited access to white privilege, and relatedly have a more attenuated relationship to white identity." Similarly, Khiara Bridges refers to "racial sullying," where the racial privilege of a white person "has been diminished in some respects--by drug addiction, or welfare dependence, for example" (65). So it is with poor Southern whites, and as this project shows, the identity attenuation associated with their identity is particularly fraught and unformed. Worse, the ideological history of the South has ensured that however racially sullied or marginalized, poor whites have a frustratingly uncomplicated investment in white supremacy.

While the origins of poverty among Southern whites is nebulous and contested,[23] the racial history of poor whites is, unfortunately, relatively straightforward. American racism came into existence to justify the oppression inherent in the enslavement of people of African descent (Kendi), and while the mechanisms and vocabularies have changed, its ideological legacy has not. The ideology of poor whites is built on this Southern racial calculus, which has again and

[23] In his new introduction to his classic study, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, he notes that "there is no single convincing theory to explain the slide of so many southern whites down the economic ladder into poverty after 1865. There was exploitation and plenty of it. Tax policies and the family wage did not just descend from heaven or rise from hell. Yet, many poor whites seem to have hated taxes as much as their economic betters. . . And none of these cosmic and deterministic explanations of the origins of poverty gets at the problem of personal choice. Some people really did choose to be shiftless, lazy, and irresponsible" (xx).

again resulted in poor Southern whites willingly, even zealously, acting against their own interests in the name of white supremacy. As Wayne Flynt notes, in the Antebellum South, "some poor whites hated blacks so much that they allied with conservative white planters whose economic interests were antithetical to their own, while others participated in the Populist binaries of the 1890s" (xx). Post-Appomattox, poor whites were particularly susceptible to Southern demagogues' populist rabble rousing, which usually contained a fair amount of racial fear mongering. Indeed, the "natural order" argument for white supremacy has had particular staying power among poor whites (Zanden). Certainly, the racism of poor whites has been exaggerated and exploited by the ruling classes to scapegoat their own atrocities,[24] and poor whites have been politically weaponized by the North and South for centuries. But there has to be something to exaggerate, and they were often willingly weaponized, clinging to their whiteness as the fundamental bedrock of their ideology.

Poor white ideology is wrapped up in racial dogma, which holds that "governmental assistance in any form was evil and not to be trusted . . . aligned with beliefs about a racial hierarchy that overtly and implicitly aimed to keep white Americans hovering above Mexicans, welfare queens, and other nonwhite others" (Metzl). As Thomas Frank summarizes, "ignoring one's economic self-interest may seem like a suicidal move to you and me, but viewed differently it is an act of noble self-denial; a sacrifice for a holier cause" (qtd. in Metzl). And so it remains today. As Jonathon Metzl succinctly notes, "white Americans make tradeoffs that negatively affect their lives and livelihoods in support of larger prejudices or ideals." Recent political history -- the time period most Grit Lit is produced -- bears this out. A variety of

[24] Footnote about upper-class whites were responsible for the majority of lynchings in the South, and of course the policies and laws that ensured white supremacy and the continued poverty of poor whites.

conservative political movements -- the Tea Party, the Koch brother's libertarianism, the Freedom Caucus, the alt-right, Trump -- participates in "backlash governance." Metzl writes that These increasingly unified forms of conservatism advanced politically through overt or implicit appeals to what has been called white racial resentment. In other words, these agendas gained support by trumpeting connections to unspoken or overt claims that particular policies, issues, or decisions served also to defend or restore white privilege or quell threats to idealized notions of white authority represented by demographic or cultural shifts. This was both a top-down process (politicians used racial resentment as a tool for class exploitation) and a bottom-up one (the language of white resentment became an increasingly accepted way of talking about whiteness more broadly).

The specific tenets of poor white ideology -- guns, lower taxes, reduced government interference, anti-socialist healthcare, etc. -- are therefore wrapped up in larger meanings about race and whiteness. W. E. B. Du Bois called whiteness a "public and psychological wage," one that "compensated" poor whites while they were exploited by capitalism, the political right, and so on. The allure of white privilege guarantees that poor whites won't join black populations in their common suffering. David Roedinger calls it "racial folklore," James Baldwin calls it racial ignorance, and Jonathon Metzl contends that it is literally killing poor white Americans.[25] And what happens for those enterprising poor whites that manage to infiltrate the upper classes and achieve the boon of white privilege? As Flynt notes, "those who did succeed were often quick to 'pass,' quikly putting behind them a conflicted heritage of racism, emotional religion, and negative stereotypes." This is the cultural and ideological history, based in race, that produced

[25] In *Dying of Whiteness*, Metzl argues that racially influenced politics has profoundly and self-defeatingly hurt the health, safety, and education of poor and working-class Americans.

the Grit Lit authors who seek a generative poor white identity amidst this violent past and present.

White Trash in Southern Literature

Since the phrase "white trash" has its origins in the Southern region, and since the predominant site of its sustained cultural reproduction remains rooted in the South, it is fitting that the majority of scholarship focused on the concept of the white trash is in Southern studies.[26] They have been the subjects of literary politicization for centuries. Writing in 1853, Harriet Beecher-Stowe, in "Poor White Trash," blames slavery for the "double feat, in America, not only of degrading and brutalizing her black working classes, but of producing . . . a poor white population as degraded and brutal as ever existed in any of the most crowded districts in Europe." For Stowe, slavery eliminated the possibility of a Southern white middle-class, a notion that famous Southern historian and cultural critic W.J. Cash would take up post-Depression. The Great Depression had forced the plight of the poor white onto the national stage; suddenly, it was of national concern, forcing other Americans to experience what Southern whte trash had been experiencing all along. Political policy under the New Deal[27]—such as the TVA—and an increasing popularity of Southern music on the radio—such as the Carter Family and the Grand Ole Opry[28]—made the poor southern white a recognizable and divisive figure. Southern diaspora, with millions of poor white and Black Southerners moving towards industrializing regions, such as the Midwest, further nationalized the plight of the white trash. Southern

[26] No concrete evidence exists for the actual origin of the phrase, but anecdotal information usually attributes the phrase to southern slaves, who would refer to non-slave-owning class of whites "'po white trash."
[27] See Roger Biles's *The South and the New Deal*. As a region hit particularly hard by the Depression, the New Deal created programs meant to specifically target rural populations in the South, with the intention of both employing the people while bringing things like electricity to isolated areas.
[28] See Anthony Karkins's chapter on country music in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon.*

literature initially weighed in by doubling down on the belief that, in fact, the white middle-class is the true legacy of Southern history.

Scholars and writers of the early-twentieth-century Southern academy, also known as the Agrarians or the Fugitives, pushed back with a conservative message to return to yeomanry. They argued that the plantation system, the root of all Southern ills, is not the original myth of the South. The true Southern life that they call for is one of family-based, homemade, subsistence agriculture that can remedy the incoming barbarism of the New South.[29] The Agrarians submit that the future of the South will be defined by man versus machine, farm versus factory, and company versus family. What is at stake, they argue, is the conservation of Southern ideals—social and spiritual—and the potential loss of regional identity, one that has been tainted by slavery and the plantation system but is recoverable through their pastoral project. As Stark Young summarizes Southern history in "Not in Memoriam, but in Defense," "we can never go back," but we can work to preserve the "worthwhile things" that remain. Since the Southern Renaissance[30] and the Agrarians at Vanderbilt reshaped the scope, content, and purpose of Southern literature, criticism was both elitist and revisionist. While deserving of their many important contributions, what Michael Kreyling calls the "Rubin generation," named after the influential scholar Lewis Rubin,[31] early Southern literary criticism reinforced myths of an earlier South—while ignoring issues such as class, race, and gender. Kreyling's *Inventing*

[29] For Agrarians, the industrialization of the South with its technology and machines, stripped the South of what made it culturally unique.
[30] For Kreyling, Rubin and his disciples represent the non skeptical side of Southern literary criticism and "assumed that a realistic relationship between human history and aesthetic works is the premise from which literary criticism/history begins," thus using the often fabricated depictions of the South in Southern literature as exemplifying Southern reality.
[31] "The Southern Renaissance" was a concept meant primarily to designate a remarkable surge of literature originating in the U.S. South starting in the early 1920s. It distinguished what was seen as the lesser literature of the post-Civil War "Local Color" period. Prominent authors in the Southern Renaissance include Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and the most imposing figure in Southern letters, William Faulkner. While the literature probed many themes, one key topic was reckoning with Southern history, particulary slavery, as well as defining the South as a distinct culture and place rather than just a region in the United States.

Southern Literature (1998) offers the best explanation of how Rubin's assumption that a realistic relationship between human history and aesthetic works is the premise from which Southern literary criticism has previously been approached. Rubin and his contemporaries modeled their South on the South that they wanted to see, the same South modeled in the writers they selected to study.

To put it bluntly, older Southern literary and cultural studies purposefully—almost conspiratorially—ignored ugly aspects of Southern culture that did not mesh with the projection of a South they wanted. The lived experience of the poor whites is notable among these aspects, as are the erasure of African-American culture, history, and oppression, the struggles and progress of women in Southern history and literature, and any reference to non-normative sexuality or bodies. Scholars that came later—J. Wayne Flynt, Michael Kreyling, Scott Romine and Richard Gray—have successfully pushed back against the Rubin generation, bringing to the fore previously disregarded identities while also, crucially, revealing the mythmaking relationship between Southern literature, its criticism, and cultural understandings of the South. Among these new approaches is a productive look at poor whites. Building on the foundational work of Shields McIlwaine,[32] Sylvia Cook, as far back as 1976, offered a valuable, Marxist-inflected discussion of the southern social novel and the poor whites.[33] In historical studies, Grady McWhiney was instrumental in preserving the "folkways"[34] of a traditionally poor

[32] McIlwaine's 1940 study, *The Southern Poor-white from Lubberland to Tobacco Road*, is an early example of white trash academic scholarship.

[33] Cook's *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction*, summarizes familiar narratives of the poor white in the nineteenth century before focusing on the leftist literature from Southern factories during the New South industrialization of the South. Of particular note is Cook's analysis of three novels related to the Gastonia mill strike, which demonstrates an unanticipated but present influence of leftist thought among a usually conservative population.

[34] William Graham Sumner coined the term, which refers to learned behavior shared by a social group. Grady McWhiney's seminal yet controversial *Cracker Culture: Celtic Culture in the Old South* (1989) analyzes the social life of the Old South, which one reviewer summarized as: "This white ethnic culture valued leisure for leisure's sake, emphasized an oral tradition over the written word, and placed stress upon ideas that were antagonistic to the life-style of English-dominated northerners."

segment of the South by cataloguing the culture of "crackers" in the Old South. Back in literary studies, Duane Carr came out with a useful survey that attempts to span all of American history, but falls back on unnuanced, essentialist conclusions, such as reading Harry Crews as a modern day Caldwell.[35]

During a moment of a deep and renewed interest in Southern fashioning (self- and non-self), Richard Gray flips self-fashioning back on itself by highlighting the counter-image of Rubin's. To that end, he raises reformist literature, including Erskine Caldwell, and stories of the rural South to examine questions of authenticity in Southern cultural production. Interested in similar things, Scott Romine employs class as a tool in deconstructing the meaning of the South. While not bound by region, Matt Wray theorizes the "disturbing liminality"[36] of white trash.[37] Very recently, Anthony Harkins offers a pop-culturist history of the adjacent but more accepted identity of the "hillbilly,"[38] Jennifer Greeson employs postcolonialism to tell a metanarrative of how U.S. exceptionalism has depended on the American North to create and perpetuate their conception of the South,[39] and Nancy Isenberg's recent bestseller brings that history to a much wider and more diverse audience.[40] Scholars like these include class and race to make important interventions in the study of poor whites. Newer scholarship is remedying a problematic critical history, though diversity in Southern studies remains wanting, and a close look at the hitherto

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[35] Duane Carr's *A Question of Class: the Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* (1996) compares Crews to Caldwell by saying that, like Caldwell, Crews's characters fall into damaging stereotypes. This is a cursory and undeveloped analysis of Crews that ignores much of what has become academically accepted about Crews's work.
[36] According to Wray, whiteness studies "stumbles" when considering "white trash," because it indicates a "monstrous identity of mutually violating terms; two things that should be kept separate but are put together" (2).
[37] See Richard Gray's *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (2000), Scott Romine's *The Real South* (2008), and Matt Wray's *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of White Trash* (2006).
[38] It is interesting that, despite clear overlaps, white trash and hillbillies have remained so distinctly separate, with the hillbilly usually enjoying a more sympathetic, accepted status.
[39] See Greeson's *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (2010), which argues and ultimately participates in the South's lack of agency in fashioning its own regional identity.
[40] Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016) was a New York Times bestseller and points to a renewed interest in the white trash.

ignored poor whites in Southern studies can be a lucrative addition to revisionist criticism, one that also offers unique angles of visions through which to view other dismissed identities. This project adds to these critiques by bringing Grit Lit into the mix. It contributes to uncovering the classism and racism implicit in older Southern studies; it helps to further explode persistent myths of the South, such as pastoralism and paternalism; and, most crucially, it articulates the ways such studies can participate in larger cultural narratives regarding race, social justice, and class divisions, in a Southern moment defined by tearing down monuments, banning Confederate flags, Trump's demagoguery, and the wholesale reckoning with (for some) of the region's past and present sins.

Grit Lit Scholarship

In 2002, Robert Gingher defined "Grit Lit" as "a "facetious shorthand for fiction devoted to the rough edges ('grit') of life" (qtd. in Vernon 78). Grit Lit began as a pejorative but became a badge of honor, with critics retroactively using it as an umbrella term for previous works (Crews, Brown, Allison, etc.) and the continued interest in and marketability of such literature. To date, there is no book-length treatment of Grit Lit as a distinct mode of literature, and there is just one journal article, Zackary Vernon's "Romanticizing the Rough South: Contemporary Cultural Nakedness and the Rise of Grit Lit." Vernon admonishes readers to avoid mistaking "dueling hardships" for authenticity, attempts to situate Grit Lit within Southern literature's history of historical revisionism, and condemns certain authors—such as Wiley Cash—as exploiting poor whites. Vernon's piece appeared partly as a response to the publication of Brian Carpenter and Tom Franklin's edited anthology, which solidified Grit Lit as both a standalone and worthy area of interest. Despite this dearth in larger treatments of Girt Lit, individual authors have been noted

in a number of monographs that intersect with Grit Lit. Typically focused in Southern studies more generally, of course, these sections do not refer to Grit Lit as a distinct category, though they often refer to lower-class white authorship as an emergent area of literature.[41] Further, when Grits appear in book-length studies, it is often used as an example of literature that challenges traditional or canonical myths of the South.[42] At other times, it is conspicuously absent, especially in scholarship that seeks to reaffirm long-held southern values, showing Grit Lit to still be in its nascent stages of becoming an accepted, usable resource in Southern literary studies.[43] Grit Lit writers are useful for pushing against stagnant areas of southern literary studies. It is wielded as one piece in a puzzle that is upending traditionally absent areas, including race, gender, sexuality, and in this case, poor whites. Given the critical significance it already holds in literary circles, as well as its growing accessibility to mass audiences and sustained popular appeal, Grit Lit is overdue for such a study.

DEFINING GRIT LIT

But what is Grit Lit? Is it a genre?[44] A mode? Is it a group of likeminded artists or a disparate collection of voices artificially placed under a critic-created umbrella? Where does it fit within other literary movements in American Literature? It's not proletarian literature, because it often

[41] Matthew Guinn calls Larry Brown's naturalistic fiction "a harbinger of many such new voices [in southern literature]" (36).
[42] When Martyn Bone writes a chapter on Harry Crews in his monograph on the "postsouthern sense of place," Crews is used to model an anti-agrarian attitude. Matthew Guinn does something similar, where he devotes significant space to the "big three"—Crews, Allison, and Brown—to demonstrate a recent strain of literary naturalism that writes against the grain of traditional southern-renaissance-oriented scholarship..
[43] Grit Lit authors are conspicuously missing in Mary Weaks-Baxter Reclaiming *the American Farmer: The Reinvention of a Regional Mythology in Twentieth-Century Southern Writing* (2006), which works to prove that agrarianism is still a vital, ever-present facet of southern literature.
[44] Nancy Pearl's *Book Lust* (2003) includes a very brief section on "Grit Lit." She labels it a "subcategory of Southern fiction" (106).

lacks polemics, though not always.[45] It's not literary naturalism, because not all of the authors posit a deterministic worldview, though some certainly do.[46] It's not quite dirty realism, because such a stripped-down, realistic focus is not always present in Grit Lit, though it often is.[47] It's not exactly a genre, per se, because you're just as likely to find magical realism (Lewis Nordan)[48] as a detective story (Tom Franklin)[49] or a piece of autobiographical environmental activism (Janisse Ray; Ron Rash).[50] Like other insurgent, apparently low-brow artistic movements like blaxploitation, the term was first used pejoratively, but it has proven popular, however, to the point where, as Zackary Vernon notes, "contemporary writers flash the label proudly; and literary presses, book purveyors, and fan websites rely on it to promote books published by writers of the South who inhabit or once inhabited the region's poorest or most culturally marginalized spaces" (78). It's explosion in popularity raises existential questions about its place in southern literature, popular culture, and the representation of poor whites. And as we will see, Grit Lit depends on experimenting with a range of genres, styles, and literary movements to explore its unique and hitherto unspoken voice.

To define the efflorescence of Grit Lit, we must first define its components, *grit* and *lit*, both of which are fraught and undetermined. It is perhaps easier to delineate what "Grit Lit" is not then decide on what it is, as Tom Franklin does in his preface to the anthology, *Grit Lit: A*

[45] Environmentally focused Grit Lit is perhaps the clearest inheritor of proletarian literature's polemics. They track the ecology of the South through its poorest inhabitants, raising awareness for the culture and its environment with a clear agenda (See the work of Ron Rash, Ann Pancake, Janisse Ray, and this book's Conclusion).

[46] Chapter two considers how Larry Brown's strong ties with literary naturalism are used and subverted. Brown is the writer perhaps most often saddled with the label of literary naturalism.

[47] Chapter three considers Dorothy Allison's teleological use of autobiographical realism.

[48] For an analysis of magical realism in Lewis Nordan, see Taylor.

[49] Chapter four considers the use of the detective genre in Tom Franklin's *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* (2010).

[50] Again, see Rash, Pancake, and Ray.

Rough South Reader, the first of its kind: "First off, it isn't grits, that white breakfast stuff that southerners eat," or "the quality Rooster Cogburn possesses in Charles Portis's *True Grit*," or "the hundred-pound bags of sandblasting grit." It is, in fact, all of those things. Tom Franklin's exercise in determining what Grit Lit is not is a useful starting place because it forces us to divorce it from preconceptions we have about both "grit," which receives the brunt of critical attention, and "lit," its literary-ness, literary genealogy, and teleology.

Etymologically, *grit* comes from Old English, which in itself linguistically carries lower-class associations.[51] There are competing definitions of the word, a synthesis of which lands closer to its current contextual connotation. One specifically American Hemingwayesque definition refers to "firmness or solidity of character; indomitable spirit or pluck; stamina."[52] This is the "grit" of Portis's *True Grit*.[53] In that novel, Patty is in search for the ideal "grit," the quality of staring down death in defense of an ideal morality, one that lies outside traditional conceptions of right and wrong (but is always right). The other meaning, however, references the "unpleasant or injurious qualities of grit." The experience of "grit" is one of "unpleasant surprise," "as when one's teeth close on a bit of gravel in a dish of strawberries and cream." Relatedly, "grit" also refers to a substance that gets in the way of the smooth operation of gears. In this way, "grit" is a grainy, hard, jagged, and unwanted quality. It seems that Grit Lit, though clearly entrenched in that purely American, Rooster Cogburn brand of "grit," also carries an injurious quality, one where such hardness is not always righteous and is sometimes harmful.

[51] After the Norman Conquest, English became the language of the peasantry while French was the language of the aristocracy.
[52] The first usage of this brand of "grit," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was in a 1825 American text—"Proper fellow he was too; 'cute enough, I tell you—sharp as a razor—clear grit."
[53] Indeed, many "cowboys" were Southerners displaced after the Civil War.

"Grit," used in this way, accounts for when that "indomitable spirit" becomes destructive to itself and the community.

"Grit" is not selflessness or unbridled bravery. It risks calculated and reckless selfishness to gain fleeting and occasional glimpses of that "true grit." It is also a classed definition. "Grit" is a quality of the lower classes, those who are unrefined and unconstrained. Moreover, this definition is necessarily raced. Behind much of this "grit" is white anger and a racial memory that harbors both entitlement and disillusionment. Bearing this definition in mind, Grit Lit should not be looked to for affirmation of American steadfastness and solidity of character; that kind of "grit" is illusory. Grit Lit qualifies the idyllic American charm of "grit," as defined historically by figures like Jefferson's yeoman, Creveceour's "new man," and Daniel Boone,[54] by showing how it can be distorted and misplaced by lower-class Americans who do not wield it like Rooster As such, it undercuts the prevailing national fantasy of the white working-class as the backbone of the nation. Grit Lit is the current manifestation of a "bit of gravel" in the "strawberries and cream" of American literature.

The "lit" part of Grit Lit is similarly fraught. The criticism devoted to Grit Lit, in particular its intellectual ancestry, traces its genealogy from elite Southern gothic writers such as Faulkner and O'Connor.[55] As Matthew Guinn rightly sees it, "southern literature has been for decades a near-monolithic record of southern experience viewed through the lens of the upper classes" (3). In the shadow of canonical literature, Grit Lit has been read against these figures, determining how they depart from, complicate, or bolster the artistic and cultural preeminence of

[54] See Creveceour's third letter in *Letters from an American Farmer*, where he describes the "new man": individualistic, self-reliant, pragmatic, hard-working, a stolid man of the land free to pursue his self-defined goals. Daniel Boone and subsequent mountain men have been romanticized in American culture for their freedom, survivability, and toughness.

[55] Zackary Vernon believes we can trace Grit Lit back from William Byrd's *Dividing Line*, through the western and Southern Gothic in "Romanticizing the Rough South: Contemporary Cultural Nakedness and the Rise of Grit Lit."

America's literary vanguard. Thus, emerging scholarship on the genre locates its potential as well as its problems within this elite group. Given its sometimes subversive subject matter and its aspiration to unguardedly express and enact lower-class authenticity, scholars assume that Grit Lit is deliberately created against the cultural grain, detached from history, or at least unconcerned with the social grain. While that is sometimes the case, it's more often the case that Grit Lit is tethered to the dominant, genteel literature of the South. One of the Vanderbilt-based Fugitives of the 1920s, Andrew Lytle was Crews's mentor. Much of it was first published in literary journals by writers who, though they (legitimately) claim gritty authenticity, got MFAs in creative writing and appealed to the reading classes.[56] Like the historical relationship between poor, landless whites and the landed gentry, the former exists apart from the latter, but aspires to it nevertheless. Part of Grit Lit's project is unshackling its identity from the ruling class that marginalized them.

In practice, what is Grit Lit? What do the authors write about and what themes and ideas unite these sometimes disparate and unrelated writers? First, the grouping of these texts as a singular genre of school of writing united by a textuality based in region, economics, and resistance presupposes class. If the socio-economic conditions of Grits goes unremarked upon in the literature, it is because class is assumed. They are on the lowest rung of the post-industrial, specifically Southern, class hierarchy, or very near it—those who saw the barrels off of shotguns, who cook, distribute, and use methamphetamine. They write from *within* the underclass, unlike other representations of poor whites. Crews, for example, refutes the political quietism of the conservative movement as framed by the Southern gentility. His writing presupposes class-based

[56] In Tom Franklin's preface to *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, he writes about the earlier authenticity of Grit Lit (though this too ignores the first waves embeddedness in higher education and the literary world): "And while some us second- or third-generation Grit Litters did ear M.F.A.s, we feel vaguely guilty about it and know we're a level less pure than our older, grittier counterparts" (xviii).

hierarchies at odds with the propaganda of social mobility the elite wield to misdirect the underclasses. Amy Weldon compares the comparable motivations of Crews and Rick Braggs, noting that both authors operate from an assumed binary of aristocracy and trash. If class goes unremarked upon in Grit Lit, it is because class is a concept reserved for those who can observe differences between social positions. That they rarely discuss class is indicative of how embedded class assumptions are; it goes without saying. By contrast, for the rough Southern writer, class status is self-consciously depicted as permanent and unescapable; the bottom rung is all that is observable.

Second, Grit Lit traffics in authenticity. There is an understanding amongst readers and writers alike that, to a certain extent, every piece of Grit Lit is autobiographically informed, insofar as the fiction comes explicitly, sometimes painfully, from personal experience. Most reviews cite the literature's stripped down, brutally honest, intensely personal content in ways that transcends genre as it ranges from life-writing, to genre fiction, literary fiction, and more experimental smudgings therein. But the literature also calls attention to the inherent artificiality of all claims to authenticity. For example, there is a recent trend in Grit Lit in which authors acknowledge the honesty and integrity found in the majority of the people of their respective locales, with the criminal, the group they focus on in their writing, constituting the minority. Matthew McBride, for example, a recent Grit from rural Missouri, describes his home in Gasconade County, notorious for its meth trade: "Yet, in this community, you'll find honest, hardworking people. They are teachers and farmers and factory workers. But there are also a few lowlife degenerates. They are the ones I write about." Donald Ray Pollock, a southeastern Ohio writer, says something similar about his hometown holler of Knockemstiff, where the ugly subject matter of his fiction is not meant to represent the place as a whole. Such disclaimers

betray an impulse to safeguard authors from local outcry, not always because of political, philosophical, or moral motivations, but because most Grits continue to reside in the places they write about, and neighbors resent being lumped in with the criminal element. Such disclaimers also present the challenges of holding up authenticity as a foundational prerequisite aspect of Grit Lit.

For example, Grit Lit's seeming emphasis on authenticity and its grounding in the underclass is complicated by the high-class company it often keeps.Those who write (and write about) Grit Lit want it to be taken seriously as high literature. *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader* addresses mostly authors who published in small, literary journals, never made much money, and were critically lauded but commercially inconsequential, with a few notable exceptions who found commercial success while retaining a literary luster. Grit Lit is rightly presented as a consciously more intellectual treatment of poor whites than Southern literature has previously provided, and though it is also meant to be entertaining, it wants to be appreciated first for its intelligence, its literary-ness. Perhaps this comes from insecurity over its subject matter. Certainly, after surveying the historical representation of poor whites in popular culture, it is little wonder why champions of Grit Lit would want to put some distance between their versions of poor white culture and past and present prevailing conceptions. Another reason for Grit Lit's popularity in literary circles comes from the reading class's fetish for reading about this type of subject. Zackary Vernon, while examining the success of Grit Lit, cites Wendy Griswold's work on regionalism and the reading class. The reading class is the "self-perpetuating minority" that is associated with education "and more generally with urban social elites" ("Reading and the Reading Class" 138). Region, Griswold contends, resonates not with the reading class's experience, but with its desires. The white trash South, then, is another in a long line of spaces

both material and cultural that consumers can fetishize for being outside of global homogenizing forces.

But despite its literary pretensions, Grit Lit authors frequently turn to low-class, popular formulas. For example, the western is readily discernible.[57] With the West settled, the hollers of the rough South become the new geographical location wherein the cultural tensions formerly explored in westerns can be reexamined and updated.[58] In attitude and worldview, Grit Lit resembles hardboiled detective fiction;[59] rather than the dark, dank streets of the corrupt metropolis, it is the dark, dank hills of Appalachia. Instead of a dilapidated apartment building, it is a rundown trailer park. Another reason authors employ these formulas, at its most basic, is because many authors need to get published and sell copies to realize their careers as writers.[60] Similarly, while authors welcome comparisons with canonical authors and show a knowledge of classic texts, they are also influenced by popular fiction writers. Harry Crews loved Graham Greene's "entertainments."[61] Larry Brown consistently cites Stephen King as an important

[57] Thomas Aervold Bjerre's "The White Trash Cowboys of Father and Son" argues that Brown has "at the same time borrowed from, and in one particular novel [Father and Son] added to, the legacy of the American Western" (58). He details the generic superstructures of the Western, and how Brown's novel takes up the same issues: honor and justice, the rejuvenating power of the land, nature as being larger than life, working-class heroes and villains, the strict pairing of moral counterpoints, and male fantasy.

[58] Like most westerns, landscape is a distinct character in Grit Lit, and a key theme is the intersection and tension between civilization and wilderness, sectionalism – Grit Lit rotates the geographical divide from east/west to north/south – and a questioning of values and myths central to the American character.

[59] The deep resonance of the hard-boiled detective story appears counterintuitive at first glance. Yet, just as the hardboiled genre shares much with the wild west and pioneer narratives of the 19th century, we only need to reverse some of the characteristics of hardboiled fiction to arrive at Grit Lit. While the hard-boiled formula features the corrupt modern city as the scenic backdrop, the Grit Lit novel takes as its background a rural, but still very corrupt, setting. The former glory and natural beauty is still visible, but it is now juxtaposed with encroaching consumerism and cultural homogenization. But while the urban wasteland signals a complete transformation into criminality and corruption, the Grit Lit setting is in the process of undergoing that change.

[60] Larry Brown was a long-time firefighter who practiced writing while on call. Only after many years was he able to become a full-time writer. William Gay worked in the trades for decades before becoming a published author.

[61] Greene created a dichotomy to distinguish his literary novels from his formula fiction, which he referred to as "entertainments."

influence.[62] Dorothy Allison calls herself "the wages of pulp" (*Skin* 94).[63] Thus, Grit Lit's anxiety about authenticity is compounded by its (desired) relationship with the literary vanguard, the elite's own interests in it, and its own indebtedness to popular fiction.

Third, and tied in with the fraught concept of authenticity is Grit Lit's preoccupation with nostalgia. History, memory, and a sense of loss in a changing South is apparent in much of Grit Lit. Reflecting Agrarian conservatism, culture is often seen as disintegrating, like a "shivering load" of receding forest, or consumerist invasion in Crews. The rough South comes to be regarded as a threatened enclave of culture and tradition that is being infiltrated by outside forces—"new" Southerners, capitalism, and carpetbaggers. Many authors who work primarily in fiction write at least one memoir, a genre built in many cases on nostalgia. Moreover, childhood is a common theme in Grit literature, with most of the memoirs detailing the author's rough south childhood, a sort of credentialing that validates their fictional rough south content. But unlike the nostalgia of other Southern literature, such as that of the Agrarians, the rough South past is not Edenic or bucolic, nor is it prosperous or harmonious. As Crews said in a 1974 interview, ""Everybody likes to rhapsodize about how beautiful the rural life is. The rural life, as I knew and experienced it in childhood, is, without exception, dreadful" (57). Nevertheless, it pulls authors backward. Grit Lit is infused with the complicated interplay between nostalgia, life writing, and childhood.

Relatedly, and previously alluded to, Grit Lit is inextricably bound to specific places. Grit Lit is so immeasurably tied up in the landscapes that inspire it that it jarringly blurs the distinction between imagined and lived experience. The make-believe is never far from the real,

[62] In Brown's *Billy Ray's Farm: Essays From a Place Called Tulsa*, he connects himself with three writers: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and Stephen King (5)

[63] Allison also writes of the significance of reading lesbian pornographic and romance novels in *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*.

and given the brutality of its content, great weight is placed on Grit Lit's affective abilities. Such people and places exist in the world, and these writers know firsthand. Indeed, writing often codes as a form of therapy or recovery for the Grit writer—they seek alternative ways of viewing things to escape or understand the harshness of their circumstances. It is rare for a Grit to change the name of a place that is responsible for the content of their literature. Still further, there is a retrospective quality to much of Grit Lit. Because these authors have experienced the "gravel" version of "grit," and because they often turn to writing later, they must turn back, confront, and finally acknowledge those experiences before finding the capacity to mine them for aesthetic expression. For Crews, it was only when he realized he would have to use the personal pronoun, "the use of *I,* lovely and terrifying word" that he "was home free" (*Childhood* 21, author emphasis). Dorothy Allison cited a similar obstacle when unpacking the word "trash," which she overcame only when she was able "to confront the term and claim it honorific" (25). Grit Lit is not celebration or exploitation, nor is it simply literary journalism. It is a grappling-with, a coming-to-terms with a place and its people, having removed the blinders of the genteel tradition stretching from Byrd and Simms through Faulkner, Caldwell, Dickey, and even O'Connor or McCullers. Yet it is itself still a construction, one that also participates in creating Southern mythologies.

Class, authenticity, nostalgia, and place are the thematic core of Grit Lit, the topics most commonly associated with it, with tropes such as crime, drug use, and violence rounding out the common content of Grit Lit. Other things common to non- and pre-Grit Southern literature and culture come up in Grit Lit but are de-emphasized or re-positioned. While central to most regional sources, religion, for example, does not seem that urgent. While it is clearly a huge part of the lives of authors and sometimes the plots of the stories—it is appropriately presented as a

central, ubiquitous feature of the Southern cultural landscape, and thus must influence the narrative to a certain extent—the literature does not promote religion, as such. Indeed, there is a secularizing aspect to it; for them, infact, the primitive forms of Christianity common to the population they depict represent religion yet another reason poor whites have remained mired in poverty and inferiority. Genealogy and traditional, patrilineal family descent is likewise a common theme in conventional Southern literature, but unlike other texts where heritage cements an individual in history, family trees are often contested, violent sites in Grit Lit, raising still more doubts about usually stable aspects of Southern literature.

This open-ended definition of Grit Lit is necessarily unfixed and fluid; it serves to articulate the complexities of the genre, the content of the literature, and the various theoretical avenues that must be reckoned with in order to fully perceive the critical crossroads where Grit lit is located. While poor whites of the South have been previously configured as objects, this treatment explores their subjecthood and subjectivity by tracing the development of a distinct cultural voice, one that is produced from the inside-out and the bottom-up.

The Three Waves of Grit Lit

As Grit Lit evolved over the decades, discernible and historical patterns emerge. Harry Crews was the first practitioner of a dynamic white trash fiction. In the twentieth century, writers approached the poor Southern white from a variety of angles. Erskine Caldwell employed them for political reasons. James Agee used them for journalistic, formal reasons. Faulkner's many, many Snopeses engrained the literary portrayal of white trash for decades, even as parts of the family become wealthy.[64] However accurately or sincerely these writers approached their

[64] In addition to the Snopes, Faulkner's *Sanctuary* features the unsavory exploits of the southern underclass. Faulkner is the primary touchstone for white trash representation in high Southern literature.

subjects, it was always from a distance. Caldwell used them as tools, and Agee aimed for truth, but they always did so from a comfortable distance. Other Southern writers like Barry Hannah and Cormac McCarthy foreshadow Crews, but before the 1960s there was no writer with such a total, inside focus on the Southern underclass. Since Crews began publishing in the late 1960s, aspiring writers of similarly blue-collar, southern backgrounds sought to model and expand upon what Crews made acceptable to discuss.

The second generation—peaking somewhere in the mid-1990s—was the height of Grit Lit's accomplishment in terms of critical approbation and literary (understood traditionally) acceptance.[65] Larry Brown, Dorothy Allison, Chris Offutt, William Gay, to name only a few, built on Crews's foundation and explored the poor white's relationship to their identity and themes such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability. This was also when literary scholars, who were quick to applaud these authors, looked back and started connecting their work with Crews, who was still publishing all the while. Crews retroactively became the godfather of Grit Lit by exposing an appetite for such literature and also providing an operative vocabulary for describing it.

The third generation corresponds with Grit Lit written after 2000. This is when the Grit Lit mode explodes in popularity, beyond the laudation of academics, and into genre fiction (established formulas),[66] new mediums,[67] and more mixed responses.[68] Examples of recent authors include Tom Franklin, Ron Rash, Frank Bill, David Joy, and Donald Ray Pollock. Some

[65] Dorothy Allion's *Bastard Out of Carolina* one many awards, including being a finalist for the National Book Award. Larry Brown became the first two time winner of the Southern Book Award. Many authors began publishing in small literary journals, and their writing has always been discussed in relation to Southern literary stalwarts like Faulkner, O'Connor.
[66] Most commonly the crime, detective, and mystery genres, with horror, romance, and adventure mixed in as well.
[67] Including comics, video games, film, and television; see the Conclusion for examples and analysis.
[68] That is, while earlier Grit Lit was widely praised for its craft and perceived authenticity, more recent examples have garnered criticism for exploiting of white trash culture, see Vernon.

writers simply capitalized on and mimicked their earlier influences, damaging previous progress and encouraging renewed stereotypes, while others work to maintain the integrity, the probing uncertainty, characteristic of the first and second waves. What is clear is that this generation currently holds the day and will influence perceptions of the poor Southern white moving forward.

Grit Lit and the (Identity) Politics of Genre

While Grit Lit is a range of utterances held together by historical, socioeconomic, geographic proximity, as a cohesive genre it is quite messy. Indeed, a defining feature of Grit Lit is generic experimentation; it finds its voice through a collage of literary forms--memoir, gonzo journalism, autobiographical realism, magical realism, literary naturalism, detective fiction, the revisionist western, the Gothic, and many others. Thus, Grit Lit can be thought of as a group of authors seeking an accurate means of literary expression by first confronting established modes, identifying their shortcomings, and suggesting future ways of thinking that synthesize what's useful from the past with new and more apt aesthetic paradigms.

Genre is born out of other genres, which have their origins in human discourse. Grit Lit, a "new" genre, does not have a discursive history. It picks from other genres, styles, and modes, which are all ideological in their own ways. As Tzvetan Todorov notes, genres "communicate with the society in which they flourish by means of institutionalization . . . which is in relation with the dominant ideology . . . Genres, like any other infatuation, reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong" (164). Again, the poor white literary voice has not been a dominant ideology, so how are they to communicate via literature? Which genres reveal their

"constitutive traits"? Grit Lit, like any other genre, is born out of previous genres, exploring their aesthetic and political potential and pitfalls in an effort to fashion something usable.

This project explores the generic explorations these authors have conducted since Grit Lit's inception. Crews turns from grotesque, almost absurdly violent fiction to memoir to gonzo journalism. In each phase, Crews confronts the boundaries between fiction and fantasy, real life and literary persona. Larry Brown samples similarly, leaning on the deterministic environments of the American literary naturalism movement. Dorothy Allison co-opts and confronts literary realism while modeling the shortcomings of a variety of genres and mediums, including fantasy, photography, and gospel music. Tom Franklin parodies the revisionist western, itself a remediation of the classical western, and Jim Grimsley and Rick Bragg return to life writing to acknowledge and challenge poor white racism. In their own ways, and to varying degrees, these genres fail, but they fail forward. Thus, Grit Lit exists on a continuum of refusal.

Grit Lit, then, is characterized by a "precarious structural balance" (Todorov, *Fantasy*).[69] Grit Lit is located between the "real" and the fictional, between mimesis and something constructed. The function of the cultural text, according to Jameson, is to aesthetically reconcile conflict that cannot be bridged in the material-historical level. For Grit Lit authors, this conflict is directed inward, to the ways poor whites have previously been represented and how their cultural texts, taken together, attempt to arrive at something generative. But since there is no previous body of texts to lean on, no previous genres born out of the dominant ideologies of poor Southern whites, Grit Lit explores other genres in an attempt to reconcile its internal conflicts

[69] In *Fantasy: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov defines the fantastic as a specific literary genre located between the uncanny and the marvelous. It is a field of ambiguity, of hesitation over the natural or supernatural character of narrated events.

regarding identity -- how they see themselves and their cultures, how they represent them, and how this impacts past and future representations of poor whites.

As such, in its refusal of the established categories of representation, Grit Lit becomes a sort of metagenre--a comment on the genre, style, or movement's ideological conflicts, their political unconsciousness, and not just their aesthetic adaptability. This is of course a political process, but trying to find an overarching political platform, in a strict sense, in Grit Lit is a fool's errand. Among its authors, there are Democrats and Republicans, Marxists and followers of Friedman. Some just want to be left alone, others want social programs to help rural populations. Some eulogize a lost culture while others welcome its cultural evolution. And again, we are talking about a relatively small collection of authors, not the ideological framework of the entire population of poor Southern whites. In ways discussed above, the separation between Grit Lit (a sort of petit bourgeois, to use Marxist terminology) and the culture they know, write about, and are nevertheless separate from (the lumpenproletariat) and the cultural gatekeepers (the bourgeoisie proper) is an important element of their anxiety. Since it is messy, and since there is no explicitly agreed upon ideology (unlike, say, proletariat literature, with its Marxist telos), the ideological conflict *is* identity. Put another way, the "dominant ideology," the "constitutive trait" of this collection of authors bound by class, history, and geography is the searching for a usable paradigm of identity politics.

So, identity is the destination, genre is the journey. The goal is personal identity and self-expression through storytelling, an identity that sometimes simply wants to overlook material-historical-ideological concerns (Crews), sometime wants to acknowledge these concerns and let them inform their construction of a usable identity (Brown), and others want to use that identity to fight for more immediate, actionable change (Allison). The politics, personalities, and

presentations of these authors are diverse, even if their demographic is decidedly not. What binds them is experminations in genre and identity politics and the process of acknowledging and eventually allying with difference. For Grit Lit, "the medium is the message,"[70] in which provocation and simply making the underclass visible transcends any overt, shared, or actionable political outcome. The action is the medium, the mode of presentation. Grit Lit first emphasizes exploring, identifying, and making known these complications, before looking to resolve its many complications and contradictions.

Therefore, Grit Lit, and this project, focus on this process. The authors' skepticism of other genres, styles, and movements parallels the typically one-dimensionality of poor white representation and interpretation. Just like the historical tendency to reduce this population to a short list of negative ideological traits, any single approach oversimplifies Grit Lit's dynamic and nuanced process of self-identification. Having acknowledged alternative voices and ways of telling, Grit Lit has recently turned its attention to more explicitly political endeavors. They're feeling their way to progress. First they must decide who they are, and for *white* trash writers this must include a recognition and understanding of poor white Southerners' role in American racial history.

Grit Lit and Race

Finally, just as "white" trash culture, history, and ideology depends on an Africanist presence (Morrison),[71] a project on "white trash" authors must also consider blackness, though the

[70] This phrase was coined by Marshall McLuhan, which holds that the message (the content and character) of something often obfuscates the character of the medium itself.

[71] See Morrison's *Playing the Dar*k; in American literature, race is always present, even when it does not directly feature Africanist characters or idioms.

literature and its scholarship has previously downplayed race in favor of class and identity. Even with its beginnings dating back to the tail end of the Civil Rights Era, race was often reduced in Grit Lit, most often by conflating the shared experience of poor whites and blacks. While the two defining traits of Grit Lit have to be class and race (white trash is a classed, raced term), race is often a non-issue. Indeed, Brian Carpenter contends that in Grit Lit "race is a less contentious issue here than one might expect" (xviii). This assumed race-blindness is a hole, a denial of their complicity in the centuries of violence and exploitation of their similarly impoverished Black neighbors. And while this becomes a viable part of the Grit Lit project as a whole—it is, after all, modeling the ways in which the poor southern white is denied and unable to assimilate to the dominant white communities (even if many reject assimilation)—it must still be noted where the literature does, and does not, address race head on.Grit Lit models a slow, painful, incremental liberal narrative of progress with regards to race.

Crews acknowledges racial differences in his work but usually either leaves it be or conflates it with the struggles of poor whites, thus participating in the reduction of race. Larry Brown models the seeming deterministic nature of racial violence in the South in order to counter the tidy assumption that we (Grit Lit, critics, Southerners) can harmoniously sidestep such violence by simply conflating poor white and black hardship. Brown problematizes an issue raised but not explored in Crews, but he also keeps issues surrounding race, masculinity, and disability segregated; they remain separate. Allison makes an important step forward by attending to intersectionality. For Allison, race, just like class, sexuality, disability, etc., "form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to hatred is not a simple act." In the search for usable identity, one that is actionable and inclusive, these markers of difference must be considered intersectionality, as mutually constitutive parts of a multi-faceted

identity. Lurking behind all of these approaches to race, and not usually brought to the fore, is the history of racism and relationship between poor whites and blacks in Southern history. Multiple writers post-Allison, however, have again pushed the discussion of race forward by acknowledging racial history in all-encompassing consideration as well as the everyday nuances of racial discrinimination in poor white culture. Just as the larger project of finding a Grit Lit identity utilizes previous genres, styles, and movements, so too does formal experimentation aid in Grit Lit's confrontation with race. By so doing, these authors (Rick Bragg, Jim Grimsley, and Tom Franklin) engage often unengaged aspects of poor white racism and explore often unexplored histories of oppression (such as how the North has used Southern whites to exonerate their own racism, to scapegoat it in the figure of the poor Southern white), further contributing to Grit's Lit's insurrectionary liberal narrative of racial awareness and progress.

CHAPTERS

Chapter one reads Harry Crews's memoir, *Childhood: Biography of a Place*, as a reflection of Crews's own anxiety regarding his position as spokesperson for poor white Southern literature and his own indebtedness and desire to be a part of the dominant Southern literary history. In his memoir, Crews's choice of genre projects the issues of authenticity that haunt poor white writers. If Grit Lit is to represent, or create, an authentic white trash identity, how does the writer embody such an identity, if, as is often assumed, the Grit Lit author is to be a member of that identity? Questions of the authenticity of identity have pervaded the literature since Crews sought to come to terms with his poor white upbringing in Bacon County, a project that, read in these teleological terms, failed. This chapter considers Crews's biography, because his "hard living" is said to mirror his fiction (and vice versa), and because author biography is often cited as a

foundational aspect of how critics would label Grit Lit authors.[72] His literary representation of the rough south is sometimes brutally antagonistic, sometimes painfully nostalgic. This reading sets the stakes for considering Grit Lit as a regional literature as well as informs the similarly complicated views the writers of future chapters have towards their own identity. Crews begins the Grit Lit project of searching for identity through different genres. Crews tries using memoir, and while I argue that it fails for Crews's personal self-fulfilling mission, he shows the literature's searching adaptability. In the process, Crews's *Childhood* gestures towards, but does dwell on, identity intersections—race, gender, ability—that will evolve as a new generation of Grits expands, and narrows, those entanglements.

Chapter two builds on the masculine anxieties and self-destructive impulses of Crews via Larry Brown. Though Grit Lit, in general, is often compared to literary naturalism, Brown is perhaps the model of white trash literary naturalism. *Dirty Work* outwardly reflects the type of deterministic, ultimately doomed universe found in literary naturalism. Brown's *Dirty Work* models this through its approach to masculinity, disability, and race. The main characters are shown to have fallen from the apex of masculinity to the aberrant position described in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's feminist disability theory. This circumscribed narrative is mirrored in Walter and his family's history of racial violence, suggesting that however well-intentioned or vocally progressive a poor white man is regarding racial difference, white-on-black violence remains. But baked into the seemingly nihilistic portrayal of Walter and Braiden and their discourse covering disability, racial history, and uninvited identity transformations is the equally certain position that such paradigms are oppressive for all involved parties. For the

[72] William Gay, for example, is often lauded for his decades of tradesman work before turning to writing; his biography puts him in league with Crews, who had a similarly blue-collar upbringing.

male subject, it might usually end violently, but the inclusion of other identities gestures towards the possibility of a poor white subject not solely governed by the dictates of heteronormative identity.

Chapter three actualizes the suggested potential of *Dirty Work*. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* moves forward the question of poor white identity through genre by leaning on autobiographical realism, a tweak to Crews's life writing, which serves to portray the horizontal, intersectional identity formation of Bone Boatwright. While Crews no doubt gestures to other identities' impact on conceptions of poor white southerners, Allison's work is explicitly inclusive of other non-normative identities, showing the progressive, productive white trash subject comprised of the (often destructive) interpersonal relationships with other identities—black, disabled, gendered, queer. Allison suggests, informed by her feminist and queer activism, that any stable (non-self-destructing) poor white identity must reside on the fringes with other non-normative bodies, an intersectionality best demonstrated through realism. Perhaps more than any other single Grit Lit text, *Bastard* successfully transitions Grit Lit from a self-isolated literature that acknowledges difference but primarily seeks to define itself to a literature that understands the two are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are inseparable.

Chapter four addresses the ways Grit Lit authors have used genre to explicitly discuss race and racism in the poor white South. Similar to the rest of the literature, nonfiction and fiction each lend themselves to different approaches to race. Memoir shows the lived-in, nuanced, "authentic" legacy of racism despite the narrative of escape endemic to white trash life writing, another anxiety foreshadowed in Crews's *Childhood*. More recent Grit Lit fiction, conversely, experiments in other genres' (anti-western, detective fiction) potential for disrupting usual discourses of poor white and black history. Earlier writers needed to (painfully) forge an

identity. In this way, the "grit" of Grit Lit includes the requisite grit needed to confront their own racist past and present.

The conclusion interprets the legacy of Grit Lit and projects areas for further study in a moment of rapid expansion in Grit Lit's popularity and production. This expansion raises future questions that face the study of Grit Lit, such as how the expansion of geographical space and increased circulation and attention will impact, for better or worse, the cultural production of the poor white. Essentially, Grit Lit is going national, and future work must reckon with this. Relatedly, as the tropes of Grit Lit continue to grow in popularity—not just in academic realms, but in popular culture—I raise questions regarding the future of Grit Lit as it continues to infiltrate popular culture. Among the potential problems that might accompany the continuing shift from literary to popular is Vernon's fears of romanticizing the rough south—white trash exploitation. Where Grit Lit was originally designed to be an anti-romantic depiction of the South and a critical look at the systems, values, and embodiments that contribute to its own marginalization as well as its role in the marginalization of others, recent works have romanticized the anti-romanticism in an attempt to approximate or manufacture authenticity. In this way, sadly, what was at first a striking fissure in the popular conception of white trash representation, Grit Lit, if it is to include these recent examples, has returned it to its place in the usual narrative. The ultimate problem of this development is that it doesn't address and confront the social and economic problems faced by those southerners who have once again become objects. However, the potentially destructive impacts of an expanded Grit Lit are somewhat mitigated by a simultaneous turn to ecological activism, as well as those texts in new mediums—comic books, film, television—that subvert the more demeaning representations of poor white subjects. Existential questions emerge: is this recent content even Grit Lit? Is (was) Grit Lit just a

boutique sideshow literary digression in Southern studies and critical discourse? How does the current context, post-Trump era and a moment of renewed public interest in race relations, impact these recent iterations as well as our readings of older Grit Lit texts? Thus, the original question remains, though its context has changed: who are we, and how do we tell our stories?

Grit Lit, and this project, are inherently social projects. Thus, the aims of the project are both urgent and far-reaching, literary and social. I mean to advance Grit Lit as a valuable contribution to Southern literature, one worthy of sustained study. I aim to increase the visibility of these authors as a collective while also contributing meaningfully to each individual author's literary criticism and their role in Southern studies more broadly by importing a variety of critical angles, such as disability studies, queer theory, race theory, gender studies, and ecocriticism. In sum, while it presents itself as literary criticism, such a project also hopes to shed light on the cultural values and ideologies associated with this group, including assumptions, justified and otherwise, of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny. Such considerations are as urgent as ever, as current discourse about social injustice generates new and productive methods of speaking truth to power while further radicalizing those trafficking in discrimination. Moreover, in the post-Trump era, where poor whites have been scapegoated—sometimes rightfully—as willing disciples of the president's demagoguery, the time is ripe for a specific look at the literary representation of the poor Southern white, as described in the contemporary literature of the region. By so doing, Grit Lit does more than just combat ingrained stereotypes, it actively works to change perceptions of a diverse and dynamic culture while highlighting and combating the hate that still resides there.

CHAPTER 1: "PURGED NOTHING": LIFE WRITING, AUTHENCITIY, AND MYTH IN CREWS'S *A CHILDHOOD*

"Harry realized he didn't have a persona. He had to invent one. And the one he invented was a motherfucking freak from Georgia" – Ward Scott

For a few years while teaching at the University of Florida, Harry Crews would show up for the last day of class drunk, wearing a gorilla suit, and carrying bananas. He would thump his chest and throw bananas to everyone in the class. "Life is just a bunch of bananas," he would say. "Get 'em while you can, my friends, for tomorrow they're gonna drop the big one" (Geltner 181). Suffice to say, Harry Crews had a reputation as a rebel, an academic outsider, "an outsized, Bacchanalian figure, the Lord Byron of the Okefenokee swamp, devoted equally to the arts of letters and partying" (Eby). Literary scholarship and popular criticism painted him as a rule-breaker, someone who broke previous conventions in southern literature and became a key voice in a revered, if controversial, white trash renaissance.[73]

Yet, for a significant portion of his early writing career, the one person whose approval he coveted above all was Andrew Lytle, one of the original Agrarians and one of the few Fugitives who stuck to the Agrarian tenets, even when his peers denounced or reshaped them.[74] Crews became enamored with Lytle while a student at the University of Florida and Lytle took

[73] *The New York TImes* called him, after his death, "a Georgia Rabelais," "whose novels out-Gothic Southern Gothic" and are "grotesquely populated and almost preternaturally violent." Similarly, *The Washington Post* described his legacy as: "Even though many of his books have fallen out of print, Mr. Crews became something of a sage of the red-clay South, sought out for documentaries and for his spellbinding stories." He was seen by reviewers as a dangerous, respected, misunderstood but fiercely beloved cult Southern writer. In academic scholarship, critics such as Jerry McGregory describe him as breaking form the status quo, particularly through his unique, unrefined, and unorthodox view from the forgotten sharecropping fields of South Georgia, a region far different from Oxford, Charleston, and other hotbeds of Southern literature.

[74] Like opinions of Agrarianism in general, Lytle's adherence to his small farm, anti-industrial ethos is figured in both positive and negative ways. Maggie Rayland, for example, writing for the Tennessee Literary Project, describes his dedication to Agrarianism as heroic and (Southern) patriotic: "Lytle was one of the few followers of the movement who remained true to his beliefs and teachings; in fact, of all the members, Lytle was the only one who was actually a farmer, and he was the only one who did not eventually desert the South to become a Yankee."

an interest in him. He became Crews's mentor and provided diligent feedback on the young writer's work. For years, Crews would continue to send his manuscripts to Lytle, who would invariably respond that Crews needed to slow down and remove the extreme violence that would become fundamental to Crews's thematic. Crews would later say: "Mr. Lytle was sort of like a father to me at one time, and he sort of disowned me" (Bledsoe, *Getting Naked* 192). On their differences, Crews said: "Here's one of the things you must understand: my South, the South I'm from, is entirely different from Mr. Lytle's. He doesn't know anything about the South I'm from." Lytle, Crews said, along with people like Reynolds Price and Erskine Caldwell, spoke different languages: "On the one hand, I'm immodest enough to say that they can't talk my language because they don't know it. They just think they do. They think they know my language; I know I don't know theirs. But they don't know mine, but they don't" (193). While he always spoke fondly of Lytle, Crews would never dedicate a book to Lytle, because Lytle never gave him the approval he craved.

This relationship serves two purposes and reveals a tension in the study of Harry Crews and Grit Lit as a whole. First, it introduces Crews's conviction that the people best suited for writing about the poor white are those who "speak the language." He is invested in authenticity, even though I will show that he is also invested in a kind of subject position, one that has been fetishized and instrumentalized in order to create a certain version of the South. Second, his relationship with Lytle shows him to be loyal to a writer who was himself deeply invested in the myth of the agrarian yeoman. Crews craved the approval of someone who, despite making a career of championing the rural southerner as the most important southern myth, does not, finally, "speak his language." This tension, between myth and authenticity, invention and reality, would stay with Crews throughout his life and literature and help characterize the inextricable

and fraught relationship between genre and identity. That is, if one of Grit Lit's prime missions is for credible authors to theorize the identity of the poor southern white while also carving out an independent literary space, which genre, medium, or mode is best suited to serve that mission?

This chapter makes several introductory moves regarding Grit Lit as a whole and Crews specifically. First, beyond the stylistic elements he would impart to Grit Lit, this chapter explores his complicated negotiation of autobiography (as a semi-fictional genre), actual biographical facts, and public perception of that biography. Crews's confrontation with autobiographical writing will inform subsequent generations of Grits who are faced with the basic question: How does one write about the dirty "truth" of their white trash experience? Central to Crews's influential foray into autobiographical writing is his uneasy relationship with authenticity. In the process and aftermath of composing his memoir, however taxing it was to Crews personally, his melding of autobiography and fiction helped deconstruct previous traditions en route to clearing a space for Grit Lit's unique voice. Therefore, authenticity becomes a central component in how we read other poor white Southern authors. The formation of a white trash identity is inextricably tethered to the ways that identity is textually configured. When it comes time to politicize the literature's treatment of these pressing social topics, specifically the intersections of genre and marginalized identities discussed in subsequent chapters, we can look first to the original. Indeed, in his most famous work, *A Childhood: Biography of a Place*, Crews further introduces readers to the often difficult to discuss topics that continue to dominate Grit Lit—disability, gender, race, and class. In short, Crews's fiction marks beginning of Grit Lit's meditations on difference, for better and worse, not just because of how he wrote or because he chose to write about an often neglected demographic, but because he addresses issues central to the analysis of the poor white literary moment that he spurred and in which we still find ourselves. This chapter,

then, also serves as a primer on the issues that Crews and future Grits address. To discuss that, we must examine Crews's own place within a counter-movement to the Southern literary canon and his less-than-comfortable position as spokesperson for the emerging white trash renaissance.[75]

Emerging from this consideration of genre and identity are interventions in existing Crews criticism. The first is Crews's place within the dominant narrative of Southern literature. Crews was painted by critics and the reading class, as well as painfully performed by himself, as a literary rebel. This tidy conclusion neglects Crews's own indebtedness to the established, Southern Renascence guard that he looked up to, felt betrayed by, and, eventually, actively worked to undermine. This chapter situates Grit Lit in Southern literary history by analyzing the ways Harry Crews both combats and reinforces the Southern literary impulse to mythologize the South. Readings of Crews's nonfiction complicates previous conclusions about Crews's work, its legacy, and its place within Southern literature. While scholarship positions Crews as rebutting traditional models of Southern romanticization, it ignores how Crews, in his hard-living biography, candid interviews, and volumes of nonfiction, also carves out a space for what would become a growing interest in an alternative myth: the myth of the rough South. Indeed, the recent romanticization of Grit Lit, alluded to in the introduction and discussed below and in the conclusion, should not come as a surprise; it is ingrained in the literature. Crews, the godfather of Grit Lit, participates in (and has always participated in) the same Southern mythmaking impulse that characterized the genteel literary traditions he seemingly rejected. And while scholars of Crews have rightly discussed his construction of a counter-myth, they do not explore how

[75] In an early interview, in *Recherches Anglaises et Américaines* (1972), Crews says he has been consistent over the years in his dislike of the term "Southern" (Bledsoe, *Getting Naked*)). Still, throughout his interviews, with the frequent exception of Graham Greene, most of the literary influences he names are firmly Southern.

unstable and reactionary this new myth is—how wedded it is to the dominant myth. Crews's own struggle with myth-making and authenticity, and how that affects interpretations of the urgent social topics, is explored in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, Crews's possible romanticization of the rough South is a topic also gestured to throughout subsequent chapters but will be most fully treated in the conclusion. At the heart of all this is Crews's own life: the facts, fictions, and conflicts that would shape how he perceives and ultimately writes about his poor white identity.

THE CREWS LEGEND

One of the most famous passages from *A Childhood* is when Crews makes the courageous decision to confront personal writing:

> I would someday have to write about it all, but not in the convenient and comfortable metaphors of fiction, which I had been doing for years. It would have to be done naked, without the disgusting distance of the third person pronoun. Only the use of I, lovely and terrifying word, would get me to the place where I needed to go. (38)

Much has been made of this. It presents Crews as a writer facing his fears, confronting his past. While his early fiction incorporated elements from his biography—particularly his hobbies and interests—he now makes an explicit turn towards autobiography. This passage supports the general consensus that Crews's "use of I" is was a foundational development in his honest, truthful, unflinching writing. Because he made this choice, the logic goes, and because it was hard, it must mean that truth will follow. But singling out this passage as microcosmic proof of the text's authenticity is misleading. From the very beginning, Crews expresses uncertainty about his reliability and credibility as an auto-ethnographer.[76] Coupled with his lingering attachment to

[76] David Rothstein describes Crews as an "accidental ethnographer." Drawing on the changes in anthropology and ethnography, along with modernism and literary journalism, Rothstein argues that Crews blends inside and outside perspective, making him an auto-ethnography, in the same tradition as James Agee, who also explored the subjective, sometimes fictive aspects of ethnography.

the old guard, as embodied most notably by Andrew Lytle, and his self-conscious self-invention of a literary persona, the assumption that Crews is a bedrock of literary authenticity becomes increasingly unstable.

Crews the Author: Biography and Persona

Biography is an important feature of Grit Lit. Much of the literature's appeal and dissemination relies on the author's ability to "walk the walk." Since Crews establishes authorial biography as a central aspect of the literature and its reception, it is necessary to put pressure on the role of biography—and by extension, autobiography—in the Grit Lit project. In this case, Crews-the-person is different from Crews-the-author (the persona he cultivated), and those are both different from Crews-the-subject from his autobiography. What emerges from this interplay is a complicated portrait of self-invention. Harry Crews the author and persona—as interpreted from the verifiable facts of his life—sought to invent himself as an outsider to the literary vanguard of the time, whilst Crews the subject of A *Childhood: Biography of a Place* sought to invent himself as an insider within the Bacon County[77] of his childhood; and both are suspect.

In *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985), Paul Eakin lays out principles applicable to Crews's project of self-invention. First, he describes Poe and Rousseau, agreeing that autobiographical truth is largely a matter of volition, "of having the courage to utter it" (5). Furthermore, he contends that "autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process

[77] Jerry McGregroy offers a useful analysis of the history and culture of the Wiregrass region of South Georgia. Describing it as "steeped in its own aberrations," it was a place slow on the industrial and economic uptake. Sharecropping replaced the tradition of landowning, leading to extreme poverty among its mostly white population. McGregory writes that Crews differs from other Georgia writers, O'Connor and Caldwell, because they were born in the historic heartland of Georgia. Crews departure "is a manner of a distinctive regionalized and social class identity" (66). The result is a culture of carnivalesque folk humor, which inverts social hierarchies, particularly all that is refined and pretentious.

of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). That is, autobiography is constructed in a way "in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness" (5). Finally, Eakin describes the "dialectical interplay" between the author's "impulse to self-invention" and "the models of selfhood in the surrounding culture" (7). The fictions of autobiography are thus influenced by facts, imagination, cultural context, and a drive to self-invention.

In Crews, these features shed light on what appears to be a muddied relationship with truth, memory, and selfhood. Crews resembles Rosseau and Poe in his courageous volition to bravely confront the personal pronoun, to "tell it like it is." This is how critics and audiences tend to read his autobiography, which Eakin says, leaves "unexamined the problematic nature of the truth to be told, the epistemological difficulty of ascertaining what it is" (5). Upon examination, Crews shows the interplay between fact and imagination that serves the needs of "present consciousness."[78] Crews readily admits that the facts of his life and culture are clouded by his subjective, shifting memory of them, as well as cultural transformations across time. Crews is also forthright in describing the "present consciousness" that his autobiography serves. He hoped that confronting his past would improve his present by making sense of the history that shaped him. Finally, the analysis of Crews's autobiography depends on "models of selfhood in the surrounding culture."[79] Crews fashioned himself within and against cultural perceptions in

[78] Eakin says twentieth-century autobiography "is increasingly understood as both an "art of memory and an art of the imagination; indeed, memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiog-raphers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice" (5). That is, recent autobiography readily rejects the idea of autobiographical truth. Crews can be included in this.
[79] Analysis of autobiography, Eakin contends, must consider "the dialectical interplay between an autobiographer's impulse to self-invention" and conceptions of selfhood within the culture that produces the autobiographer (7).

and of rural Georgia, marking himself as different from Rosseau and Poe by exploring what it means to be part of the white working class in the South.

It's impossible to separate the biographical facts of Crews's life from his persona; each informs the other. Considered together, they speak to the culturally situated fictionalization and self-invention of his literary persona and eventual reputation. Crews considered himself a natural outsider and actively cultivated that image. Even though his whiteness may have conferred him some privilege, his tattoos, mohawk, and crude, backward mannerisms gave him a classed image, an example of what Khiara Bridges refers to as "racial sullying." In the classroom or writing conference, he took pride in not fitting in, not "speaking the language." Even when his reputation was being cemented in literary and popular circles, Crews steadfastly maintained that he somehow did not belong. Ted Geltner's *Blood, Bone, and Marrow* (2016)—the only biography of Crews—begins with Geltner's own nervousness about being assigned to interview an aging Crews. He had heard the stories of Crews: his "ruthlessness in the classroom," his quick temper, and his unmatched energy. A colleague of Geltner told him "he wasn't paid anywhere near enough to subject himself to the likely verbal abuse" that would come with interviewing Crews (1). Crews's legend preceded him, and Geltner mentions the "Crews legend" several times in the book's opening pages. Indeed, the book is a nonfiction account of the creation of a semi-fictional legend. Beyond his eccentric writing and the impact it had, Crews's biography is a study in myth-making and self-invention. His adult life can be studied as a series of myths he was either trying to combat or perform. Crews's authentic, mythic life reveals the same genre-identity tensions that permeate all of Grit Lit, and prompts discussions of how to properly document a dismissed, liminal identity.

His post-*Childhood* life can be carved into three phases: transience, stardom, and descent. As a young and struggling writer, Crews wandered. Physically, he drifted across the country, adapting to the zeitgeist of the moment. He also wandered mentally, trying to figure out what persona he should inhabit. Immediately after high school, Crews joined the Marines. While there, he read voraciously, achieved minor success as a professional boxer, and was subjected to grueling physical punishment and, more impactful perhaps, he participated in several debauched port of call misadventures.[80] Utilizing the GI Bill, Crews briefly attended the University of Florida, but he quickly became disheartened with the university, where he saw professors as drill sergeants.[81] Instead, Crews embarked on a cross-country motorcycle trip at the same time Kerouac published *On the Road* (1957). It is unclear to what extent he was influenced by the Beat Generation, but he did meet Kerouac a few times while spending time in Haight-Ashbury.[82] Following his cross-country wandering, he returned to Florida and resumed his writing studies at the university, eventually becoming infatuated with Andrew Lytle. Also around this time, he got his first teaching job at a junior college. While he was a dutiful student with Lytle, as a teacher he was already displaying some of the performative characteristics that would come to define him. But while he was rebellious in his teaching and quick to fight authority, he also accepted some authority by taking on a leadership position in the faculty union.[83] All the while, Crews had started a family, lost a son in a tragic drowning accident, and—despite a fleeting moment of

[80] Published in *The Sewanee Review* in Spring 1963, "The Unattached Smile" tells the story of seaman who seeks out Puerto Rican prostitutes while reckoning with his incestuous relatinoship with his sister. Andrew Lytle heavily edited the story (Geltner 19).
[81] Crews wrote, "Both men's worlds were carefully prescribed; both men knew exactly what you ought to do and say, and where you ought to squeeze your juice" (qtd. in Geltner 44).
[82] Occasionally while in Haight-Ashbury, Crews and his companions would see Kerouac at a bar. His friend Ben Roark recalls how Harry would approach Kerouac and discuss writing with him, "That made Harry's day whenever he was there" (qtd. in Geltner 49).
[83] While teaching at the Junior College of Broward County (JCBC), Crews rose to the rank of president of the college's faculty union, the American Association of University Professors. Crews spoke passionately regarding a corrupt president, government oversight, and the nature of junior colleges. A colleague described him as being "practically revered" among the faculty for being "willing to stick his neck out" (Geltner 94).

success when he was published in the *Georgia Review*—racked up a tall stack of rejection letters. Veteran, beatnik, dutiful mentee, family man, raconteur professor, and loose-cannon: Crews performed a number of personas. The one constant was his determination to become a working writer, and at this time, he was still very much invested in the Lytle-esque, academic writer-elite, someone who publishes in literary journals and meets the approval of his gatekeeping elders.

After his novels started getting published, Crews entered a period of relative stardom. His novels were a hit with literary critics, he wrote film scripts—by far his most lucrative writing endeavor—and he wrote journalism for *Playboy* and *Esquire*, which at the time were among the most popular and well regarded literary magazines, respectively. During this period, Crews worked hard to balance the legend he was cementing, both in his writing and his life. Crews's reputation as an intense partier continued to grow. An exemplary anecdote is "Goat Day Olympics," a multi-day celebration wherein Crews and his crew would kill, roast, and consume a goat.[84] He also brought his erratic and charming masculinity to teaching, whether it was bringing live tarantulas to class or getting into an all-out brawl with a literary colleague at their local watering hole (Geltner). As a journalist, Crews combined elements of New and gonzo journalism, often telling introspective stories that feature him drinking and taking drugs. Through all of this, however, Crews managed to balance partying with work. When he was not on benders, he was a prolific and disciplined writer.[85] Moreover, he was also known for obsessively throwing himself into various hobbies. Some hobbies, such as karate and hawk training, would

[84] Beginning as a casual idea over drinks became an annual party, sometimes with more than a hundred people in attendance. It was a local legend. Geltner notes that "the ritual slaughter of animals . . . drew for him a connection to the ceremonial hog butchering of his youth on the farm. What was once done in the name of survival had become an all-day celebration of bacchanalian revelry" (164).

[85] Crews credits the discipline of the military for instilling his work ethic. While he would bookend his writing assignments with prolonged benders, he was systematic, almost maniacally dedicated to a project once he was invested in it.

become fodder for novels.[86] But however quickly and deeply he invested himself in his hobbies, he inevitably abandoned them just as quickly. When he had completed the manuscript for *The Hawk is Dying* (1973), he, according to Ted Geltner, "donated the birds to the zoo . . . put all the leather accessories he had accumulated into a drawer in his desk and closed the hawk chapter of his life for good" (153). His reputation as a writer, professor, and partier was firmly cemented, and his earlier transience was still observable in the hobbies he took up and put down.

Concerned with his tenuous relationship with identity, in 1978 Crews returned to where he was raised and produced his masterpiece: *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. The memoir may have represented his critical apex, but it was also the beginning of his personal descent. Drinking and violence, the sort of machismo that once fed his legend, became increasingly unsavory to Crews and those around him.[87] After countless bouts of desperation and attempts at sobriety, Crews finally succeeded to quit drinking for good. From interviews, the older Crews seemed to settle into a combination of the first two periods: one who projected a rebellious attitude in image and reputation, but harbored an almost reactionary, conservative worldview, which will be discussed momentarily.

There is a tension in Crews's real life identity that comes through in his writing. The Crews who gets discussed today is the Crews who had decided on a persona: a hard-drinking, tough-talking literary maverick who, though he taught in the academy, was an outsider and an honest storyteller. This is the Crews that has been mythologized by writers, critics, and himself. It is the basis of the Grit Lit mystique. In his introduction to the anthology *Grit Lit: A Rough*

[86] See *Karate is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971) and *The Hawk is Dying* (1973).
[87] His attorney Huntley Johnson describes his "wretched, filthy" state: "He would stay on the ground in one place, and hold court there—eat, shit, piss, sleep" (qtd. in Geltner 229). Binges began to end only with "a trip to the hospital, a rehabilitation clinic, or jail" (229). Editors began to cool on his tough guy persona, instead sadly predicting his imminent demise. Even close friends found him to be too much work to be worth it (231).

South Reader, Brian Carpenter describes looking at a photo of Crews with his mohawk, tattoo, and grimace: "when I look at this photo of Crews, I know I am looking at the 'real deal,' just like I am looking at a lifelong performance artist" (xiv). Carpenter captures but does not unpack the tension in Crews's identity: authenticity vs performativity, the "real deal" vs a constructed myth. Later in life, Crews distanced himself from his persona, saying, "I wish that perception wasn't there. I think it comes from the subject matter of my books, and I think it comes from my mugging for the camera" (Bledsoe, *Getting Naked* 361). But such backtracking ignores the years he spent creating that perception. As a friend of his said of his earlier period: "Harry realized he didn't have a persona. He had to invent one. And the one he invented was a motherfucking freak from Georgia" (Geltner 202).[88]

Authenticity

Despite the fictionalization of his life, Crews projected himself as an authentic purveyor of rough south truth in his many recorded interviews. "Good fiction is not there to prove anything," he said. "Good fiction is there to make you breathe with another human being, bleed with him" (Bledsoe, *Getting Naked* 196). He eschewed the idea that he writes "tract novels," fiction centered around specific issues or themes. This runs counter to the purpose of literature, he said, which is to get to "the reality of it." Theme-centered literature neglects the hard truth of people's lives, what Crews often referred to as the "blood and bones and guts" of something. Writing about *A Childhood,* he said, "I wanted to tell the truth" and "be factual" (179). When discussing Southern literary history, he further shows his dedication to authenticity, like when he discussed

[88] This statement was made in reference to what some believed to be Crews's calculated adoption of an oversized persona as a way of distinguishing himself from other magazine writers. Geltner compares it to Donn Pearce, who came before Crews and propelled his career forward by crafting a persona as "the ex-con who viewed life on the outside with a jaded prison mentality" (202).

Erskine Caldwell, who "wrote about tenant farmers" but whose "daddy was a Presbyterian minister or something, and he had a secure life" (193). Once again, one must "speak the language" to accurately capture the reality, the blood and guts of a people and place. And though he worked as a professor of writing at a major university, he looked down on "them professors" in Gainesville, who "ain't been around no blocks," "ain't seen no blood, and all their bones are intact" (207). In his interviews, Crews distinguished himself as a writer who is close to the people he describes, true to the reality of their lives. "The writer's job," finally, is "to take those great abstract nouns and turn them into flesh and blood and bones. Then they are real. If they aren't flesh and blood, they're ciphers, just names on a page" (292). But such a straightforward, just-the-facts self-conception belies the self-invention apparent in his life and writing. And such self-invention is a symptom of tensions between the competing pulls of portraying himself as an authentic working-class auto-ethnographer, acclaimed academic elite, and bohemian beatnik.

CREWS RECEPTION

Despite these tensions, Crews's self-invention was largely successful. His literary reputation was sterling, his hard-living habits were legendary, and he was perceived—by the reading public—as an honest ambassador for the disenfranchised people of South Georgia.[89] Harry Crews fit nicely into the changing of the Southern literary guard.[90] In the wake of a moment in which southern literature had been reduced to a single "Major Figure," William Faulkner, the "Michelangelo around whose achievement a cultural identity can be organized" (Kreyling xiv)—for better and

[89] Recall *The Washington Post*'s description of him as a "sage of the red-clay South."
[90] For more on this, see Matthew Guinn's excellent *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*, which describes how Southern fiction of the late twentieth-century can be characterized by its discontinuity with traditional Southern literature. Authors like Crews, Brown, and Allison reject the Nashville Agrarians with brutal depictions of rural life, while writers like Cormac McCarthy and Barry Hannah subvert Southern tradition's obsession with topics like place, community, and history with postmodern irreverence.

worse—Crews was an iconoclastic new voice, a refreshing *enfant terrible* who helped shake Southern literature loose from its highfalutin Modernist hegemony. When *A Childhood* came out, critics lauded its honesty and authenticity. One review writes that, while some literature paints Southern life in an idyllic light, for some the South is a land of defeat and hardship and that truthfully capturing one such experience is what makes Crews "so welcome a relief among the other books with a Southern focus" (Graves, qtd. in Geltner 239). Crews brought raw honesty, darkly comic authenticity, and what many critics would call a resolute refusal to romanticize the poor white south.[91]

When Crews died in 2012, obituaries tended to sum up his life and work with two things: Crews's "unflinching" writing and his "tough-guy persona that exuded danger" (Schudel). The quality of his writing most frequently mentioned was his honesty and dedication to "being true to a distinctive" voice and people. Crews, they said, stared his past straight in the eye and wrote authentically, both in his fiction and nonfiction, about the life of freaks and societal cast-offs. His memoir, they say, is his attempt to make sense of his own history, to find the truth of his life. Most agree that he accomplishes this, and *A Childhood*, more than any of his other works, solidified his legacy as a brutally authentic, culturally instructive writer.[92]

Academic writing on Crews has underscored this basic conclusion that Crews is a truthful, ethnographic voice of a people. Matthew Guinn uses this assumption to argue that *A Childhood* is an anti-agrarian text, one that disrupts the old Jeffersonian myth of the yeoman espoused by people like Lytle. Frank Papovich notes the importance of community to the

[91] For example, Dennis Drabelle's 1979 review of *A Childhood* in *The Washington Post* says that Crews is "unwilling to join Steinbeck in romanticizing his subjects."
[92] The majority of scholarly writing on Crews focuses on *A Childhood* (with *A Feast of Snakes* coming in second). Moreover, pick any obituary or summary of Crews's life and work—they invariably cite *A Childhood* as the height of his craft and reception. *A Childhood* is the bedrock of his literary legacy.

collective memory of storytelling; through the unified oral tradition of his people, Crews is able to accurately capture his culture. Jerry McGregory argues that Crews's life in the carnivalesque culture of Bacon County allows him to powerfully disrupt the Southern literary status quo; Crews and his family see the world differently. Amy Weldon, finally, pairs Crews with journalist Rick Bragg to show how connections with the "whip-smart vigor of oral culture" allow each author to successfully portray their cultures. A more recent Grit, Tim McLaurin, when describing Crews's influence on his writing, said that Crews taught him that writing should be true to the reality of their lives, "of those who live hard and hop mightily" (13). All these authors locate his authenticity and sureness of voice in his biography. They all point to a writer who was comfortable and unafraid to write honestly, even to the point of brutality. Few charge him with romanticizing or mythologizing the culture.

Another important theme that runs throughout Crews's criticism is his reactions to a changing South and his pessimism regarding cultural homogenization and neoliberalism. Beyond being a common theme throughout his work, this pessimism comes across explicitly in his interviews. In a 1981 interview, he laments, "But we're all so mobile; we're all so . . . voiceless is a real good word . . . When we lose our voices, there's no communicating. When we lose that, then we begin to lose the family" (112); in 1990, he diagnosed that if "writing is in danger in the South, it's because there is the danger of its children learning their voices from television and from radio rather than from their granddaddy's knee or their daddy's knee. And we are in danger of becoming standardized" (189); and in 1994 he concludes that "God is dead . . . I mean, like it or not, deny it as you will, it is a secular world. That somehow offends me, really deeply offends me that it's a secular world" (302). For such a rebellious professor and writer, for someone who eschewed traditional Southern norms, his interviews simultaneously reveal a deeply

conservative, almost reactionary worldview. Far from indicating a Marxist critique of the material history of the modern South, Crews bemoans cultural homogenization and neoliberalism because it threatens foundational conservative tenets of his region and its culture.

In his fiction, the most common aesthetic vehicle for this pessimism, critics argue, is literary naturalism. Tim Edwards, Gary Long, and David Jeffrey all find a naturalistic determinism running throughout Crews's fiction. This impulse, such readings contend, leads Crews to fatalism, nihilism, and a disillusionment with the future of a Southern way of life that, even though he is critical of it, he laments the disappearance of. Crews most often packages these themes inside his characters'—who are usually misshapen, broken, or in some way incomplete—attempts to achieve social mobility or self-completion through alternative communities or through relocation to industrial centers.[93] Matthew Guinn calls the latter trope in Crews the "grit émigré," wandering, searching rural characters who seek out success or actualization in industrial centers of the Sun Belt. All of these options fail. Cultural enclaves and grit emigres document the disappearance of an authentic way of life and pessimism with the new South(s).

What these conclusions do not consider is Crews's own discomfort with his history and the people he gets credit for portraying so authentically. Within the larger narrative of Southern literature, Crews has been cemented in the bedrock of the counter-narrative. He pushes back, and much of his power is said to come from his honest portrayal of a world that he intimately knows. And yet, a closer look at his life and writing, particularly his nonfiction, shows that Crews himself was uncertain about the very things that the reading world would accept as gospel. He had an unstable relationship with his personal and family history, his inclusion within a culture

[93] For examples, see weightlifting gyms in *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974), karate dojos in *Karate is a Thing of the Spirit*, or retirement communities in *The Hawk is Dying*. For examples of the "grit emigre," see George Gattling in *The Hawk is Dying*, Eugene Biggs in *The Knockout Artist* (1988), and Shereel Dupont in *Body* (1990).

he is supposed to speak for, and his own ability to honestly and authentically portray that world. If Crews falls back on pessimism in his fiction, it's partially because of his own inability to reconcile the inherent tension between the myth of a rough south that he doesn't feel ownership of and his discontent with the modern world, not a universal determinism dooming the South—it's more self-focused than that. Indeed, his brave turn to autobiography was intended to excorcise these tensions and shore up the auto-ethnographer side of his persona. Instead, life writing excacerbated tensions and provided insight into the fiction that pervades his nonfiction, again underscoring the precarious interplay between genre and identity. Thus, this chapter does not hold up Crews's life writing as truth, as an accurate, unmediated account of what Crews thinks and feels; it is written and crafted, like fiction. Recognizing that "truth" and "reality" are every-shifting, fluid concepts, Crews's life writing lies somewhere in between the raw facts of his life (as reported by third parties, though of course the authenticity of these must be questioned), his legendary, blunt, and seemingly honest (but still constructed) interview responses, and his often surreal, sometimes ridiculous fiction. There is no "true" Crews, as such.

MYTH IN SOUTHERN LITERARY HISTORY

Autobiography helps create myth, to the point that authenticity--as presented through autobiography--becomes its own myth for Crews and Grit Lit. Crews's writing is replete with myth—some new, some old, often contradictory. It is no secret that Southern literature is preoccupied with myth. Whether it is the myth of the Lost-Cause, the Agrarian myth, or the myth of the Southern belle, writers have always mythologized the South, from inside and out. In Southern literary history, recent scholarship has extracted the mythmaking from Southern history and studied the ways these myths shape perceptions and representations of the South. Robert

Penn Warren speaks to the divide between "historical" and "poetic" sense, which for Warren, need not be contradictory, "for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living constantly remake" (qtd. in Kreyling). Unfortunately, the "poetic sense," which accounts for the cultural products that canonize and give fixed meaning to history, often neglects the "historical sense," which accounts for inflections that challenge claims of constancy and completion. Warren's use of the word "myth" brings up the multiple meanings of the word. Myth is the narrative we create to explain something, to create a fixed, knowable origin of an inherently unknowable concept. To mythologize is also to romanticize, to raise to the level of legend, to the point of "near reverential admiration." Three important authors who study various Southern literary myths are Michael Kreyling, Scott Romine, and Jennifer Greeson, whose work Crews, and this project's analysis of it, builds on, works against, and sometimes reiterates.

Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998) is an important metanarrative about Southern literary studies' history of falling back on an "orthodox faith" that holds that the South "is not invented by our discussions of it but rather is revealed by a constant southern identity" (ix). The separation between what Warren calls the "poetic" sense—the literary representation of the South—and the "historical" sense—the larger cultural context in which those representations are created—led to the erroneous misconception, or myth, that the South can be distilled down to an essence, a constancy in both spirit and culture, one that, due to its fixed nature, is "impervious to literary representation" (xi). In fact, Kreyling counters, Southern literary history is a process that has "created, indicted, refurbished, or rebirthed" myths of the South. He concludes that "Warren had it right, from the start. The myth and the history feed one another; together they make consciousness a process, and we are in it, body and mind" (xviii). To study Southern literature, then, is to study this convergence of spirit and fact, literature and history, in a process

where "it is not so much southern literature that changes in collision with history but history that is subtly changed in collision with southern literature" (ix).

If Kreyling offers a metanarrative of Southern literature's role in the making of Southern myth, Scott Romine explicates the narratives within Southern literature that grapple with those myths in the age of what Romine calls "cultural reproduction."[94] Throughout its history, Southern literature has defined its present-day iteration of the South against a past, authentic, preferable, and what Romine ironically calls "real," South. And so, in the face of late capitalism, when "deterritorialization proceeds apace, efforts to reterritorialize—to reproduce place and locality—are increasingly mobilized under the aegis of tradition, heritage, culture, and identity" (9). In other words, as place diminishes, the mythologizing of former locales, enclaves of unsullied culture and tradition, become prime areas for literature to portray their own micro-myths of what the "real" South once was, and perhaps never will be again. In short, Southern literature is a collection of "fake" Souths that document variations of a "real" South that was never real to begin with. As Romine notes, "terms such as 'authentic' and 'real' are less useful as "metaphysical or psychoanalytic categories than in understanding how individuals and groups use these concepts in a region and age compelled by them" (10). To build on Kreyling's argument, not only does Southern literature invest itself in an inherently constructed myth designed to codify a fixed, unified representation of the South, Romine adds that those myths are always predicated on previous myths, previous constructions. Further, those erroneous myths are packaged as authentic realities, such that the "constant southern identity" necessarily changes as

[94] "Cultural reproduction," as it is employed in Romine's *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, refers to the commodified and simulated "Souths" such as themed restaurants, regional magazines, and television.

literature continuously reinvents it at different historical moments, moving it further and further from a fixed, authentic position.

While Kreyling and Romine study Southern literature's self-fashioning, the ways Southern literature invents itself in relation to past myths, Jennifer Greeson expands regional mythmaking beyond the South, arguing that national fantasies were created in relation to the "internal other" that is the South, "an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole" (1). Myths of American exceptionalism are created by juxtaposing the South with the larger national body. Greeson shows how American literature of the northern metropoles utilized myths of the South to fashion larger, national myths. Thus, there are dueling myths, those created from the inside and those created from the outside. In both cases, the South is constructed against something else—the North or imagined and past Souths—and used as a tool to both confirm the mythological past and project prescriptive futures. As such, both the internal and externally generated myths have aided in the colonization and hierarchization of the region. One role of contemporary Southern literature, then, is to combat this prevailing narrative, to compose counter-narratives. One particular way these counter-narratives manifest in recent Southern literature is through what Matthew Guinn calls mythoclastic authors, those who harbor "an inimical attitude toward southern cultural mythology," a direct attack on tradition. Writers like Barry Hannah, Cormac McCarthy, and Richard Ford all repudiate various tenets of Southern myth by reducing them to postmodern irony (McCarthy), post-Vietnam skepticism (Hannah) or outright "abdication of the south as subject and setting" (Ford) (111). It is within this mythoclastic vein that critics and readers tend to situate Harry Crews, someone who explodes myth with grit.

Crews's work reveals itself to be acutely aware of, and skeptical and resentful of, these foundational characterizations of Southern myth, identity, and artificial construction. Yet, it often falls back into the same rhythms, albeit in through a different frame of reference. Regarding Greeson, Crews's work can be looked to as an important intervention in the self-construction of the South, wrestling agency back from a Northern elite that has historically fashioned the South as they saw fit. Yet, Crews's fiction is largely read and processed by the elite reading classes of the North and South; it doesn't exactly become literature for the masses. Regarding Kreyling, Crews is aware and highly critical of these strands of Southern literature, such as the pastoral ideal; Crews once said in a 1974 interview: "Everybody likes to rhapsodize about how beautiful the rural life is. The rural life, as I knew and experienced it in childhood, is, without exception, dreadful" (57). But instead of working to eliminate it, he reworks it and includes his vision of low-class authenticity. It's a different identity, certainly, but its method of construction is similar. Regarding Romine, as this chapter contends, what does Crews do if not advocate for a real South? Yet, one could claim that he produces another fake South disguised as real.

Childhood

Crews's memoir of his childhood would become, more than any of his fiction, a popular *ur*-text of Grit Lit authenticity. And yet, just as an analysis of his life revealed underlying tensions with regards to identity performativity, so too does a close reading of *Childhood* reveal uncertainty about Crews's ability to credibly speak for the Southern underclass. The text shows him to be an unreliable narrator of his own story and his own people. What others have called Crews's dedication to the authentic oral tradition of storytelling can also be interpreted as a tenuous grasp on his identity, an uneasy understanding of where he came from. Crews presented himself,

consciously or not, as an outsider not just to the academy, as he often said, but to the place he tries to call home. The cultural ties that form the basis of so much Crews's legacy are elusive. Indeed, what was supposed to be a cathartic experience for Crews ended up leaving him further alienated from his claimed hometown. Crews returned to Bacon County, where he had not spent any significant amount of time in more than twenty years. Ted Geltner notes, "He found that the alienation he often felt at the university also existed, albeit in a different form, among those he thought of as 'his people'" (214). His uncertainties were only exasperated by his attempt at an honest homecoming via the memoir genre. "I thought if I could relive it and set it all down in detailed, specific language, I would be purged of it," Crews said of the memoir later, "It almost killed me, but it purged nothing" (qtd in Geltner 220). Literary masterpiece though it may be, understood as a generic, personal failure, *Childhood* shows the instability that occurs when forging a poor white identity, one founded in fact but always augmented by myth, and successfully relating that identity through text.

The first sentence of the book casts doubt on his entire soul-searching enterprise: "My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew" (20).[95] The story that anchors the text, the doorway into Crews's "biography of a place," is actually an anecdote about his father getting chlamydia from a Native American prostitute in southern Florida. He begins his story before he was born, in a place far away (for a little-traveled community, at least), with a story that came to him secondhand. From the start, Crews is compelled to inform the reader that he will be speaking

[95] Crews himself is proud of the sentence, saying, "Sentences like that don't just pop out of your head. It's not antithetical, but it is classically balanced . . . I was proud of that sentence when I finally got it" (qtd. in Geltner 217).

to events and places that are, at best, murky territory for him. As the story moves to its main setting, Bacon County, Georgia, the uncertainty and unreliability follow.

A couple of pages later, there is another passage that reviewers and critics have gotten a lot of mileage out of: "nothing is allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all—the good and the bad—carted up and brought along from one generation to the next. And everything that is brought along is colored and shaped by those who bring it" (21). Like the confrontation with personal pronouns, this passage is referenced as Crews harnessing the tradition of oral, folk storytelling.[96] While that may be, it also casts doubt on the reliability of the narrative. Moments earlier, Crews asks: "Did what I have set down here as memory actually happen? Did the two men say what I have recorded, think what I have said they thought? I do not know, nor do I any longer care" (21). What could be interpreted as authentic storytelling could also be read as an admission of incredibility, a resignation to unreliability.

Perhaps the clearest example of this unreliability occurs at the end of the first chapter, just before Crews begins chronicling his life in Bacon County: "But because we were driven from pillar to post when I was a child, there is nowhere I can think of as the home place. Bacon County is my home place, and I've had to make do with it" (31). Crews only spent six years living in Bacon County before he moved to Florida. He briefly moved back before joining the Marines. After that, he lived a more or less transient life, with Florida being the place he spent the most time. The passage shows his attempt to find geographical stability, for his own sake. And while his representation seems convincing enough, such passages undermine the sturdiness

[96] See, for example, Amy Weldon, who uses the passage to characterize Crews's break from traditional Southern literature, particularly the genteel written form as theorized by people like William Percy, whose *Lanterns of the Levee* describes and promotes a Southern class binary between aristocrats and poor whites. The written word becomes a marker of the aristocratic writer. Thus, through Crews's reliance on anecdotes and folk storytelling accepts and empowers the poor white author.

of his claim. He is, in fact, reaching for "a home place." In the absence of a more obvious connection, he has had to manufacture it, "to make do with it." The passage occurs after two paragraphs of Crews sentimentalizing the importance of a person's home place, a person's "anchor in the world," an important luxury that he was denied.

Crews's narrator persona obsesses over credibility. One passage ponders "what would give credibility to my own story if, when my young son grows to manhood, he has to go looking for me in the mouths and memories of other people. Who would tell the stories?" (#) It was not certainty or sureness that caused Crews to look back to his childhood in Bacon County, it was uncertainty. The fantasy of a home place and his inability to access one drove him back to Georgia. Where for others, home place is inherent and immovable, for Crews it required a decision. In this way, whether or not readers find his journey authentic or successful is beside the point; Crews himself was unsure, and that insecurity pervades his erstwhile courageous "use of I."

Perhaps it was simply his short stay in Bacon County that was the source of his uncertainty, but the text offers another reason. His memoir describes his younger self as being isolated from the culture he is trying to reconnect with. He presents himself as an outsider.[97] While he would later wear his outsider status as a badge of honor—especially when it comes to his place within the academy—he betrays in his memoir a discomfort with the label. This is best observed through the two long-term injuries that kept him separated from others as well as his relationship with Auntie, who was herself clearly marked as an outsider. Auntie, more than anyone, is the biggest inspiration for Crews's early interest in storytelling. She teaches Crews the

[97] In Grit Lit memoirs, the idea that the author is different than their culture is a common trope. See, for example, discussions of Rick Bragg and Jim Grimsley in Chapter Four.

power of imagination, myth, and escapism. And while these are qualities that would later be associated with Crews's entire culture—the collective imagination of a place—the memoir presents his relationship with Auntie as existing on the fringes of the larger culture.

As a child, Crews experienced two childhood maladies that would mark him as an outcast for long stretches of time. The first was a mysterious case of leg paralysis (which turned out to be polio) that kept him bed-ridden. The second was a horrific burn he suffered after falling into a vat of boiling water. While others worked and played outside, Crews stayed inside. This led him to a realization that would inform his later life and work:

> Right there, as a child, I got to the bottom of what it means to be lost, what it means to be rejected by everybody (if they had not rejected me, why was I smothered in shame every time they looked at me?) and everything you ever thought would save you. And there were long days when I wondered why I did not die, how I could go on mindlessly living like a mule or a cow when God had obviously forsaken me. But if I was never able to accept my affliction, I was able to bear it and finally to accept the good-natured brutality and savagery in the eyes of those who came to wish me well. (91)

In his adult life, Crews deliberately maintained his outsider persona, but as a child, the choice was made for him. In a society where being able-bodied and capable of labor is paramount, even though few people were not marked by some physical infirmity, Crews's injury marked him as different. How could Crews credibly act as a spokesperson for a place when for a significant amount of time he was "rejected by everybody?" How could he reasonably be expected to render a fully sympathetic, let alone realistic, portrait of people who, however "good-natured" it may have been, looked upon him with "brutality and savagery?" By accepting the pity-filled eyes of his visitors, he simultaneously accepted his position as an outcast from people that did not understand him. And so Crews attempts to reckon with the notion of difference within an already marginalized culture. In the process, he offers a primer on Grit Lit's own relationship with difference.

In the Bacon County of Crews's *A Childhood*, to be different was to be "*that way.*" Crews recounts, "you couldn't go crazy in Bacon County; you were just *that way*" (95, original emphasis). By being confined to a bed and being an object of others' voyeuristic pity, the young Crews "knew it was inevitable that the county begin thinking of me not as a cripple but as 'that way.' And I desperately did not want to be *that way"* (101, original emphasis). By being different, he risked being seen as "that way." More than that, he came by the label through his association with Auntie, who Crews describes as being "that way" due to her advanced age and superstitions. Auntie is assigned to look after Harry while he recovers (or doesn't) from whatever ails him. Auntie teaches Harry the power of myth, imagination, and storytelling. While most critics point to Crews's use of the Sears, Roebuck catalogue as the source of his storytelling, Auntie's indelible influence is discussed less frequently.[98] She teaches young Harry that "every single thing in the world was full of mystery and awesome power," that myth pervades everything, and that "making stories about them was not so that we could understand them but so that we could live them" (97-98). From Auntie, Crews learns another oft-quoted line: "Fantasy might not be truth as the world counts it, but what was truth when fantasy meant survival?" (98). Critics have pointed to this line as indicating Crews's place in the collective imagination of his poor white culture.[99] Crucially, though, Crews learns this from someone who has been deemed different—"that way"—and he learns, while being quarantined, that he does not have normal access to the larger community. Again, though, Crews is writing this for a particular effect, and with a persona and purpose in mind, further contributing to his outsider mythmaking.

[98] Crews made up stories for the "perfect," able-bodied models in the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. In these stories Crews is said to have initiated his future storytelling.
[99] See Amy Weldon's "'When Fantasy meant Survival': Writing, Class, and the Oral Tradition in the Autobiographies of Rick Bragg and Harry Crews."

"That way" refers to disability, broadly defined. Disability is a mainstay in Grit Lit (most books feature physical or mental disabilities), and Crews's memoir offers a striking distinction between useful and useless disability that will prove essential to future understandings of disabled bodies in the literature of the rough south.[100] Crews remarks that: "nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple." Crucially, though, these examples come from those who were disabled while contributing meaningfully to the utility of farm life. Further, it can be assumed that they quickly found themselves back in the field. It gives them physical markers by which others can gauge their masculinity and sustained utility. This is far different from being an invalid or being "that way." The latter group does not contribute to or belong in the dominant, ableist (despite the prevalence of injury), labor-intensive community. The occasional missing digit does not preclude you from usefulness, being bed-ridden or mentally disabled does.

Also noteworthy is the relegation of the unproductive disabled to the female realm, an intersection that is prominent in Grit Lit moving forward.[101] As an unproductive contributor to the central economic source of his clan's livelihood—the grueling work of farming tobacco—Crews is left with the women while the men go to work. Thus, another distinction in Crews's position as an outsider is the influence of gender on his development as a storyteller. Like men, women told stories, but Crews notes the difference between "the women whose stories were unrelieved by humor and filled with apocalyptic vision." He says that while men rarely told stories about people or events they didn't know, women "would repeat stories about folks they

[100] See Zackary Vernon's "The Enfreakment of Southern Memoir in Harry Crews's *A Childhood*," which utilizes the disability theory of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a scholar who will figure prominently in Chapter 2.
[101] Disability and masculinity in Grit Lit will be given deeper treatment in Chapter 3.

did not know and had never seen." Such distanced storytelling recalls the beginning of the memoir when Crews admits the apocryphal nature of the story. Gender and storytelling will also come up in the next chapter, revealing the problems and potential of mixing autobiography, feminist, and queer literature. Coupled with Auntie's influence, Crews experienced a much different experience than his able-bodied male peers, as he "watched the plows drag on through the long blowing days" (124). This dichotomy, between the useful and useless disabled, and its effect on masculinity and established gender roles will resurface in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The result is the development of a child largely removed from the usual experience of his self-identified home place, one that left him feeling disassociated and uncertain about his ability to successfully exorcise his discomfort. Just as the beginning of the book casts doubt on the credibility of the memoir, so too does the book's final moment underscore that doubt. The book ends with Crews returning briefly to Bacon County after serving in the Marines. While helping some of the men work, dizzy from the exertion he is no longer used to, he realizes how far away from the others and their world he had gone, when he says: "goddamn sun" (170). This goes over poorly with the others because Crews "had cursed the sun:"

> And in Bacon County you don't curse the sun or the rain or the land or God. They are all the same thing. To curse any of them is an ultimate blasphemy. I had known that three years ago, but in three years I had somehow managed to forget it. I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave them completely. Wherever I might go in the world, they would go with me. (170)

Once again, read in a vacuum, the sentiment that "they would go with me" can be pointed to as affirming the strong connection with his home place that Crews carries with him throughout his career. Read contextually, however, "they would go with me" connotes a constant reminder of

his position as an outsider. In this reading, the presence of Bacon County becomes a specter that haunts Crews, reminding him of what he is no longer, perhaps has never, been a part of. This conclusion also gestures towards the importance of ecology as a central topic in Grit Lit. As someone who left his home, Crews is forced to confront his dwindling understanding of the complex, spiritual relationships between poor whites and their homeland. This destructive, if not improving, narrative of poor whites and their environment, from Erskine Caldwell to Larry Brown and Ron Rash, will be touched upon in the conclusion.

As a personal endeavor, Crews was quite open with what he hoped to gain out of writing *Childhood* and how he ultimately fell short. In this sense, the book was a failure. The "use of I" did not end up taking him "where he needed to go." While it was supposed to strip down his history, answer the questions of who he is, and purge the things that haunted him throughout his career, the memoir, finally, "purged nothing." Even though *Childhood* would be the critical and commercial pinnacle of his career, and even though it would be the book he is most remembered for, it also marked the beginning of Crews's personal descent into self-loathing, diminished reputation, and addiction. Textual evidence of his unstable relationship with Bacon County supports the biographical shift of Crews's life post-*Childhood*. Despite the personal failure of the memoir, he established a trend of utilizing both life writing and fiction, and various blendings of both, that would inform and influence later writers and become a key characteristic of Grit Lit's response to Southern literature's staid ideas of aesthetics and classed regional identity.

CREWS AND RACE

One outgrowth of Crews's writing, and important outgrowth of Crews's indebtedness to old-guard Agrarian southern philosophy, as well as his ruminations on difference, applies to the

fraught specter of race. *Childhood* is closely related to canonical white Southern literature's myths regarding race, but it also brings us to race as a central aspect of this study, one that will play a crucial role in every chapter. Agrarians circumvented race by reducing race problems to class problems. While this recalls similar Marxist tendencies, the agrarian endgame is obviously markedly different. For the Agrarians, issues of race were an unfortunate and avoidable byproduct of the economic planter system, which eliminated subsistence farming and created a culture that favored landowning elite's simultaneous enslavement of blacks and the ostracization of poor whites to the fringes. Simply put, race is not an issue in the South; the issues are economics and class. The Agrarian tendency to acknowledge the "Negro problem" only to diminish race in favor of class forecasts a similar trend in Grit Lit.

Crews established the early trope of superficially confronting race, only to move on, leaving the specificity of race wanting. In other words, the enduring tension of race in the poor South is acknowledged as an inherently troublesome feature of the region, but for the author at least, race is, to a certain extent, sidestepped. In *A Childhood,* for example, young Crews describes discovering that his African-American friend was black, and therefore, marked as different:

> There was a part of me in which it did not matter at all that they were black, but there was another part of me in which it had to matter because it mattered to the world I lived in. It mattered to my blood. It is easy to remember the morning I found out Willallee was a nigger. (68)

Crews goes on to describe Willallee's family, the Jones's, as being "very hard workers. I had never heard anybody speak of Robert Jones and his family with anything but admiration." And yet, when he describes telling a story involving "Mr. Jones," his aunt quickly corrects him: "you don't say 'mister' when you speak of a nigger. You don't say 'Mr. Jones,' you say 'nigger Jones'." This appears to be an important moment of Crews acknowledging his fraught

relationship with race. Young Crews professes to not see race, but he soon realizes that it is a fundamental feature of his poor white culture. However, rather than delving further into the nuances of this tension, he moves on, returning to the deep friendship between him and Willalee and how they were, besides the problematic blend of admiration and deep-seated racism, conflated in their poor upbringings. Indeed, this is the only explicit confrontation with race in the memoir. Crews acknowledges the everyday manifestation of southern racism, an admirable moment, before somewhat sidestepping the issue by reducing his personal relationship to race in favor of conflating the black and white experience in terms of class. This reduction of race as an important topic in Crews's work extends to criticism, where, of the more than seventy journal articles and book chapters dedicated to his work, none of them—in the title at least—refer to other races. Race is a major part of the story, because part of Crews's internal conflict must be his alienation from awareness of race. And like Crews came by his evolving attitudes towards class, gender, disability, and ecology through some sense of dominant and counter myth, so too does his interaction with race stem largely from the myths he both consumed, sometimes perpetuated, and other times remediated.

MYTH, NOSTALGIA, AND AUTHENCITIY

Where is there to turn when personal exploration produces no answers and attempts to integrate a persona into an established way of life are denied? Different authors respond in different ways and in different genres. Dorothy Allison explores autobiographical realism. Larry Brown leans further into literary naturalism. Crews makes myth. The myth Crews turns to reflect different uses of the term. In *Childhood*, myth-making is used to escape. For Crews, based on his relationship with Auntie and other "apocalyptic" women, his biographical history with Bacon

County, and his cloudy family history, myth-making is an attempt to reconcile his past, escape from his position as a cultural outsider, make sense of the cruel, natural world and, finally, to memorialize a way of life he was never a part of. In nonfiction about his adult life—essay collections and interviews—myth is used, as it has always been used in southern literature, to return to an inherently constructed but seemingly "authentic" past.

Crews admittedly had a secondhand, unstable grasp on who his father was. As such, Crews constructed his image of his father through the accounts of people who knew him. In the process, whether it was from being filtered through the townspeople or Crews's own myth-making impulse, every story about his father shines with a mythic sheen. The first story alleges that his father had a testicle removed due to contracting a sexually transmitted disease from a Native American prostitute. As a result, he never expected to have children. He beat the odds and sired three—losing one in infancy. When describing his father, Crews highlights two sides of his father: the side that had a good time and the side that worked too hard. Each takes on legendary status. Once he had a family, he set aside his wild ways and worked his tenant farm with a fervor that Crews is quick to distinguish from the average worker: "There seemed to be something in him then and later, a kind of demon, madness even, that drove him to work too hard, to carouse the same way, and always to be rowdier than was good for him" (30). His father was exceptional. And so, when he had a heart attack, it is fitting that Crews would describe it as a mythic heart attack, one "so massive and so sudden that he didn't move enough to wake his wife" (55). His death matched his life; everything he did was outsized. Uneasy about his tenuous relationship with his father, Crews compensates by elevating his father above others; he uses myth to explain the inexplicable, hopefully creating a sturdy legacy on which to tell his own story.

During his childhood, folklore and mythmaking pass time and provide an escape from his position as an outsider. Geographical and cultural isolation necessitate "fabrication," which "became a way of life. Making up stories, it seems to me now, was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it" (67). And while he uses the pronoun "we" to include a larger culture, it is clear that much of his understanding of mythmaking would occur from an even more isolated vantage point. The biggest mythmaker in the family is Auntie, who teaches him the power and potential of creating myth out of everyday things. As Crews explains, for Auntie, "the entire world for her was aberrant and full of shadows, but she understood the aberrations and the shadows, knew all about them and never seemed to find it strange that so little of her world was what it appeared to be" (94). Young Harry was steeped in a "discoverable world" of "unfathomable mystery" that "we can name—even defend against—but never understand" (74). Things took on mythic layers, such as the firm belief that birds would spit in his mouth while he was asleep, making him subservient to the bird. Recall, Auntie was considered "that way," and so it is safe to assume that the myths that she taught Harry were conceived and handed down from a marginal position. These myths, indicative though they may seem of a larger Southern culture, did not speak for everybody, like some myths. These are marginal myths.

Crews's impulse to make myth runs throughout his work, but it is especially prominent in his journalistic writing. While working for *Playboy* and *Esquire,* Crews became a well-regarded journalist in the vein of New Journalism by writing personal stories that heavily featured his own subjective view of his subjects and experiences. As he says, "The experience you are trying to deal with may have been dealt with before. But it has never been strained through your particular sensibilities, your limitations, your imperfections, your vision of the world." A major part of this

introspection is his analysis of what he considers "naked Americans." "Naked," in this usage, connotes honest, gritty, and authentic Americans; it also means myth. Throughout his journalism, Crews romanticizes those he considers authentic, and in the process, strips them of some of that authenticity. He describes "an incredible din, the noise of violence, viciousness, and the lust for blood and money. The *naked* American. Nothing fake here" (Crews, "A Day at the Dogfights"). And though his image as a "naked" American defined his own writing, he betrays the same insecurity that permeated his memoir, when he calls himself a "bogus southerner," inauthentic when paired with mythical Grits.

Perhaps the clearest way that Crews mythologizes authenticity is in his profiles of famous actors. He wrote extensive profiles of both Robert Blake, "television's junkyard dog," and Charles Bronson. In each, he describes visiting them on the sets of their film and television projects, finding a personal connection with them, and discovering the "real" side of their characters. This type of behind-the-scenes insight is typical of the journalistic profile genre, but Crews quickly slips into mythmaking. Discussing Charles Bronson, for example, he argues that "he is, in fact, the straight-on, tear-your-balls-off kind of guy that he so often portrays with such power on the screen" (Crews, *Blood and Grits* 112).[102] He masks the mythmaking behind a veneer of setting-it-straight but ends up reinforcing the popular myth that already exists. He purports to reveal the truth about Bronson, and "the truth is no more spectacular than this: he doesn't talk when he doesn't want to, and he is hostile only when he has something to be hostile about—which seems to me a damn fine way to be" (112). While this description may contain

[102] *Blood and Grits* (1979) and *Florida Frenzy* (1982) are collections of Crews's nonfiction. These texts, perhaps more than any others, offer a first-person portrait of Crews as a larger-than-life character.

some truth, it is filtered, as he says, through his subjective perception and his own impulse to romanticize his subjects.

Crews does not only mythologize the very famous. He romanticizes the types of marginal people commonly disregarded by the dominant culture. Take Winnebago children as an example, who Crews calls "magnificent creatures. They were wandering in and among the picnic tables, protected, at their ease" (156). What begins as a truthful description of "The Wonderful World of Winnebagos," including the pack of children, morphs into a description of fantastic beasts: "I knew what would happen. They would gradually tighten the circle and finally fall upon the doe. They'd skin her with their bloody baby's teeth and eat her heart" (*Blood and Grits* 156). His journalism that focuses on a specific person or set of people tends to follow a pattern. He first describes how he became ingratiated with the person or people, how he becomes a credible source, and while he often includes factual information and personal anecdotes, he almost always ends up elevating his subjects above the mundane, transforming them from journalistic assignments to "naked Americans," "grits," embodiments of the myth of authenticity—the very thing he struggles to embody himself.

Crews's mythologizing of authentic people is an extension of his own romanticization of his childhood in Georgia. Perhaps as a result, Crews reveals a deep nostalgia for bygone ways of life. Specifically, undergirding each instance of mythmaking is a lament about change. This applies not just to his memoir of childhood, but to his journalism and interviews. In his profile of Charles Bronson, Crews relates how he and Bronson bonded over their rural childhoods. Crews brings up mules in Georgia and Bronson lights up with nostalgia for his own Pennsylvania home place: "But it's all changed there now . . . the mules are gone; the slag heaps, for the most part, are gone. Hell, they've even got grass planted in the yards, green growing things everywhere. All

different than it was" (111). Crews notes the changes in Bacon County too, and their similar histories form the basis of their brief but intimate friendship. In his profile of Robert Blake, he relays a conversation where he and Blake commiserate on old Hollywood. Crews empathizes readily with Blake's nostalgia for the times when "giants were around" and "people inspired each other," before the present moment, where he "can get more out of reading Jack London" then talking with "other creative people, cause they just ain't that creative" (149). In each case, whether it's a rural past or a bygone era of Hollywood, Crews and his subjects endow their myths with a sense of nostalgia and an accompanying frustration with the present moment. This nostalgia is especially prevalent when Crews discusses his native South and the changes that have occurred there. In his many interviews, Crews frequently voices his displeasure for what he feels is a disintegrating way of life. Discussing regional dialects and the homogenization of culture, Crews laments that "when we lose our voices, there's no communicating. When we lose that, then we begin to lose the family. You know, damn little was passed on to any of us—voice, place, manners, customs. When that begins to break down, it diminishes the human family. That's what I think" (Bledsoe, *Getting Naked* 112). In moments like this, he sounds like a regressive agrarian, like Lytle, who bemoans the loss of tradition in the face of cultural change—not very much in line with what Crews became known for. He sounds conservative. "I *do* know that we're being assimilated into the culture of the rest of the country . . . Yeah, it may disappear; it *will* disappear. We're all going to become—God love our hearts—radio disc jockeys with interchangeable parts" (213-14). He even laments the death of God, a fact that "somehow offends me, really deeply offends me that it's a secular world" (302). At times, he is downright Ludditian in his thinking of technology, which he sees as painting over the traditions that literature works hard to keep alive. Progress and secularization threaten the cultural enclave that

he represents. These lamentations lead to negative and prescriptive comments about literature, where "writing is characterized not by a literary heritage but by an electronic heritage," once again placing him in thematic company with his former mentor and the broader history of Southern literary studies (Bledsoe, *Conversations* 172).

Much of the critical work done on Crews has focused on this lamentation of a fading way of life, a culture receding into the homogenizing fabric of a modern South. All of this results in a weirdly prescriptive vision of the world he supposedly speaks on behalf of. But instead of setting an agenda for combating the encroaching evils, his fiction betrays, as critics have noted, a fundamental pessimism. There is nothing to be done, he seems to conclude. Only moments of intense violence can puncture the suffocating fabric of modernity, but these are only fleeting, ultimately inconsequential gestures that delay the inevitable. What usually goes unremarked upon is the relationship between Crews's nostalgia and pessimism and his unstable relationship with his (lack of) a homeplace. The nostalgic moments in interviews and his writing are for a mythic past and way of life he was never really a part of, one that he can mythologize, and commodify, but not credibly speak for. Crews is adept at diagnosing what he sees as problems, but his writing tends to stop just shy of offering actionable alternatives.

CONCLUSION

While Crews's problematic self-mythologization presages the romanticization of the rough South and how that has always been built into the literature, it also forecasts the literature's relationship with neoliberalism. That is, while Crews purportedly bemoaned the neoliberal-homogenization of the South and how it negatively affects a person's sense of place, community, and tradition (a conservative and problematic thing in its own right), he also showed the natural impulse for

literature about the rough South to expand, grow—sell. Crews wanted to preserve the enclave he wrote about, but he quickly left his boutique publishing house for a heavy-hitting publisher.[103] He didn't hesitate to sell his stories to Hollywood in the form of scripts or hit the journalistic trail and capitalize on gonzo and New Journalism trends.[104] Of course, Crews shouldn't speak for the entire group, but as a starting point in the narrative of Grit Lit, it is telling that the most pressing anxieties currently facing the genre have been there all along. This entire study of Grit Lit is a way of theorizing the literature and categorizing it for critical and popular consumption. Any literature claiming authenticity should be met with a healthy degree of skepticism, especially in the South. But this should not discount the many authors that do not mythologize or romanticize, that really does give voice to the voiceless; there is productive, important work being done. Genre—in Crews, memoir, myth, and attendant questions of authenticity—influences this dissertation's subsequent readings of identity. How do successive authors respond to the myths of masculinity, gendered storytelling, the categorization and subsequent hierarchization of disabilities, the centrality of other races to the poor white experience? What genres do they turn to theorize a white trash identity? Such issues are entwined with myth because they respond to a literary history shrouded in myth-making. Such issues are also entwined with authenticity because authorial credibility is the foundation upon which Grit Lit is built. If Crews falls back on older myths or shows uncertainty in his role as auto-ethnographer, how do those who come later change or reinforce what he built? Harry Crews departs from canonical Southern literature in

[103] Jim Landis, Crews's longtime editor at William Morrow and helped launch Crews's career, had a falling out when Crews left William Morrow for Knopf in the early 70s. Crews would later admit that leaving Morrow was a mistake, and he consistently praises Landis's editing. As Geltner summarizes: "Harry's was an economic decision" (173).

[104] The story of writing his first script is telling. When developing *Nakend in Garden Hills* as a movie, Frank Perry wanted Crews to adapt his novel into a screenplay. Crews procrastinated, not knowing how to write a screenplay. Perry worked with him, insisting writing screenplays is easy—"only the moron fakes out there keep insisting it's hard" (qrd. in Geltner 146). He often accepted writing assignments for *Playboy* and *Esquire* because it offered him a paid excuse to party and travel. He often took his friends or girlfriends with him.

more than just style, subject matter, and authenticity. He establishes discourses surrounding controversial cultural topics that future Grits will continue to reckon with. Inseparable from work on socio-cultural identity and difference are the genres used to illustrate this emergent literary enclave. Crews is no doubt a stalwart of what would be described as a white trash renaissance. But it would be incomplete to not note that he was reticent in this regard, and this is born out in his landmark text. So while Crews carved a fertile space for an enduring literature of the rough South, it took subsequent generations of writers to refine it. Crews marked the boundaries that define the mode. He came from, struggled with, and, finally, tore down the old, while later authors would build the new.

CHAPTER 2: "LEFTOVER GUYS": LITERARY NATURALISM, DISABILITY, AND RACE IN LARRY BROWN'S *DIRTY WORK*

"I stood over him for a long moment. He opened his eyes and looked at me when I closed my hands around his throat. He said Jesus loves you. I shut my eyes because I knew better than that shit. I knew somewhere Jesus wept."—Larry Brown, Dirty Work

In the foreword to the essay collection, *Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South,* Brown's friend and fellow Grit, Rick Bass, calls Brown's novel *Joe* (1991) a thematic and programmatic descendant of Warren's *All the King's Men*.[105] The central image of both is rot and the "threat and fear of intransigency; and yet, at the same time, a ceaseless opportunity for growth, or at least re-growth" (xii). Brown, Bass argues, always signals toward a grander, "more sharper felt world" than the one he violently renders, a moral world beyond the seeming nihilism that masquerades in his fiction. Brown displays what Donald Pizer calls the "naturalistic impulse" inherent in American fiction since the 1890s, an emphasis on tragic determinism, "reflecting the various ways in which human freedom is limited or circumscribed and the various ways in which this truth is made palatable by combining it with traditional notions of human worth therefore won't do" (9). This is nowhere more evident than in his debut novel *Dirty Work* (1989), a novel consisting entirely of the conversations and internal thoughts of two disabled Vietnam veterans—one black, one white.

This chapter addresses constructions and legacies of masculinity and sexism, ableism, and racism in the poor white South, as read in the naturalistic fiction of Larry Brown, particularly *Dirty Work*. It applies feminist and queer disability studies to Larry Brown's novel about

[105] Rick Bass' memoirs, beginning with *All Over But the Shoutin'*, also takes up the history of racism in the poor-white South, also choosing to describe and confront rather than "move past" race. This will be given in-depth treatment in Chapter 4.

heterosexual, disabled cis-men. Brown reflects the naturalistic impulse to write narratives featuring circumscribed social conditions, determined to repeat the hope and failures endemic to the American (Southern) way.[106] Like Allison will do with realism in the next chapter, Brown co-opts aspects of a movement, utilizing its method and meaning (a realist method in service of a deterministic meaning), and finding useful ways to turn traditionally negative associations (sexism in realism, for example, as repurposed in Allison, and racism in literary naturalism, as repurposed in Brown) against itself in order to locate humanity in depravity, identity in stereotype, and hope in pain.

In *Dirty Work*, Brown locates, through this naturalist impulse, the humanism of the naturalistic literature from the bleak determinism often held against it, the idea that the human subject has agency, potential, and morality. And, since naturalism "has survived as a significant yet popular literary movement in America because it has responded to the preoccupations of particular moments of modern American life and has discovered appropriate forms for doing so," Brown again updates naturalism, this time to engage the literary form's own crimes (Pizer 16). Despite lofty ideology and revolutionary zeal, naturalists fall back on what Ira Wells calls their "proclivities toward racism, sexism, and the abject worship of force" (11).[107] As we will see with Allison's challenges to realism's middle-class hegemony in the next chapter, Brown reorders the shortcomings historically found in literary naturalism in order to address them in a still determined but generative way. By unpacking tragedies of masculine, disabled, and racially

[106] The sense that characters in literary naturalism are molded by societal forces echoes Foucauldian notions of institutions and discourses shaping subjects. Rather than studying the cause, though, naturalism seems to prefer focusing on the effects (the empirical results), which they render deterministically to encourage a specific response in the reader.

[107] Wells examines whether these "proclivities" are "central and constitutive" of the genre, and whether the genre is therefore worth keeping, summarizing: "in the hands of their critics, naturalism has come to exert a deforming influence not only on generic categorization but also on the entire discipline of American literary historiography (11).

constructed veterans (itself a construct), Brown displays the persistent, seemingly insurmountable taints of exploring poor white identity while nevertheless showing how, if one can be (and write about) poor and white and possess a regional, classed identity not fatalistically defined by the outside or nihilistically doomed through (rightly earned) past offenses, it will be from Grits that know and can depict "a more sharper felt world."

By bringing disability, masculinity, and race to the forefront, the characters are shown to have fallen from the apex of masculinity to an aberrant position traditionally reserved, in the heteronormative southern calculus, for non-normative bodies. Bringing this to the fore enlightens other previously discussed aspects of the novel. This chapter reshapes how race is read in the novel; it brings a needed focus to disability; and it reexamines Brown's literary naturalism as it relates to identity. For the study of naturalism, the novel and this chapter offer a modern example of the endurance of the "naturalistic impulse" in American literature and highlight the potential but unfulfilled generative (if brutal) function of naturalism, despite and in reaction to its common criticisms. The vehicle for that potentially generative discussion is in the intersections masculinity, disability, and race. For the study of Grit Lit's search for a usable identity, this chapter shows another step forward by modeling the failings of traditional hegemonic masculinity and the hopeful, if often unrealized, potential of an inclusive gender identity; however, the deterministic tragedy of the novel keeps race separated from other identities, and that's problematic because it reinforces the novel's potential rebuttal of race as a non-issue in *Dirty Work* by making race a non-issue in relation to discussions of masculinity and disability. Brown's meditations on how disability intersects with other identities approaches but does not realize the intersectionality that, the next chapter argues, finds its fulfillment in Dorothy Allison. Instead, for Brown, the entanglements of identity in the novel are ultimately incommensurable,

which diagnoses the issues of a poor white, especially masculine, identity and gestures to something more inclusive but does remedy them.

LARRY BROWN THE LITERARY NATURALIST

Such a study would be remiss to discuss Grit Lit and not feature literary naturalism. Beyond Larry Brown, almost any Grit Lit writer could be labelled a latter-day naturalist. Harry Crews, William Gay, Dorothy Allison, Tom Franklin, Tim McLaurin (as well as their Southern literary forbrearers--Cormac McCarthy and Barry Hannah) could all bear the title of being an American literary naturalist. And it's not hard to see why: Grits occupy a fallen world populated with "grotesques," as Pizer calls characters in naturalist fiction.[108] They dramatize the rigged American system, one doomed to fail and historically denied a proper articulation of that failure. Grit Lit novels tend to move towards an inevitably violent climax. They document the empirical, material evidence of a society shaped by combatant forces. Many of them insert polemics and ideology into their work (anti-consumerism/homogenization in Grit Lit versus anti-capitalist, leftist politics in early-twentieth-century literary naturalism). And, perhaps at its most basic, like naturalism before it, Grit Lit hijacks genteel forms (the Southern literary canon) for down-and-dirty, insurrectionary purposes.[109]

While literary naturalism is not an operable umbrella to situate all of Grit Lit under, (it is better defined by subject matter, identity politics, region, and the use of various literary forms to seek some sort of collective identity), the overlapping venn diagram is certainly pronounced. Initiated

[108] "Grotesques' 'refers to the unsavory characters who ungracefully stumble through the circumscribed worlds of naturalist fiction. These characters in particular were causes for alarm from naturalism's critics at its beginning. For a deeper analysis on the grotesque and naturalism, see Daham.

[109] Naturalism reacts to romanticism and combines realism's documentary approach with its own philosophical agendas.

by Emile Zola, literary naturalism found quick import with a generation of late-nineteenth American century writers—Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris—who found in Zola's writing something particularly apropos to their impressions of America. As Alfred Kazin puts it, "with us naturalism has been not so much a school as a climate of feeling, almost in the very air of our modern American life, with its mass patterns, its rapid social changes, its idolatry of the mechanical and of 'facts'" (qtd. In Pizer 14). Perhaps reaching its apex in the literature of the 1930s with John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and Richard Wright,[110] it is still a popular critical pastime to locate the naturalistic impulse in every generation of American writers. Sometimes revered for its materialistic, scientific approach to society's impact on an individual, other times dismissed for its polemics and philosophy—it is, so the criticism goes, "a literature characterized by the squalid and degrading in human nature and by a deterministic philosophy that denied man moral responsibility for his actions" (36)—literary naturalism is nevertheless an enduring, adaptable impulse in American letters, one that allows its practitioners to speak on evolving social matters across time and space.

Of course, challenges to literary naturalism can be found in its particular approach to portraying the world. Literary naturalism has been a white man's genre. Ira Wells summarizes critiques of naturalism: "'it is 'trenchantly racist'; its fictions naturalize the discriminatory practices 'em-bedded' in genre" (11). In this regard, it seems cruelly appropriate that poor white authors would make use of literary naturalism, and adding authors like Larry Brown to its ranks hardly seems productive: a white male author taking up a male-dominated, arguably discriminatory genre to unpack the culture of a male-dominated, often discriminatory culture. As

[110] Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy, Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, and Wright's *Native Son* stand among the most heralded, studied, and controversial works of American literature.

I will show, however, it is precisely within this too-perfect literary marriage that Brown finds the fictional tools to brutally depict the seemingly circumscribed discriminatory forces at work in the poor white South, and by so doing, carve a way out. As James R. Giles concludes of Brown's *Father and Son* (1996),[111] "the central characters . . . are all victimized by a complex determinism that incorporates familial and tribal relationships, the interaction of language and an alcohol-fueled violence perpetuated by repressive socioeconomic systems, and intense, often Oedipal, psychological conflicts created by codes of masculinity centered in misogyny, homophobia, hatred of the Other, and a barely repressed self-loathing" (148). At its simplest comparison, Brown (and other Grits) painfully document their naturalistic South—a Mississippi Studs Lonigan or Carolina Augie March.

As Pizer suggests of the humanism that undergirds the squalor of literary naturalism from the 1930s, "A permanent naturalistic theme—the capacity of men of all stations to feel deeply—is now expanded into an ability to understand as well, and in understanding there is promise for the future" (28). In *Dirty Work* (and elsewhere), Brown uses literary naturalism to engage, like Allison will with realism, the seemingly predetermined, violently incommensurable struggle of intersectionality[112] among a culture defined by stereotypes and constructed caricatures from outside poor white culture and very real and very dark histories from within. In Brown's first published novel, the unsustainable but tragically deterministic hegemonic masculinity informs characters' readings of disability and race and the knotted intersections that traditional

[111] Also worth noting is Brown's novel *Joe* (1991), which is another moving naturalistic novel. It follows the titular character, an alcoholic ex-convict with an ambivalent attitude to the world and a violent approach to human relationships. He slowly befriends Gary Jones, who is abused by his father. In the end, Joe dies while killing Gary's father, who was letting men rape his daughter for money. The violent, moral story highlights the inevitably of violence (like all of Brown's novels), but also hints at the possibility of growth and regeneration in an amoral, seemingly deterministic world.

[112] "Intersectionality," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise."

circumscribed social forces simply cannot untangle, an important recognition in Grit Lit's process of fashioning an identity for themselves.

THE APEX (OF MASCULINITY)

Larry Brown's first novel is a *tour-de-force*. Twenty-two years after being wounded in the Vietnam War, Braiden and Walter find themselves lying next to each other in a Veteran's Affairs hospital. Braiden has been there for twenty years, in the same bed. Walter was brought in for a then unknown incident. Braiden has no arms and no legs. Walter's face is disfigured, the result of a sniper rifle bullet. Another side effect is occasional blackouts that leave him unconscious for varying minutes and hours. The novel consists of the conversations they have over a two day period. The two men's complex systems of coping with their fallen status, even in the tough terrain of Brown's South, at first offers hope for the disabled man. Sadly, poignantly, the novel's tragic end strips away hope, leaving, in the naturalistic world of the novel at least, no optimistic answer for the disabled, formerly hegemonically masculine man.[113]

Braiden and Walter learned their hegemonic masculinity in an era still dominated by traditional conceptions of gender roles and authority, and they lost it in a moment of increased anxiety over traditional gender roles and authority. Writing in the late 80s, Brown's novel's characters were wounded in the Vietnam War (no later than 1973, presumably), so Walter and Braiden's period of fallen masculinity occurred just after and throughout a historical moment that saw the rise of social changes like the women's movement, the sexual revolution, the gay liberation movement, and a revolution in communication and proliferation of mass media

[113] Connell and Messerschmidt offer a good summary of the term. Hegemonic masculinity is "an analogue, in gender terms, of power structure research in political sociology—focusing the spotlight on a dominant group. Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (832).

(Lemon 16). These giant steps in social and political change resulted in a renewed interest in studying masculinity. Backlash movements, antifeminism and pro-male movements, accompanied more progressive responses, most notably the emergence of Men's Studies in the 1980s, which saw scholars renegotiating and redefining traditional gender conceptions of masculinity during a moment of "unprecedented disequilibrium" (16). Terms cropped up that consider this anxiety and instability. Sex role strain refers to "felt difficulties in fulfilling role obligations, where the male actor is exposed "to conflicting sets of legintimized role expectations such that complete fulfillment of both is realistically impossible" (Komarovsky 8). The "crisis of masculinity" refers broadly to "a time of renegotiating taken-for-granted, 'commonsense' assumptions, and a redistribution of power in human relations in response to these changes" (Lemon 28).

Thus, however secure Braiden and Walter may have felt, or performed, in their masculinity, the larger cultural landscape suggests that such feelings and performances were increasingly unstable. It is certainly reasonable to question to what extent the characters would have been aware or exposed to these radical renegotiations. Walter hides in his room most of the time, and Braiden has been confined to the VA hospital for two decades. But Brown explicitly focuses on Braiden and Walter's consumption of media. Walter spends his reclusive time watching television and film, and Braiden relies on the medical staff and, most influentially, the television in his room for images of the outside world. An essential source of the masculine instability, changes in communication through mass media and popular culture resulted in uneasy and contested representations of sex role strain. Some film, television, and advertisements lent credence to the changing roles, showing women in professional roles and men showing a sensitive side, while others reacted negatively to these changes, showing how

media contributes to creating a "crisis of masculinity," "since they constitute one of the prime sites for the reproduction of gender divisions, sexism and patriarchal ideology" (Lemon 24). At the same time they consume contemporary portrayals of masculinity, Walter and Braiden are also revisiting and reinvesting in traditional paradigms of masculinity (such as Humphrey Bogart).

Another way this context is valuable when considering the novel is because able-bodiedness was among the assumptions being dislodged. Traditional assumptions regarding the biological superiority of men (e.g., they are stronger) gave way to studies and evidence of the decline of men's emotional and physical health (Miles). Women were living longer and experiencing less heart and stress problems, while they moved into previously masculine spaces and performed previously masculine roles. For Walter and Braiden, it means that in addition to how they individually understand their disabled bodies in relation to their masculinity, the larger culture was also reconsidering the connection between able-bodiedness and masculinity. And while this could be seen as a helpful thing (the characters' anxiety could be softened by the knowledge that all assumptions of masculinity and physicality are being questioned), Walter and Braiden more likely associate their disabilities as being disappointing examples of the death of masculinity and the identity crises that brings.

The novel was intervening in conceptions of masculinity of its moment by illustrating in painful detail this crisis of masculinity. But far from using it as evidence of the need for renewed commitment to traditional forms of masculinity, Brown models the crisis to show how impossible those traditional forms of masculinity are. Indeed, when discussing a "democartic manhood," Micahel Kimmel implores men to abandon the centuries-old "failed quest" to "prove their masculinity through self-control, exclusion, and escape," which I will show are three

methods tried and failed by Walter and Braiden. Instead, Kimmel's "deomcratic manhood" means "a gender politics of inclusion, of standing up against injustice based on difference" (333). Walter and Braiden get a close-up confrontation with setting masculinity against different identities. And while, in line with Larry Brown the naturalist, the tragedy of the novel could appear to dramatize the impossibility of an inclusive masculinity, the hope flashed in the novel is enough to suggest that inclusivity is indeed the only way to survive a crisis of masculinity, it's just going to be, as all masculinity is, a violent affair.

Prior to being disabled in the Vietnam War, Braiden and Walter were both able-bodied men. Foucault's distinction that the modern body has evolved to value physical stature and maintenance for utilitarian purposes is fulfilled in Braiden and Walter; they are docile bodies.[114] They both come from cotton-picking families in Mississippi, where being able-bodied and machine-like labor is particularly essential to livelihood. Though both Braiden and Walter were impoverished throughout their lives, their position as dominant men, within the isolated culture of the poor South,[115] enabled them to work, fight, take care of their families, and eventually, participate in war, which are constitutive characteristics of socially constructed ableism, locally and nationally.

Braiden and Walter were both large, physically imposing men. Walter, in particular, is massive. Braiden sizes him to be well taller than six feet and probably over 250 pounds. Braiden remembers his own physical dominance: "I had a pretty good set of legs on me back then" (158).

[114] Indeed, the Marines is a textbook embodiment of Foucault's argument (from *Discipline and Punish*) that "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). Regulation, surveillance, ranking, and eventual manipulation of bodies seem a key part of training soldiers. It is little wonder, then, that Walter and Braiden struggle post-docility.

[115] Again, when the bottom rung of society is all that's visible, "dominant" becomes highly relative, such that physical laborers in the twentieth centuries can be considered dominant.

Picking cotton becomes a point of familiarity for Walter and Braiden. They both come from poor, working families who relied on their hands to make a living. Braiden remembers seeing cotton before going to war: "Cotton was up. Most of them around us had a pretty good stand. Looked like they's gonna make it good that year" 26). Picking cotton was how he defined himself, and he laments that he can no longer contribute to the traditional means of sustenance. We should not misappropriate Braiden's nostalgia for farming as a pastoral ideal. As Christopher Rieger notes, labor in Brown's novels—sharecropping and poisoning trees—is usually anti-pastoral but economically necessary. The machines that destroy Arcadia are associated with hyper-masculinity.[116] Braiden was one of those machines. His is a nostalgia of usefulness. Walter is also aware of the masculinity associated with labor. He describes nomadically following where cotton was growing and spending his days in the field so that his mother could buy food to cook. Walter's life was defined by his ability to perform labor so that women could perform their role. They were docile, in the Foucauldian sense, in that the maintenance and use of their physicality was seen as an ideological duty.

Violence also determines masculinity, and like labor, it requires an appropriate physical capacity for receiving and reciprocating. Walter's father was sent to prison while he was young, and "that left me and mama to fend for ourselves, as they say" (29). Braiden learned masculinity by what he perceived in his immediate surroundings. Interestingly, the one most responsible for his abiding image of a man is his mother. He recounts a story of being bullied. His mother once sent him to the store to buy Kotex. Walter did not know what it was. Coming out of the store, the local bully beat him up, saw the Kotex and said, "*Kotex*, like it was a dirty word" (40). People

[116] See Christopher Reiger's article, "The Pickup Truck in the Garden: Larry Brown's *Joe*," which analyzes the hyper-masculine symbol of the truck and its relationship to pastoralism, environmentalism, and the poor.

outside the store laughed and watched "to see what I was made of. And they saw. Chickenshit. That's what I was made of. I picked up my dirty Kotex, and I went on home" (41). Walter's younger self equates feminine hygiene with being bullied. If he had not had to go get Kotex, he would not have been bullied. Thus, Kotex becomes "dirty" and associated with his lack of masculinity. Further, Walter is identified with the Kotex, thus coding himself as feminine. Returning home, his mother scolds his cowardice and urges him to fight back: "I know now that she was ashamed of me. Not my father's son. Hell, I was ashamed of myself." Violence must be learned, and in the absence of his father, Braiden's mother inherits the duty of imparting to him the concept of self-preservation that would inform the rest of his life: "If you don't take up for yourself in this world, there ain't nobody else that will. If you let him run over you once, he's gonna run over you again" (42). "Getting run over" and femininity, signified in the Korex, are two markers of an unformed able-bodied masculinity. Walter's mother operates in the traditional view that, to be a man, you must stick up for yourself in an inherently violent world. By marking Walter as feminine while he carries the Kotex, Brown underscores the novel's emphasis on masculine ability's role in overcoming femininity through violence. Survival means harnessing violence. The next day at school, Walter stabs the bully, and is never bothered at school again. It is implied that it takes not just an able-body to do that, but a specifically male able-body; the Kotex goes unremarked upon.[117] His early association with masculinity came in the form of violence. His father killed someone, his mother taught him that his father was a man, and Walter became violent in order to become a man. The connection between the feminine and disability climaxes when Braiden calls into question Walter's masculinity when trying to convince him to

[117] Brown would later invert this earlier presupposition in *Fay*, where a female protagonist navigates the same harsh landscapes of Brown's male characters, see Robert Bueka's "Hard Traveling: *Fay*'s Deep-South Landscape of Violence."

end his life. The Kotex incident, being marked by femininity, and his mother's lesson on the necessity of violence primed Walter for the novel's fateful, deterministic ending.

Sexuality, too, is a gauge by which Walter and Braiden judge their masculinity. Braiden continually comments on the influence of television on masculinity formation: "have to watch all that pussy on TV. Miss America. Days of Our Lives" (19); "Old Humphrey Bogart could get the damn women. Had them women crawling all over him" (21). Whereas labor and violence are more or less local constructions—or were, at least, locally constructed for Braiden and Walter—sexuality is reinforced by encroaching commercial forces.[118] Braiden perceives his disability, which makes him decidedly unlike Humphrey Bogart, as rendering him asexual. Walter is more open, and local, with his sexuality. When a nurse is in the room, he thinks, "I sneaked looks at her tits once in a while. They were pretty awesome" (115); she "got up and started fluffing my pillow. Rubbed one her big old titties right across my nose. One time. Inadvertently, of course" (144); "she had her legs up on the bed next to me. Fine, heavy, thick. Real legs" (143). His sexuality is more rooted in his immediate surroundings. Even in retrospect, his sexual development is local. He recalls an old classmate, Marry Barry, saying "she had great big titties and great big glasses" (194). He describes reacting violently when a male student had sex with Mary and then boasted of it at school: "I mean, I used to hear guys talk all the time. Oh hell, I fucked so and so. I could never understand how they could tell that shit . . . it'd take an asshole to go out and tell the whole world about it. I whipped a guy bad over that shit one time" (194). Walter's violent reaction to discourse of sexuality, the garnering of male power at its circulation, is, by the novel's standards, a particularly masculine moment in his pre-disabled life. His views

[118] Darlin' Neal notes the use of pop culture in Brown as a way of reinforcing and obscuring the reality of his characters.

of sexuality, coupled with his violent nature, manifest in his "whipping" of a disrespectful man. The nebulous intersection of gender, ability, and violence results in a sort of chivalry.[119] Whereas Braiden shows the encroachment of sexual homogeneity via television, probably because of his prolonged isolation away from material markers of sexuality, Walter displays the local interplay between sexuality, violence, and the able-bodiedness that produces and protects hegemonic masculinity.

Finally, if labor, violence, and sexuality made Braiden and Walter men, becoming soldiers lifted them to the apex of masculinity. Walter remembers his drill sergeant saying:

We got an image to uphold here. The best in the world. There's a bunch of them going over there in a few months that ain't coming back. They're gonna die for their county, they're gonna die for their Marine Corps, for all the softass civilians like you guys used to be. The war ain't getting better. It's getting worse. Now you pay afuckintention or your ass comes home in a plastic bag. Don't die for your country! Make that motherfucker die for his! Do you understand me? (186)

Walter's drill sergeant enforces the idea of a soldier as hyper-masculine, an "image to uphold." Within the military, soldiers were believed to be better than average men. The drill sergeant invokes General Patton's WWII speech to the Third Army, an iconic American piece of military masculinity.[120] They are willing to die for "the soft ass civilians" but their specifically American ability transcends previous perceptions of manliness. Though they were indoctrinated into masculinity by labor, violence, and sexuality, Braiden and Walter reached their apex in the

[119] Chivalry is another form of male sexism, where women are treated as objects to be revered and exalted, see Žižek.

[120] Patton famously delivered a rousing, profanity-laden series of speeches prior to the Normandy invasion to motivate American troops. Later memorialized in the film *Patton* (1970), the speech opens with the oft-quoted line: "No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country" (Brighton 265).

Marines;[121] and though it's implied that a soldier can die and still be a man, the drill sergeant makes no mention of those men that become disabled. As docile bodies, Walter and Braiden were disciplined to internalize the sense of being monitored; from the field to the barracks, one regime of mechanization and labor is replaced by another and thus the regime of masculinity is augmented. With the military, Brown has moved able-bodied masculinity from locally and commercially constructed to something that is specifically national. Brown himself never was deployed while in the Marines, but he observed disabled marines in his two year stint at the Marine Barracks in Philadelphia (Cash xxiii). The Mississippi setting may have incubated Walter and Braiden's early conceptions of masculinity and its requisite able-bodiedness, but national and cultural forces secured the totalizing link between an able body and a useful body.

THE ABERRANCE (OF DISABILITY)

Criticism on *Dirty Work* has mentioned disability only in passing, despite its centrality in the novel. It is brushed aside as a plot device, part of the narrative frame that structures but does not contribute to the intellectual heft of the piece, what Mitchell and Snyder call "narrative prosthesis."[122] Pieces published on the novel focus, and rightly so, on the Vietnam War, masculinity, and race.[123] Scholarship on Brown's entire corpus tends to focus on class, environment, violence, regionalism, and Brown's literary influences and generic position, as

[121] The Marines in particular fashions itself as the apex of the American military, tougher and prouder than other branches, particularly the Army. In this sense, they are the apex of the apex.

[122] Narrative prosthesis, as defined by Mitchell and Snyder, is the "perpetual discursive dependency on disability" that manifests in literature "as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (222).

[123] Dan Allawat heralds the novel as one of the most accurate accounts of the Vietnam War ever written. Suzanne Jones takes up the issue of race, concluding that "although Brown assigns different races to his protagonists, he does not handle this difference as complexly as he might…he shies away from a real dialogue between [the characters] about racial issues" (110). Robert Donahoo suggests that the implied mercy killing at the novel's end suggests that the artificial construction of the protagonist's (particularly Braiden's) reality is meant to conceal – and by so doing, confront – racial history.

does this chapter.[124] These scholars are correct to study these fundamental aspects of Brown's work, but critics of *Dirty Work* have given only passing acknowledgment to disability in the novel, particularly disability as theorized by feminist and queer disability scholars,.

The discipline of disability theory has quickly turned to feminism and queer theory in order to define the disabled body. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson begins her merging of the female and disabled body with Aristotle, who laid the groundwork for establishing hierarchies of the typical and the aberrant in Generation of Animals, saying, "in these cases [the aberrant] Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male." Feminism of all types have understood and reacted in some way to this dominant model of gender division; the idea that the female is somehow lacking, or as Aristotle says, somehow "a deformed (or mutilated) male," has informed, to different ends, many approaches to feminism. At its most important, Aristotle begins our understanding of the "generic" norm, the idea that there is a physical standard by which all "others" can be compared. For Garland-Thomson, the power of that comparison is made by social relations: "a universalized disability discourse that draws on feminism's confrontation with the gender system requires understanding the body as a cultural text." Garland-Thomson evokes Erwing Goffman's "stigma theory," Mary Douglas's "Concept of Dirt," and Foucault's "docile bodies" to show the social construction of the body, from stigmatization to an ideological transition favoring physical maintenance as political duty. Douglas Baynton's "Disability and the Justification of Inequality

[124] Class is presupposed in most Brown criticism. Look at the title of the only critical collection on Brown, Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South, to note the centrality of class. Environmental readings of Brown range from poverty as an environmental issue in Watson to the violent landscape of Fay in Beuka. Like class, violence is a ubiquitous aspect of both Brown's writing and criticism. Regionalism receives its most significant treatment in one of the more theoretically inclined articles on Brown, Paul Lyons's "Larry Brown's Joe and the Uses and Abuses of the 'Region' Concept." Literary influence and generic positioning in Brown ranges from Caldwell and southwestern humor in Atkinson, the American Western in Bjerre, and the reinvention of literary naturalism in Giles.

in American History" parallels the social equating of women and the disabled. During the woman's suffrage movement, for example, "one of the rhetorical tactics of suffrage opponents was to point to the physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws of women" and "by the late nineteenth century, these claims were sometimes expressed in terms of evolutionary progress . . . their disabilities a result of lesser evolutionary development" (37).

Walter and Braiden's fall to a position of aberrance is best observed through their own reactions to society after coming home disabled. As such, they are "dealt" with in similar ways. Douglas's "Concept of Dirt" describes the ways that society deals with anomalies: assignment to an absolute category, elimination, avoidance, labeling the anomaly dangerous, or incorporating "anomalous elements into ritual to enrich meaning or call attention to other levels of existence" (33).[125] As veterans, rather than being valorized, the characters' wounds either make them feel like they need to hide, as Walter does, or they are literally hidden, in Braiden's case tucked away in the corner of a rural VA hospital. Braiden and Walter, having lived in an apex position, recognize their new position in society and turn those solutions to anomaly, ones they formerly used to subjugate others, on themselves.

Most important in the novel is elimination, the non-anomaly eliminating the anomaly, and Braiden, by desiring self-elimination, is enforcing his former able bodies' social response to his anomalous self. But Braiden is not capable of suicide; he has no arms or legs. Throughout the novel, Braiden tries to convince Walter to kill him. At some point during his twenty-two years residence at the hospital, he has made up his mind to take his own life. "They take our arms and legs," he says, "you can't do nothing. Ain't no existence for a man" (23). Arms and legs are

[125] Douglas famously describes dirt as "matter out of place" (44). It is anomalous and ambiguous, that "which blur, smudge, contradict or otherwise confuse accepted classifications" (50). For Douglas, dirt is a relative term, depending on structures of order in a given society. Disability as dirt in *Dirty Work*, exists in a society that valorizes hegemonic masculinity and abled-bodiness.

necessary pieces of an abled-bodied, masculine whole. Important aspects of traditional masculinity--self sufficiency, freedom and individualism--presuppose a man has arms and legs. Braiden's decision to die is linked with his masculinity. Even before his disability, Braiden saw suicide as a viable option. While in Vietnam, he finds a friend that had gone missing, "wired to a tree. Yeah. I quit feeling bad then . . . I made up my mind they wouldn't catch me alive. Always had me one round in my pocket for me. Yes sir" (153). But he did make it out alive, and without the necessary body parts to put his bullet to use. In trying to convince Walter to kill him, Braiden evokes masculinity, telling him, "You ain't no man if you don't do this for me. I'm tired and I want to go home . . . You been sent to me, Walter. You been sent and I ain't gonna be denied" (226-27). Braiden again equates masculinity with violence, as though Walter is not a real man unless he performs this mercy killing, a mercy killing that will seal Braiden's fate and reinforce Walter's place in the long history racial violence.

Avoidance is the mechanism primarily used by Walter. In Douglas, avoidance is a frequent initial reaction to an anomaly. While Douglas's theory implies that that the non-anomalous culture avoids the anomaly, in Dirty Work, Walter has internalized this basic reaction, recognizing that that is society's (perhaps least destructive) method of dealing with an anomaly, and enacted it himself. His self-avoidance underscores his own entrenchment in ableist cultural norms. Both characters pretend to be asleep throughout the story, in order not to make contact with the able-bodied staff. Walter describes how he "did the smart thing. I woke up before I opened my eyes. I just laid there, I didn't move . . . I had the idea that they were watching me . . . if there was two of them, they'd discuss me" (7-8). Walter chooses to not make his consciousness known in order to avoid human contact, such as when the nurses come in the

room.[126] He opts to listen to what is said about him instead of communicating. Before coming to the hospital, he avoided his family:

Usually I just stay in my room. I live with my mother and my brother. But don't see them much. They get the red-ass if they have to look at me too much. Ah shit, I ought not say that. Hell. I know it hurts them to look at me, I just try to spare them. Stay out of the way. (70)

In addition to avoiding his family, Walter avoids himself. He drinks and smokes marijuana. Drinking makes his blackouts worse, but he does it anyway because alcohol and the blackouts offer him a way out of consciousness. Instead of consulting alternate realities via "trips," Walter obscures disabled reality by triggering the very blackouts which are a manifestation of his disability.[127] Walter's avoidance is caused by a recognition that he holds an undesirable position. He understands that his disfigured face is an anomaly and employs avoidance to "spare" his family. When he does come out of his room, it's only at night.

Walter's relationship with his disability is far more complex than Braiden's. Whereas Braiden has long decided that elimination is the only solution to his disabled life, Walter finds someone who gives him hope: Beth. They meet on one of his late night excursions.[128] They develop a quick friendship. They kiss. Walter is confused as to why a woman would be attracted to him. Even Braiden thinks, "Man, where you gonna find a woman that would mess with you? Cause I mean his face was messed up big time. Just scar tissue" (84). Walter relates their first

[126] The medical-industrial complex is an important component to how disability is configured and treated. Gilbert Welch notes, the "medical-industrial complex" needs patients and so it defines health as "the absence of abnormality." In line with this, the medical side of Walter and Braiden's life in the hospital does not feature prominently, but its absence and the custodial nature of the VA hospital (they simply keep Braiden alive) speaks to the maintenance of disability as abnormality for the benefit of the medical-industrial complex.

[127] Again, this cruel irony underscores Walter's adherence to avoidance, to the point that he will self-destructively trigger that which makes him anomalous just to avoid the self-awareness that he is anomalous.

[128] Though it goes unexplored in the novel, Beth too practices avoidance, albeit in a different way than Walter, as determined by her particular disability. She works the night shift at a country gas station, where she sits or stands behind a counter, thus concealing her legs. Further, she indulges in the same mind-altering methods of escape frequented by Walter.

kiss: “she said that didn’t matter, and what I looked like didn’t matter, and that she’d show me what she meant sometime . . . She touched my face, all the mess-up place . . . It was like she understood. She kissed me” (136). Beth later, hesitantly, reveals that she too is disabled, in the form of extensive scarring across her legs caused by a dog attack: “She said she hated for me to see her legs but she guessed sometime I’d have to. She didn’t think anybody would want her. That’s what it was” (156). Beth and Walter share similar misapprehensions about their ability to have a relationship. Their mutual disabilities offer a ground on which to build one.

An important distinction must be made between Walter’s visible disability and Beth’s nonvisible one, and for this queer theory is especially useful. Queer theory’s contributions to disability theory began as a reaction to the link between the female and disabled body. While recognizing the aberrant position that the two hold, queer theory submits that feminism does not offer a full enough understanding of disability. For example, disabled men and women are not always born that way, they do not necessarily share their “inferiority” with family and friends, and their position as “aberrant” is not always visible. If feminist disability theory can be said to offer an outside-in view of the disabled body – disability is constructed socially and stigmatization is created by the non-disabled – queer disability theory offers an inside perspective. While accepting that the body is a social construction and that marginalization is created by the non-marginalized, queer disability studies is concerned with how the individual disabled or homosexual body operates within that construction. Ellen Samuels confronts, “the discursive and practical connections between coming out – in all the meanings of the term – as queer and as disabled” (233). Drawing on the work of Swain and Cameron’s “Unless Otherwise Stated,” Samuels describes society’s assumption that individuals are both non-disabled and heterosexual “unless otherwise stated” – the very idea of normal (235). The idea of coming out,

both for the disabled and queer individual, is a political commitment, a willingness to accept that idea of their identity. Feminist disability theory in some way assumes that the disabled body is instantly visible and therefore immediately recognizable while Samuels asserts that coming out as disabled and gay involves a personal decision to enter into a new culture. The disabled body, then, must make a decision, to accept that facet of their identity, or remain hidden, if invisibility is an option. For those disabled bodies that are not easily visible—chronic illnesses, mental disability, or visible marks that can be hidden—and those that are visible, Samuels describes the "coming-out" discourse grammatically: "to come out to a person or group usually refers to a specific revelatory event, while to come out (without an object) usually refers to the time that one first realized and came to terms with one's own identity" (237). Visible disability has little choice in coming out to other people, as people with these conditions cannot decide whether or not to reveal themselves; they must come out to themselves. The invisibly disabled are faced with a choice of identity; that is, they can decide whether or not to reveal their disability and cope with the social constructions that surround it.

Beth seems to enact the position of the non-visibly disabled. Her hesitance is a result of fear that she won't be accepted, that no one will want her. Walter has little choice but to be noticed. Instead, he must come to terms with his own identity. Their mutual disabilities, then, become a way for Beth to come out to someone and for Walter to come out to himself. When they first make love, it seems the relationship has done both: "He was messed up and she was messed up and somehow they had found each other like a miracle or dream. And in their combined dreams they were whole, and happy at last, and normal" (231). Their mutual abnormal identities made them normal. Walter and Beth exhibit the entanglement of ability, sexuality, and gender. "Coming out" is a response to her invisible disability, while Walter's acceptance of it—

and her—is informed by his own connections between disability and gender. Walter knows the similarities between ability and masculinity, having learned early on to associate disability with the feminine. This interconnectedness is an important reason that Walter and Beth are able to productively engage intellectually and sexually with their disabilities.

Larry Brown creates optimism for Walter. While Braiden had long ago decided he wanted to die, Walter is given hope in the form of another disabled body. Walter is able to come out to himself; he says, "I'd hidden from everybody for so long. I just withdrew from the world. Stayed in my room all that time. She made me feel like somebody again. Instead of just a freak" (212-13). Beth gives Walter renewed energy and convinces him to come to terms with his role in the world and his own identity:

> I wouldn't lock myself away in my room anymore. I'd live with my family and try to help my mother . . . I'd try to decide what to do about my face and my head. There were other hospitals and other doctors, and people everywhere ready to help me. I'd take Beth over to the house, and let Mama meet her, and the three of us could talk about it. (228-29)

But whatever optimism is given to Walter in Beth, in typical deterministic fashion, is quickly taken away. Walter eventually remembers why he was brought to the hospital—he smothered and killed Beth.[129] His nonvisible blackouts made him the instrument that kills her. Given their position at the time of the blackout, it can also be assumed that his disfigured face was directly on top of Beth's. His renewed identity is stripped away. He suddenly understands Braiden's resolve, and the novel ends with the implied smothering of Braiden. Essentially, his disability killed two people—it directly caused the death of Beth, and, if it hadn't been for his blackouts,

[129] Walter and Beth were becoming intimate in his car during a rainstorm, after smoking marijuana and drinking beer. As Walter gets on top of Beth to have intercourse—read here as an important, self-actualizing moment for them both—he has a blackout, falls on top of Beth, and due to his immense size, she is not able to get himi off. The storm brings a flood, which eventually submerges the car and Beth. While her actual cause of death is drowning, it was precipitated by Walter's disability.

he would not have come to the hospital, the place where he would eventually kill Braiden. His black outs turn him into an inanimate object, heavy enough to smother other peopleHis singular moment of regained masculinity is unequivocally denied. Indeed, if it weren't for his massive stature, the size which contributed to his previous hyper-masculinity, perhaps he would not have suffocated Beth. His fallen male body is the culprit in his failed attempt at self-reconciliation.

Raya Morag's impotence model of masculinity of the Vietnam War characterizes Brown's fiction as not seeing race, since poverty does not see race, in which the "physical annihilation of masculinity involves a state of total paralysis, both physical and mental," ensures a sustained state of emasculation within a phallocentric, hegemonically masculinie culture (202).The final passage of *Dirty Work* returns to the apex of masculinity. He considers what Braiden is thinking about as he dies: "catching lightning bugs. Cotton picking in the Mississippi Delta . . . the wire mesh we used to cling to, the people waving . . . I think he dreamed of Africa . . . while a man with a spear walked in black silhouette across the face of it" (236). Visions of masculinity precede Walter's killing of Braiden. Twenty-two years of avoidance, the desire for elimination, and the fall from apex to aberrant, and masculinity continues to haunt the two men. Everything he names in this passage requires able-bodiedness. Faced with the image of a man with a spear walking, Walter understands what Braiden has been wanting; he understands what he perceives to be a primal need of men to be masculine. He understands that their disabilities have taken that away, aligning them with other aberrant identities. There is no hope in the novel for the disabled man. Once fallen from the apex of masculinity, there is no reclaiming it, and no coming to terms with the new identity. Brown's ending becomes especially tragic when he gives Walter hope, gives him Beth, only to take it away. Their disabilities become agents of death. The final lines express the hopelessness of disability: "I stood over him for a long moment. He

opened his eyes and looked at me when I closed my hands around his throat. He said Jesus loves you. I shut my eyes because I knew better than that shit. I knew somewhere Jesus wept" (236). In many ways, this ending is a textbook example of literary naturalism, where pessimism apparently prevails, the actions, even thoughts of the characters are circumscribed and conditioned, and the narrative seems to reinforce hegemonic—and able-bodied—masculinity as the only desirable, survivable position.

RACE

A similar fate holds true for black-white race dynamics, where white-on-black violence in the poor white South is predetermined and unavoidable. Scholarship tends to situate race as a non-issue in Brown's work. For example, when introducing what she sees as the fundamental characteristics of Brown's writing, Jean W. Cash cites the role of family, violence and resolution, strong women, natural beauty, and unprejudiced poverty. Cash describes Brown's fiction as not seeing race, since poverty does not see race. For a novel that features the intimate conversations between one black man and one white man, it seems to, at first glance, downplay race in favor of exploring the shared experience of being lower class, disabled veterans. This idea is underscored by the isolated, liminal setting of the nearly empty VA hospital. Add in the character of Walter, who makes a point to dismiss race in favor of more connective identification, and the novel seems to posit a relationship based on the mutual experience of class, war, and disability—not race. But Brown shows how race cannot be so easily dismissed. Braiden's desire for elimination is informed by what he perceives to be his shortcomings as an African-American man. Walter's family history—especially his relationship with his father—is shaped by racial violence.[130]

[130] As could be imagined, the theme of "sins of the father" pervades Southern literature, "This legacy of guilt, inadequacy, and anxiety is the 'burden of the past' under which so many male characters in Southern literature

Brown does a deft job of illustrating and then countering the idealistic notion that we can "move on" from race by conflating the similar experiences of poor southern blacks and whites, a common theme in Grit Lit. And, just like the deaths of Beth and Braiden signal a Darwinian march towards the elimination of anomalies, race gets the literary naturalist treatment.

Perhaps Walter is trying to seem disarming to his new roommate, perhaps he is engaging with his family's relationship with people of color, but he presents himself as having moved past the concept of race. He fashions himself as someone who, from an early age, has gone against the racist cultural grain. "For a long time," he tells Braiden, "the earliest thing I could remember was riding on a wagonload of cotton with some little black kids and jumping around in it" (27). Walter also describes his father's close relationship with a former field hand, Hugh Jean: "He had a certain kind of relationship with Hugh Jean, and after he died it seemed like things were never the same" (125).[131] Walter's father takes him to the funeral, where they were the "only white people there." He describes how the congregation "sang like angels," and how he has been listening for something similar ever since, an experience reminiscent of Bone's discovery of black church music (126). He shows a life of desegregation through the shared experience of cotton, which historically symbolizes just the opposite.[132] Both Walter and Braiden grew up

labor" (Makowsky). See, for examples, Makowsky on the prevalence of this theme in the works of Walker Percy, Easterbrook's "Sins of the Father: Patriarchy and the Old South in the early Works of William Faulkner," and Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *Sins of the Father: A Romance of the South*, which uses the theme to reinforce fears of miscegenation, white male desire for black bodies, and the need for complete separation of races.

[131] Little more is said about the relationship between Hugh Jean and Walter's father, but it is safe to assume, from the closeness of Walter's family to Hugh Jeans and Walter's father's reaction to his death, there was a (perhaps unspoken) friendship between them that transcended the economic and racial relationship between farmer and fieldhand.

[132] Few things symbolize the history racial oppression in the South then cotton. It contains in it the economic justification and perpetuation of slavery, racial stratification, and, more specifically, the brutal physical conditions endured by the slaves at the hands of white masters. It is interesting, here, then Brown inverts the symbol to signify the shared hardship of poor whites and blacks post-slavery. It's an instructive move, since it is true that poor whites often labored alongside African-Americans in the cotton fields while ignoring the much larger, more understood nature of the cotton as a signifier of racism. Brown purposefully counteracts Walter's argument of race conflation by building into Walter's argument such a strong and obvious symbol of racial segregation.

picking cotton. Both their families were poor. They share a similar economic past. Walter conflates this shared experience as a way of downplaying racial difference. Everytime Walter speaks of him and Braiden as a collective, he identifies them with something other than race: "We were down at one end of the ward by ourselves. There wasn't anybody else in the place but a few other guys like this guy Braiden. Guys who'd never go home. Guys who'd given all they had and then some. Leftover guys" (49). It seems for a moment that "a few other guys like this guy Braiden" might refer to other black men, but he is speaking of disabled veterans. Race is discarded for ability and military service. In this liminal, separate space, they are all leftover guys.

Braiden also wants to dismiss race as a marker of difference, but cannot ultimately buy in with the same conviction as his white roommate. The novel begins with one of his "trips" to Africa, where he "had me a son and was a king in my own country" (1). The novel begins with a daydream, a play-like scene of transplanting dialect and culture to a time and place unsullied by the cultural baggage of racial difference. In addition to looking longingly at a pre-race place, he imagines a post-race future:

> Wonder if the Lord made the black man at midnight. We know You love us. We love You too. I mean, sex, seven thousand years from now . . . won't make no difference, will it? Everybody gonna be so mixed up by then that far in the future that they all gonna be the same color by then, ain't they? Whyn't You set me down here five or sex thousand year later? They won't even have no damn gun by then probably. And I could move me some one-sixteenth Polynesian milkmaid from Hamburg with a uncle in New York whose brother was a Jewish guy. Naw, I know. Can't do it. Got to keep us all separated. But how come they ain't a word in black language for them bad as they word in white language for us? Why didn't we think us up a

bunch of good word instead of picking all their damn cotton? We wasted about two hundred years picking fucking cotton."

Whereas Walter outwardly projects his downplaying of race through recounting his history of working cotton, Braiden's post-race fantasy remains internalized. Furthermore, whereas Walter is consistent in the outward plausibility of his sentiments, Braiden no sooner gestures towards his before undercutting it with the unfortunate reality that American racist history dictates that they "keep us all separated," far different than the integrated depiction of Walter's nostalgia.

Furthermore, Braiden indirectly disputes Walter's assumption that military combat binds the two characters together more than race can separate them. When imagining a conversation with a younger person, Braiden remarks: "You boys don't know what it was like. Y'all didn't grow up with the threat of a war hanging over your head. They was drafting then. Couldn't just worry about pussy. Had to worry about going to *war* and getting your *ass* shot *off*. Especially if your ass was black as mine" (22). One way poor whites might conveniently conflate the experiences of black and whites is through being targeted by unfair drafting practices. It is true that the lower-classes had fewer ways to avoid the draft and in that regard, at least, correspond with the similar circumstances of the black population. However, Braiden contends that it was still different Southern blacks, again rebuffing tidy conclusions of race conflation.

In addition, conflating races through military experience obscures the varying understandings different races have for military conflict, patriotism, and hypocrisy. Braiden describes being shown a book about black soldiers during the Civil War:

> "Man them dudes looked bad back then. They some of em probably wasn't but one generation off the boat. And it told right there in the book that some of them was the most feared regiments in the war. Said man they'd go to the bayonets in a minute. And you ought to seen them things. About eighteen inches long, razor

> tips, run through like a sword. And I thought, man, steal you from *one* country and take you to another and have to wind up fighting for *that* country. Make sense, though. What they did to us. Take us from *our* country over to *their* country and make you fight for *that* country." (101)

Braiden puts the Vietnam War in conversation with the African-American experience during the Civil War. For him, it seems a logical extension of colonizing practices that saw former slaves defending the country that originally enslaved them. Lumping Walter and Braiden together and ignoring racial difference undermines the characters' varying analyses of who goes to war and why.

War and disability kept Braiden from doing what he wanted after leaving the military. While the same can certainly be true for Walter, leaving it at that again ignores race-related motivations that do not exist for other races:

> "But I believed in the American dream. Serve your country, do your part, come on home and take a active part in society. You know what I was gonna be? A schoolteacher . . . I was gonna take all them little black kids and teach em how to read and gem em a job and chance to break loose. Man, you don't know what it was like. To be so damn poor. And have to live on welfare." (179)

While the military might be designed to conform its recruits to standardized practices, serving in the military has varying effects on what soldiers can do after the war. For poor black Braiden, the GI bill affords him the opportunity to raise his, and perhaps his community's, education level. Comparing the two characters through their wartime experience highlights rather than downplays the importance of race to the experience of disabled veterans. Brown thus models the tendency to conflate poor white and poor black experience in the South, but he also builds in a rebuttal from a black perspective.

Furthermore, while Braiden keeps these digressions on race to himself, Walter, who vocalizes his post-race mentality, nevertheless betrays his own entrenchment in the dominant racial calculus. Indeed, race is the first thing Walter notices when he wakes up in their hospital

room: “He was a bro and he was looking at me.” Race is the first physical marker Walter sees, even before he “had to suck in a big breath when I saw the rest of him” (13). Walter is sensitive to race, even though he avoids it. “Boy, that beer’s cold, ain’t it?” he asks Braiden, “I don’t mean boy like boy. Sure, I know you do. I just feel like an asshole for acting like I did” (121). And not all his slips are polite or inocuous. When relaying how his father’s black friend, Hugh Jean, had also gone to jail for murder, he notes that “He went to the pen a long time before Daddy did. Got out after he did. Same crime I guess of a different color. Man how come you all like knives so much?” Walter doesn’t wonder about the unfair and racist judicial system that lets a white man out early for killing a black man and keeps a black man locked up for much longer. Instead, Walter wants to know why black people “like knives so much,” even though he used a knife to stab the bully in school.

Watler’s relationship with race is further complicated by his father’s history. Walter recalls three main stories of his father.[133] All of them are informed by violence, and to some degree, race. For a large part of his childhood, Walter’s father was in jail for killing a man. Walter recalls, “the thing I remember most is the man lying there in a big pool of blood. It was black” (26). It is unclear if “it” refers to the pool of blood or the objectified “man lying there,” though other moments in the novel suggest that the person he killed was indeed black. It also makes clear, though, that he didn’t kill him *because* he was black, but because of “something about my mother” (28). Of course, we cannot be entirely sure that deep-seated racial feelings did not subconsciously inform his quick decision. At any rate, his father is incarcerated for his violence but is released far sooner than Hugh Jean, who committed a crime of a “different color.”

[133] Recall Crews’s muddied relationship with the memory of his father. Grit Lit changes the genealogical obsession in Southern literature to focus on the uncertainty of heritage, where sons aren’t clear of their father’s sins, let alone their family’s history or place within Southern society.

Besides informing Walter's childhood association of masculinity with violence, he is also exposed to institutional injustice in the criminal justice system.

Whether or not Walter's father's subsequent relationship with black characters is a reversal of previous racism or simply an extension of his moral compass, he is portrayed as someone fiercely loyal to and quick to defend poor blacks—the opposite of what might usually be assumed of a violent poor white in Mississippi. When his mule kicks and kills Hugh Jean, Walter's father viciously beats the animal to death. Walter remembers that "after he died it seemed like things were never the same. I don't know why. He never would let any black people live on the place after that" (125). Once again, Brown does not make clear why Hugh Jean's caused Walter's father to disallow black people on his land. Most likely, Walter's father did not want to be reminded of the death of his close friend. Yet the optics are unmistakable: a white landowner refuses to hire black workers.[134] Furthermore, Walter's father is now responsible (one directly, one indirectly) for the deaths of two black men.

Water's father's final act of violence is against a white cotton farmer who has been cheating Walter's father and a black migrant worker, Champion, and his family out of due pay. As tensions escalate, his father "was looking at Champion's kids" (210). The landowner again refuses to pay what is owed to them and in the subsequent scuffle, Walter's father shoots him. Once again, the text suggests Walter's father is dangerously loyal to the black family. At this moment, he is a martyr for fair and equal treatment. But just as the end result of his previous two episodes resulted in the death of a black man and the barring of black tenants from his land, this third episode also yields no tangible results. Champion's family never received their pay and "we

[134] While there were no Jim Crow laws specifically dealing with labor, it's not hard to see the legacy of segregation in employment practices in the post-Jim Crow South.

never heard anything out of them again." The landowner survived: "all he lost that day in his cotton patch was one ear and some skin off the side of his head. My daddy lost some more years of his life. And I lost that much more of my daddy" (211). The cheating landowner was left to go back to his unfair abuse of the southern hierarchies of class and race and Walter's father returned to prison, once again participating in a cycle of hollow, racially informed—even if inverted—violence.

`With the implied killing of Braiden, Walter falls into the same cycle as his father. His dad killed a black man for reasons supposedly unrelated to race. He then bans black workers from his land, supposedly because he mourns the passing of his black companion. Walter smothers Braiden to death. Even though the text makes it clear that Walter was not racially motivated, the net result is that Walter and his father are responsible for the deaths of four non-normative bodies: three black men and a disfigured woman. Despite outward attempts to show individual growth away from troubled racial history and culture, Brown ends Walter's story the same way he began Walter's father's: killing a black man. Walter tries to show that color doesn't matter. Braiden shows that color is always present; it can never be conflated with someone else's experience or ignored entirely. The optics of his and his father's violent history, finally, only reinforce the assumption of racism in poor southern whites. Similar to the novel's deterministic attitude towards disability, Brown portrays the difficulties in combating embedded prejudice within the strict confines of hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy.

CONCLUSION

The tragic conclusion to Brown's novel is illuminated by considering the implications feminist and queer theory has on disabled heterosexual man. In the world of Brown's novel, one cannot

successfully survive once fallen from a position of normalcy. By aligning the disabled male body with the female and queer's, the novel is not endorsing Aristotle's original hypothesis of woman as deformed male, nor is it suggesting something similar for the homosexual process of "coming out." While the novel is conspicuously devoid of explicitly queer identities, Beth's invisible disability channels the struggles of coming out as a disabled woman. Though she dies, it is not by virtue of her femininity or disability. In fact, she initiates what would have become her and Walter's deliverance from avoidance, and it was her and Walter's cognizance of female identity that allowed progress to be made, however fleeting it may have been. It was Walter's male body that crushed growth. If anything, the novel suggests that the female, homosexual body is better able to accept its new identity; a maturity exists that does not for the fallen male. Such doubt undergirds Brown's first novel. While it appears to lionize masculinity, to aggrandize heterosexuality, the two always come up short, while the real tragedy is the characters' inability to think intersectionally about their "fall" from masculinity. The novel casts disabled white masculinity as more tragic, more pathetic, than other kinds of disability because it is "crippled" by its rigid devotion to hegemonic masculinity. Brown's novel about disabled men becomes viable real estate for examining the unspoken stigmatization of other identities.

Brown's novel gestures toward intersectionality, something that will receive greater treatment in the work of Dorothy Allison. Part of the tragedy of *Dirty Work* is the rejection of approaching white masculinity intersectionality. It posits the painful and degenerative process of men encountering intersectionality and struggling with it, whereas in Allison, as we will see, intersectionality is a painful but ultimately generative process of female self-actualization.[135]

[135] Chapter 3 argues that for Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, each tragic engagement with a new non-normative identity aggregates into an intersectional foundation on which she can begin to adapt and resist.

Walter and Braiden both find it impossible to reconcile their now-disabled bodies with their former conceptions of masculinity. Brown portrays a corroded South where even good intentions perpetuate ingrained prejudice. While this could be, and has been here be read as a fatalistic and resigned attitude, another textbook recapitulation of literary naturalist philosophy and identity politics, Brown's later work instead suggests that *Dirty Work* sets the difficult baseline from which meaningful change can be painfully accomplished.[136] If the poor, white, specifically male subject is to move past the limiting and persistently destructive conceptions of masculinity, race, sexuality, and ability—under the cloud of southern racial history, the parallel histories of class and disability in the south, and the prosthetic deployment of disability in southern literature—it involves unpacking cultural and individual causes of existing identity prejudices. But such promise is only suggested, not fulfilled, in Brown; he gives us the glimmer of something hopeful and then transforms it into tragedy. In the novel, masculinity, disability, and race remain segregated. In its brutal affirmation, however, is condemnation, and *Dirty Work* suggests that if poor white literature is to meaningfully challenge the real and constructed perceptions of racism, it will not be done by obfuscation and it is not done overnight.

In the process, Larry Brown engages another genre (literary naturalism) with which to unpack the poor Southern white identity. Like Allison, Brown co-opted the form and themes of older literary movements—including, crucially, the ugly parts—to experiment with their own emerging literary voices. Building on a pattern started in Crews, though the road to meaningful change is violent and gritty, authors like Allison and Brown model the intellectual work needed to start. Thus, the narrative of Grit Lit's use of genre to conceptualize identity politics move from

[136] This can be seen in his dark but hopeful renderings of feminine resistance in *Fay*, domestic abuse in *Joe*, and disability and race in *Dirty Work*.

a primarily personal consideration to one that increasingly recognizes its relationship with others and their environment. With more work to do, Grit Lit finally points its genre-identity methodology directly at inclusivity.

CHAPTER 3: DOROTHY ALLISON'S INTERSECTIONAL REASLISM

"I pressed my bony white trash fists into my stubborn lesbian mouth"

—Dorothy Allison, "A Question of Class"

In the twentieth-anniversary Afterward to her most famous novel, *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), Dorothy Allison describes meeting a teacher in Maine who experienced resistance from parents and teachers for including Allison's novel in her high school English class. Allison traveled to Maine to lend her support, but the book was ultimately banned. Allison spoke to the teacher after, who explained that "she wasn't sure she could teach anymore" due to "being forced to let go of her sense of justice" (312).[137] For Allison, it was a formative retrospective on the purpose and power of her novel:

> I felt guilty, ashamed, and a little desperate. I had known what I was doing when I wrote the novel, what I hoped the book might achieve, but I had not imagined this young woman's ravaged face or those of the youngsters she had tried to teach. I had imagined my novel would be a catalyst for clarity and compassion—not an impetus to anger and regression. (313)

Allison is forced to revisit what she saw as the fundamental goal of her novel, which she later explains was to tell "a story that made sense of what did not make sense, and telling it plainly enough that anyone who wanted to could point to it and say 'that's my story'" (314). Dorothy Allison is an activist. She seeks to acknowledge and support those who have been sexually abused or marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, or ability.[138] She wants her literature to help people.

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[137] As Allison tells the story, the teacher "had chosen *Bastard Out of Carolina* for her high school class, and when a parent complained she had set about trying to explain that choice, to say why she thought it important for the students to read. She had spoken about how young people develop a moral sense, and how hidden violence affected small communities, and how bringing that violence into the open made it possible to strengthen and enlarge concepts of social justice" (312). In other words, the teacher understood the activist purpose of the novel, and for that was fired and the novel banned.

[138] Allison is a noted, longtime sex and gender activist. Among her many, many activist activities (discussed more in her nonfiction, *Two or Three Things* and *Skin*), she cofounded the Lesbian Sex Mafia in 1981. Always involved and often critical nevertheless, Allison has been a mainstay in women's activist circles for decades.

The Afterward also contains Allison's justification of telling her story through fiction rather than memoir. "Memoir did not seem," she writes, "to be able to shape in that direction the way I wanted the story to shape, at least not any memoir I could write" (315) The most productive way to accomplish that, she decided, was through autobiographical fiction, a continuation of the generic blurring found first in Crews and continued in other Grit Lit. At the time she was composing her novel, she describes how the "winds of the media culture shifted from fiction to memoir," and how "the shorthand of nonfiction" does not require the work of crafting a fictional work where you are "viscerally inside someone else's reality" (320). In short, choosing fiction over memoir required "the responsibility of fully imagining a world separate from the perspective of one person's experience" (316).[139] More specifically, it is realistic *fiction* that must accomplish this. In *Skin: Talking about Skin, Class, and Literature* (1994), she defines literature as "the lie that tells the truth, that shows us human beings in pain and makes us love them, and does so in a spirit of honest revelation." Idealistic though it might seem, she is resolute in the purpose of her writing: "If I throw everything out and start over without rhetoric or a body of theory . . . I am left with the simple fact that what I want as a writer is to be able to tell the truth so well and so powerfully that it will have to be heard, understood, and acted on." Her choice of genre serves her purpose, and her purpose is activism. While the greater Grit Lit project similarly plays with genre to tease out a white trash identity that can be "heard" and "understood," Allison is groundbreaking in her direct appeal to "act." Realism, then, is employed to not just combat the history of pejorative representation and stigmatization of poor whites, a

[139] For Allison, "Memoir did not seem to be able to shape in that direction the way I wanted the story to shape, at least not any memoir I could write" (315). That direction, I'm arguing, is activism. Fiction is better suited for that. Speaking to memoir's growing popularity throughout the 90s, Allison writes, "when prevailing winds of the media culture shifted from fiction to memoir, some writers were eager to make their novels and stories over into autobiographical accounts. I found myself both horrified and enraged . . . they obscured a hard fact that all fiction writers know—which is simply that real life is far less believable than fiction" (316). For a similar argument with different themes and authors, see Chapter 4's discussion of Grit Lit memoir and fiction dealing with race.

cause that is more or less ubiquitous across Grit Lit, but to actively transform the white trash identity from a force of bad to a force of good.

What exactly is Allison advocating for in her writing? Critics have drawn a wealth of conclusions from *Bastard* in particular, ranging from political to personal. The most common subjects touched upon are incest, rape, and trauma, with critics most often finding redemptive or productively subversive meanings in the text's darkest moments.[140] Another common approach is to read the novel as a refutation, or at least a complication, of white trash stereotypes. These critics work to combat outside perceptions of the white trash subject, but also to reorient the ways the subject views herself within and against white trash culture.[141] Though the novel only obliquely gestures towards lesbianism, sexuality is a critical component of the novel and Allison's work more broadly. Queer readings of *Bastard* tend to locate resistant and liberating qualities in Bone's story.[142] Feminist scholars have likewise read the novel as a challenge to patriarchy. The novel is a site of gendered resistance.[143] Critics have focused on narrativization and the text's engagement with gospel music, which will be taken up in greater detail later in this chapter. Interestingly, only one piece deals deeply with race in the novel and, despite occasional gestures to it, and the term "intersectionality" does not appear in the discourse.[144] Certainly, identities overlap here and there in the criticism, but for the most part, scholars have been content

[140] See Cvetkovich's "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture," Harkins's "Telling Fact from Fiction: Dorothy Allison's Disciplinary Stories," and Patterson's "Ellipsis, Ritual, and 'Real Time': Rethinking the Rape Complex in Southern Novels."
[141] See Hubbs's "Documenting Hunger: Famineways in Contemporary Southern Women's Writing," Langhorne's "Dorothy Allison: Revising the 'White Trash' Narrative,"and McDonald's "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina."
[142] See Baker's "Dorothy Allison's Topography of Resistance," Donlon's "'Born on the Wrong Side of the Porch': Violating Traditions in Bastard out of Carolina," Jarvis's "Gendered Appetites: Feminisms, Dorothy Allison, and the Body," and Trodd's "A Painful Progress: Queer Fiction and the American Protest Literature Tradition."
[143] See Bailey's "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and Bastard out of Carolina: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic," Miller's "'An Aching Lust to Hurt Somebody Back': The Exile's Patrimony in Bastard out of Carolina," and Sweeting-Trotter's "The Price We Pay: Motherhood, Marriage, and the Struggle to Class Jump in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina."
[144] See Fine's "Gender Conflicts and Their 'Dark' Projections in Coming of Age White Female Southern Novels."

to choose one. While the majority of these readings are both valid and important, they tend to disregard the expressed purposes of Allison's own delineated goals, and despite differing opinions on authorial intent, it is a worthwhile avenue here, especially when that author's intent is so clear, powerful, and socially relevant.

On the one hand, Allison's purpose is as simple as connecting to and potentially helping victims of rape and abuse, documenting the difficult lesbian experience (especially in the poor South), and the general desire to tell difficult stories that speak to actual people, those who "were not writers . . . people trying to live their lives without having to go naked for others the way it seemed I had chosen to do" (318).[145] More specifically than individual theories of identity, Allison advocates on behalf of intersectionality, a term originally coined by the black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. As a lesbian writer and long-standing participant in various women's movements, Allison has routinely criticized the class blindness, as she sees it, in queer identity politics. In her essay "A Question of Class," Allison blasts traditional feminist theory for its "limited understanding of class differences" and of how those differences impact sexuality and self (15). In her personal experience, "[her] sexuality identity is intimately constructed by [her] class and regional background, and much of the hatred directed at my sexual preferences is class hatred—however much people, feminists in particular, like to pretend this is not a factor" (23). What she prescribes, finally, is intersectionality: "What I know for sure is that class, gender, sexual preference, and prejudice—racial, ethnic, and religious—form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to hatred is not a simple act." Allison is invested in some kind of truth, the value of autobiographical fiction, and intersectionality in explicating the identity-construction of the poor, white, sexualized subject. In the process,

[145] It is noteworthy that Allison uses the same word, "naked," when discussing poor white identity as Crews.

Allison's intersectionality participates in Grit Lit's ongoing undoing of prevailing Southern myths associated with poor white identity—that they are impotent or promiscuous, white but tainted, one-dimensional and usable.

This chapter builds upon these basic theoretical tenets of Allison's writing to unpack her use of realism in relation to her intersectional advocacy. Allison employs and subverts usual criticisms of American realism to describe—and prescribe—a horizontally-oriented intersectionality, one that serves an ultimately activist purpose. Included in this intersectionality is race. Indeed, the term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1989 social theory work on race and gender, and it was black feminists that gave it theoretical heft, using it to confront racism in feminism and sexism in civil rights.[146] Released in 1992, *Bastard Out of Carolina* contributed to the expanding applicability of intersectionality as the term was coming into vogue in race and gender studies by addressing classism in feminism and queer studies and incest and rape prejudice within lesbian culture. But while Crews includes a seemingly noble confrontation of race before reducing it via the conflation of poor whites and blacks, Allison's confrontation with race contributes to the construction of an intersectional, progressive female identity.

Finally, this chapter further considers the use of other modes and styles in Grit Lit. In the introduction, I suggested that it is a mistake to refer to Grit Lit as a genre or a subgenre, since it spans a multitude of genres, styles, and modes, from naturalism and realism to gothic, satire, parody, magical realism, poetry, long and short fiction, essays, and memoir. Rather, what unites Grit Lit is class, race, and its reconstruction of the poor white southerner from object to subject.

[146] "Intersectionality," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise."

This chapter bears out this repositioning by showing how Allison utilizes and rejects certain genres before settling on realism as the most productive tool (even though it must also fail, as shown through the work of Brooks Thomas Michael Bell) for achieving her specific, intersectional activism. *Bastard Out of Carolina*, from a metatextual analysis, is a project in elimination. Similar to Crews, Allison sifts through various genres, attempting to find which would best explain themselves, their identity and culture, to themselves and others.[147] Allison, like Crews, tests the narrative, generic, formal, and theoretical conventions they, as writers, as Southerners, as Grits, have inherited, a shared gurney of seeking a discursive home. Like Brown, Allison's novel progresses towards an inevitably violent conclusion, but unlike Brown, Allison does not fulfill the formula of literary naturalism. Bone's future is not circumscribed; she is able to move past it because of her hard-earned intersectional angle of vision. Grits have never had their stories told, and they don't know who they are or how to tell their stories, but like the character of Bone in *Bastard*, the journey becomes the destination.

GENERIC POTENTIAL AND FAILURES IN *BASTARD*

In her masterpiece, Allison chooses to write realist fiction. Within *Bastard*, Allison, through her child-surrogate Bone, explores the tenability of several other methods of confronting the traumatic, classed narrative she wanted to disrupt and redirect. She refers to other narrative techniques and mediums. Photography plays a significant role in the novel, so too do Bone's investments in religion, fantasy, and literature—attempted avenues for escape or self-expression. While critics have gotten considerable mileage out of these alternate forms of narrativization,

[147] For the latter, it is also a matter of accessibility. If intervention is the purpose of her writing, a broad audience is needed. For *Bastard*, Allison attracted the mainstream Vintage publication series, and the film adaptation further contributed to Allison's widespread circulation.

they do not account for the failures of these generic options as they relate to the objective of the novel and the intersectional maturation of Bone's identity. Each genre, for various reasons, risks reinscribing or freezing in place old, regressive myths—the existence and maintenance of a static underclass in a South unable to achieve the dynamism of modernity. Each must be exhausted before an alternative narrative and form can be explored. In other words, Allison purposefully samples alternative generic possibilities, only to reveal their inadequacies, further cementing her decision to write in the realist fiction tradition.

Photography

Critics have discussed *Bastard* by referencing the use of photography in her nonfiction. Timothy Dow Adams, in particular, writes about her memoir *Two or Three I Know for Sure* and how Allison uses photography "as a way to bridge her narrative dilemma" between memoirs and autobiography. Memoir's emphasis is "not inwardly on the constructed story of the life but outwardly on the story of the author's life as it relates to the lives of others." In other words, Allison is "torn between the impulse to reveal and the equally strong desire to conceal" (85). Photography, then, becomes a productive method, in *Two or Three Things*, of reconciling her reticence to "tattle" while also trying to establish historical validity, despite acknowledging the inherent fictive qualities of photography. Photography aids her personal purpose in writing a memoir, her desire to confront her actual past, real family, and personal trauma: "Her open confession about the silence surrounding her years of physical and sexual abuse; not wanting to write a memoir that would be inauthentic . . . but also not wanting to be so stuck in reproducing the facts of her childhood" (87).[148] Photography bridges that gap. When photography appears in

[148] This again underscores the differences and tensions between life writing and fiction in Grit Lit. Photography in memoir accomplishes something different than fiction. As with other memoirs discussed in this project (see the first

Bastard, however, where the stated purpose of the text moves from the personal and familial to the activist-oriented reasons outlined above, photography continues to bridge the gap between some idea of "truth" and the subjectivity of fictive life-writing, but with less constructive returns.

In a larger historical context, photography has been a common vehicle for displaying poor white poverty as a way of drawing empathetic attention to the plight of poor Americans while also, unfortunately, objectifying poor whites for others' consumption. Jacob Riis's photos of poverty in New York, Dorothy Lange's photos of the Dust Bowl, and Walker Evans's photos of Southern sharecroppers reveal a history of using photographs to document inequality and also as a surveillance tool for the entertainment of others and the aesthetic aims of the artist. These photographic surveys of segments of American poverty also tend to reduce the working classes to a kind of Noble Savagery, one of the original ways American art has represented difference. Thus, as socially urgent or artistically innovative these texts were, they still fall into elite paradigms of history, thereby continuing to silence their subjects. Allison's novel subverts this one-dimensional effect of poor white photography by modeling the limits of photography even as she uses it to add depth to her characters.

In *Bastard*, narrativized photographs reveal key characteristics of the novel's characters' motivations, anxieties, and relationships, but it does so through concealment. Bone's mother, Anney, "liked taking pictures," and yet she only took one photo of her first husband, Lyle (6). Lyle was simple, poor, and seemingly happy being seen as white trash.[149] This first mention of

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and fourth chapters in particular), memoir offers authors its advantages, but limits them in other ways. At any rate, many authors are attracted to writing memoirs. Even Allison, who, as discussed previously, rejected memoir in favor of fiction, eventually produced one. This tension in Grit Lit is certainly caused and accentuated by the autobiographical nature of the fiction, such that there is no escaping memoir when writing fiction, just as there is no escaping fiction when writing memoir.

[149] Lyle is depicted as being in some way mentally disabled. While he is perfectly able and functional as a stepfather, husband, worker, and citizen, his contentment at being poor is linked with his implied disability. Allison draws here on old "scientific" arguments that poor whites are deficient, disabled, and therefore deserving of charity, avoidance, or elimination.

photography in the novel is Anney's decision to memorialize Lyle in only a single photo. Anney is uncomfortable with being considered poor white trash. More than any other Boatwright, she shows the desire and capability of crossing class lines. She is the most literate of the family (she was the family scribe and took pride in her penmanship), and her charisma makes her conversational with the various patrons of the diner she waitressed. Her performativity allowed her "to laugh with" the upper-classes. Her deliberate concealment, via photography, of her proudly poor first husband forecasts her own discomfort with her class status and her future relationship with the novel's antagonist: her second husband, Glen.

In an interesting mirror of Anney's reticence to be photographed with Lyle, her second husband Glen Wadell shows equal reticence with being photographed alongside Anney. Glen was initially seduced by the Boatwright mystique. Glen comes from a higher class. His family owns the local dairy store and Glen's brother ran for district attorney.[150] While courting Anney, who is drawn to Glen for his upper-class pedigree, Glen is drawn to Anney's family because of what he sees as their freedom, their untethered relationship with societal norms. Glen is the black sheep of his family. In the Boatwrights he sees the potential to "live down" without caring about "fear of his family's disapproval." Indeed, the more he becomes involved with the Boatwright clan, the more "Glen found himself grinning back, enjoying the notion of angering his daddy and outraging his brothers" (12). And yet, when Aunt Alma, who "was determined to document every family occasion she could," turned her camera on Glen and the rest of Bone's family, he is determined not to be seen. Bone describes "Glen almost stumbling off the steps as he tried to

[150] Despite being the antagonist of the novel, a despicable predator, Allison portrays Glen three-dimensionally. He is presented as a victim of class stratification. His simultaneous fetish for the white trash and pretensions of aristocracy are at least partly responsible for his monstrous development. In a way that cleverly mirrors arguments that slavery is a debilitating force on white masters, not just slaves (see Frederick Douglass's description of the degrading effects of slavery in the character of Sophia Auld in his *Narrative*).

turn his face away from the camera" (39). When the photos get developed, there is only one clear image of Glen with the family, and that "good picture was even more startling" (42). Bone describes the image of Glen as concealed, refractory, and "flat and empty as a sheet of tin the sun . . . not one clear line of who he really was behind those eyes" (43). Shortly after this insight into Glen's character, he abuses Bone for the first time.[151]

Despite Glen's façade of betraying his class and proudly slumming with the low-class Boatwrights, the thought of permanent visual documentation reveals his discomfort with being associated with people who, it becomes increasingly clear following this moment, he views as beneath him. Conversely, Anney's reluctance to memorialize her relationship with the contentedly trashy Earle reveals her discomfort with remaining lower-class. It also foreshadows her marriage and frustrating dedication to Glen, despite his abuse. While it's true that photography in the novel reveals some sort of truth about these characters, it is not the same as the productive use of photography in *Two or Three Things*. In that memoir, photography helped ease Allison's anxiety about telling her family story. At the climax of *Bastard*, Anney essentially chooses Glen over Bone, even after walking in on Glen brutally raping Bone. Photographs reveal the classist prejudice of certain characters, but documentary is not enough.

Allison undermines the promise of validity that photographs offer. Towards the end of the novel, Bone describes being included in her Aunt Alma's scrapbook of clippings of the Boatwrights. In these photos, characters that Bone has fondly described throughout the novel, such as Uncle Earle, look "scary, like a thief or murderer, the kind of gaunt, poorly shaven face sketched on a post office wall." The entire clan, Bone notes, appears "worse than crazy; we

[151] Indeed, these moments of generic searching tend to immediately precede moments of brutality and violence. Glen's first abuse occurs after the photograph, Aunt Ruth dies while Bone reads *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and the final rape occurs after a desciprtion of how Bone and her mother begin reconciling through Anney's bringing stacks of books for Bone to read. The text signals the eventual failure of these methods of escape.

looked moon-eyed, rigid, openmouthed, and stupid" (293).[152] Leaving the hospital after her brutal rape, Bone has her photo taken and knows that "it would end up in the scrapbook, and I hated it" (293). In this way, Bone resembles Anney and Glen in her reticence to be photographed. Anney and Glen try to conceal themselves because of class embarrassment. For Bone, photographs memorialize the already pernicious image of the Boatwright as "rigid, openmouthed, and stupid." All three resent photography for different reasons but agree to its generic limitations.

Escapism

Allison's readers have rightly seized upon narrativization as a formative component in Bone's development, specifically her use of fantasy as what Natalie Carter calls "scriptotherapy."[153] Some of the most discussed scenes in the novel are when Bone masturbates to the fantasy of being abused. This has been read as her first step in confronting her trauma through narrative and fantasy. Fantasy and sexuality merge in moments of agency that, however violent, begin the process of healing. The use of narrative to confront trauma leads to discussions of Allison's own scriptotherapy, her personal maturation as a white trash, lesbian writer and victim of sexual violence (Horvitz). Conventionally, narrative offers healing. While narrativization is certainly productive in moments of the novel, Allison also includes moments that demonstrate the limits of escapist fantasy. Beyond her masturbatory fantasies, Bone's other engagements with

[152] In this example, photography reinforces poor white stereotypes; that they are degraded, evolutionarily stunted, and disabled. Taking away their violent personas takes away their agency, leaving only the typical one-dimensional figure of the faraway, pitiful poor whites of the South.
[153] Coined by Suzette Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects*, scriptotherapy is the concept that "writing about trauma can lead toward individual and collective healing and alleviation of symptoms" (qtd. in Carter 888).

fantasy—reading, storytelling, and religion—prove to be, like photography, insufficient for generating new or augmented ideas of white trash identity and its various intersections.

Besides Bone's sadomasochistic masturbatory fantasies, the other space where her readers have explored Bone's engagement with escapism is through her obsession with religious fantasies embedded in gospel music. While music in the novel has been addressed (Cvetkovich; Giles), Courtney George suggests that Allison "asks readers to recover the history of southern music to subvert the patriarchal narrative of the south" (128). Gospel music, for George, epitomizes Bone's confrontation with the classed and raced construction of southern patriarchal society. Despite Bone's interaction with the Shannon family and gospel music's own classed, raced history, and even though she "explores how the commercial music industry works to squash these resistances and renew patriarchal power in the south," George contends that gospel music ultimately serves a generative purpose in the novel since it creates the theoretical space for resistant, specifically female communities. While there is no doubt that gospel music is instrumental in informing Bone's growing confrontation with the social hierarchies of her culture,[154] the idea that the mere potential of resistance via fantasy is an end suitable for Bone or Allison is incomplete, because of their realist and activist agenda.

Bone becomes obsessed with gospel music's potential for salvation, as a space for exploring the promise of love, God, and a unified community. Through her occasional friend Shannon Pearl, and Shannon's family's business connections to the gospel music community, Bone gets to immerse herself in the fantasy of gospel music while also gradually glimpsing the dark underbelly of the community and the untenability of the fantasy it perpetuates. Gospel

[154] I agree with Vincent King that these seemingly digressive forays into things like gospel music are not "subplots that lead nowhere" but "attempts to create stories (read identities) that will provide her with what Allison describes as 'the hope of a remade life'" (124).

music is Bone's portal to the vindictive promise of religion's ordered, though still hierarchical, universe. "I liked Revelations, loved the Whore of Babylon and the promised rivers of blood and fire. It struck me like gospel music, it promised vindication" (152). Gospel music and its attendant religiosity give Bone an affirming cosmic orientation, a rigid fantasy that resists the inscrutable blend of love, violence, and prejudice that she witnesses in her everyday reality. But the allure of gospel music hides darker realities. George accurately describes the role of gospel music's role in exposing Bone to the racism and classism endemic to gospel music and southern society more broadly. This is most painfully felt when Bone discovers black gospel music, only to be informed by Shannon that "my daddy doesn't handle niggers" (170). Like other forms of fantasy, Bone comes to reject the promise of gospel music and religion: "Whatever magic Jesus' grace promised, I didn't feel it" (152).

Instead, as Allison represents it, the potentially escapist fantasy of gospel music is generative because it is first degenerative. That is, the limitations of fantasy afford her the space to confront the realities around her. George concludes that "through the music, Bone fantasizes about a life filled with love and tolerance, but the patriarchal structure of the gospel music business will not allow for this fantasy to become a reality" (134). Additionally, it is not just the business of gospel music that finally dooms gospel music's potential, but the limitations of investing in fantasy itself. If Allison's literary goals invoke realism for therapeutic purposes and the arrival at an intersectional understanding of identity construction, then the vertical orientation of Bone's character around a flawed fantasy undermines those goals. Even as Bone, like any adolescent shops around for a better means of comprehending her circumstances, gospel music in the novel allows Allison to expose and deconstruct social hierarchy, but the text suggests that fantasy can never transcend its complicity in the South's complicated histories of race and faith.

In addition to gospel music and religion, another consistent form of escapism for Bone is literature. Like religion, which offers Bone clear-cut resolutions, literature promises redemption and love. But like gospel music and religion, unrealistic literature only underscores the futility of fantasy. Two examples bear this out. The first occurs when Bone struggles with her complicated relationship with Glen. Her vexed feelings are colored by the literature she is reading at the time: "The worst thing in the world was the way I felt when I wanted us to be like the families in the books in the library, when I just wanted Daddy Glen to love me like the father in *Robinson Crusoe*." "Love," she continues, "would make me beautiful; a father's love would purify my heart, turn my bitter soul sweet" (209). Robinson Crusoe goes from being loved by his father to being alone on the island. In *Bastard*, Bone finds a subtextual parallel for her own perceived loneliness via the absence of a loving father. One lesson of the novel is the presence of love and mentorship in alternative and nonnormative places (from her infantile uncles to her lesbian aunt Raylene to her heartbroken and chronically ill Aunt Ruth). Bone's investment in *Crusoe*'s portrayal of paternal love again shows the limits of this kind of escape, reinforces normative notions of family, and creates for Bone a dangerously myopic view of love and parenthood. In a novel where the unstable and perhaps unknowability of the concept of "love" is a fundamental source of the book's trauma—Glen abuses Bone because he loves her, Anney stays with Glen because she loves him—the straightforward depiction of love offered to Bone in *Robinson Crusoe* only confounds her further.

A short time later, Aunt Ruth dies while Bone is reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The death of her aunt is particularly hard on Bone. It ripped her from a fantasy novel whose climax features a scene of reincarnation. Allison juxtaposes the long-foreshadowed death of Ruth—she had been ill for virtually all of Bone's childhood—with the fantasy of Aslan's (a

stand-in for Christ) reincarnation, noting its effect on the impressionable Bone's ability to process and deal with trauma. Two formative and traumatic aspects of Bone's life—her fraught personal relationship with the concept of "love" as it relates to Daddy Glen and the death of Aunt Ruth—are hurt, not helped, by using narrative as an escape. The fantasies she reads are found lacking, inherently ill-suited to the reality of Bone's formation. The potential fantasy serves certain purposes, but cannot, finally, provide Bone with the "lies that tell the truth;" they are just lies (Allison, *Skin* 316).[155] Generically, then, Allison clears the decks, opening up the imaginative and writerly space to explore the smeared and smudged content intrinsic to Grit Lit.

INTERSECTIONAL REALISM

In the face of the limited potential of other genres, Allison—and Bone—position themselves within the fraught genre of semi-autobiographical literary realism. For the specific purposes of her art, Allison decides that realism is the best option. My argument here is two-fold. Broadly, the criticisms most often leveled at contemporary American literary realism are, in Allison's text, confronted and subverted, thus remediating the typically male, middle-class dominated genre, while also utilizing its theoretical potential for her own individual project. Crucially, however, like the fantastic alternatives explored in the novel, the promise of realism also fails, but unlike the alternatives, it fails forward. First, I will present Allison's subversive approach to the oft-criticized realist technique. Next, the horizontal orientation of the realist genre, as theorized by Brooks Thomas, is the strongest method suited for Allison's unique presentation of white trash, lesbian intersectionality. Finally, Allison also co-opts "realist prestige," as described by Phillip

[155] In C.S. Lewis's Narnia series, it is revealed that the children had all died in a train accident. And while their spirits (a Christian allegory for heaven) live on in Narnia, their "real," physical bodies are dead, another kind of lie.

Barrish, for the broader purposes of both her theoretical and activist agenda as well as the evolution of Grit Lit.

One of the major critiques of realism is that, while it may have once been seen as challenging societal inequities through its tell-it-like-it-is approach to literature, it is now thought of as being part of the construction of disciplined, middle-class citizens. Thomas sums up nicely this "police academy" approach to realism, where critics, building on the theories of Barthes and Foucault, come to argue that realists are "secret agents of the police," where "realists turn out to enact fantasies of surveillance enforcing normative behavior" (14).[156] Ultimately, dating back to Reconstruction, the largely white, male, middle-class batch of realist authors are part of the social problem, and the realist project failed to live up to its once lofty goals. This criticism is valid, but it does not preclude the possibility of an author co-opting that realist project and subverting it for her own purposes.

One of the principle failings of realism, as defined in Thomas's *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1999), is that realism evokes what Thomas calls the "promise of contract" and "dramatizes its failure to be sustained" (2). Contract theory believes that social ordering and republican virtue is best served by thinking horizontally, "through exchanges and negotiations, rather than vertical In realist literature, this ordering posits that there is no "right reason" governing the world, but horizontal orientation can lead to egalitarianism and "the creation of an equitable social order through interpersonal exchanges" (13). Thus, nineteenth-century realist authors such as Mark Twain and Henry James "derive much of their force from scenes that hold out the promise of replacing relationships of status with more

[156] Barthes claims that "realism castrates desire by privileging a bourgeois sense of what is possible," and Foucault explores discourse as a modern technology of control (Thomas 14).

equitable, contractual ones" (5).[157] The result is the reader exposing themselves "to a world of social relations without foundational principles of order." And yet, such works also "dramatize the failure of that [contractual] promise." Instead of rendering the approach moot, however, Brooks suggests that realism and the horizontal configuration of contract "persists as a force to be reckoned with in contemporary negotiations about how our society should be more equitably ordered" (24). It is this shift from the vertical orientation of status, the investment in some foundational, transcendental ordering, to a horizontal orientation based on interpersonal contracts—despite their inevitable failure—that Allison evokes in her reimagining of the realist text. This shift also becomes the primary device whereby Allison formulates her intersectional activism.

A major component of the realist project, then, involves demystification, where realism is adept at presenting reality horizontally, without a transcendental, vertical order. Bone's flirtation and eventual dissatisfaction with alternative genres are exercises in the process of demystifying vertical order. Each of Bone's successive investments corresponds to a different governing principle. Gospel music invests in religion, the ultimate example of transcendental order. Fantasy in literature, as Bone interprets it, invests in love—a concept that Bone and her family continuously accepts despite its persistent inscrutability. Realism rebuts these vertical orientations by flattening the hierarchy. Indeed, when discussing Allison's "commitment to realist strategies," Katrina Irving accurately describes this flattening by discussing how *Bastard* depicts a lesbian protagonist "whose formation occurs, not through the gradual emergence of a

[157] Consider the moment in *Huck Finn* when Huck apologizes to Jim. "With Huck's apology," Thomas writes, "their relationship promises to be one of free and equal individuals bound together by mutual benefit and trust, so long as they remain on the raft, uncontaminated by the hierarchical order of the shore world" (5). In James, Thomas cites the character of Christopher Newman in *The American*, who evokes the "contract" to remove status as a barrier to him marrying the aristocratic woman he loves and wishes to marry.

nascent desire or proclivity, but as a result of her political and affective identifications with a series of marginalized subject-positions, including those of the illegitimate, the working-class, the native American and the single mother" (94). While accurate, missing in this analysis are other subject-positions pertaining to masculinity, race, disability, and sexuality.

When discussing Allison's expression of "postmodern feminism,"[158] Vincent King argues that Allison's gritty Southern realism creates a space where "Bone must accept the ongoing burden of generating identities/stories for herself. In a postmodern world view, identity is actually *more* significant because it is generated and accepted by the subject rather than simply given to or imposed on him or her" (126). Bone does this through the exploration, via interpersonal relationships, of various identity contracts, constructions that, however limited, generate value as an intersectional aggregate. Through exchanges with Glen and his family, Uncle Earle, Aunt Ruth, Shannon Pearl, her mother, and Aunt Raylene, Bone is presented with a series of identity constructions—class, gender (both male and female), race, disability, the mother-daughter relationship, and sexuality. But like realists before her, Allison models precisely the failure of horizontal ordering that a promise of contract endorses. This is modeled through a series of interpersonal exchanges, which all attempt to fulfill the promise of contract, but ultimately fail. In the end, the major contract of the novel, the mother-daughter relationship, similarly fails. But unlike the genres the novel tests, this horizontal orientation builds on one another, making Bone a chimeric amalgamation of her interpersonal connections.

[158] For King, *Bastard* successfully merges feminist aims with postmodern technique, saying, "*Bastard* may be described as feminist because it exposes and seeks to counter the physical, emotional, and eco nomic domination that women suffer within a patriarchal system. And it may be described as postmodern because Bone counters this domination by rewriting the stories/identities that demean and violate her" (124).

Masculinity

Allison makes a clear distinction between the roles of men and women in her rough south calculus. Women bear the brunt of familial responsibility and cultural shame, while the men are both feared and endeared for their rowdy behavior. While women age quickly, "men looked young": "Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding . . . What men did was just what men did" (23). The embodiment of this divide is Uncle Earle, a hard-drinking single man who, Allison points out, is a magnet for women, mostly because he appears to "genuinely like women," and "a man who really likes women always has a touch of magic" (24). The apparent freedom and romanticization of the male lifestyle appeal to young Bone. She begins to mimic her uncles and begs her "aunts for Earle's and Beau's old denim workshirts." "Most of all," she craves the phallic knives "like the ones they had." She dreams of what she perceives to be male freedom and respect and covets the fact that "their pride in me was as bright as the coals on the cigarettes they always held loosely between their fingers" (23). The male gender identity infatuates Bone first. To be more masculine is to disrupt the unfair female gender roles she inherits and resents. But like all of the subsequent sites of equitable identity, the masculine mystique, and Uncle Earle more specifically, is demystified. In a powerful passage, Uncle Earle opens up to Bone about the limitations of the Boatwright men. He describes how his father was a shiftless alcoholic and how "all of us, we're just like him" (125). The "magic" that made him attractive to women was a result of his bitter detachment at having been left by the woman he really cared for, Theresa. Earle did not want to model the male shortcomings of his father, he "didn't want to be like that. I wanted to pour over that woman like a river of love. But shitfire! When she left me she told me I wasn't even a full mouth of spit." Masculinity is not freedom, it is confinement to the illusion of

freedom and interminable adolescence. The Boatwright men are trapped, somewhat willfully, in the performativity of white trash masculinity. To punctuate Earle's demystification, Allison describes him trying to light a cigarette, "but it fell apart in his hands," prompting Earle to remark: "Sad, ain't it . . . a man who can't even keep a cigarette together?" While her uncles' pride for Bone may burned like a cigarette ember, their own self-pride crumbles before the cigarette can be lit. Aunt Raylene further deromanticizes Uncle Earle when she scolds Bone for rationalizing his womanizing: "You don't think it's cruel the way he takes up with these children?" "Christ Lord, you love him just like one of them, don't you?" A white trash male can only attract immature, unformed female children, regardless of age, but is prevented from loving, it seems, an actual woman.

Race

Each potential standalone identity sampled by Bone fails for different reasons. While masculinity fails because the men enact an ultimately hollow, romanticized archetype, race fails because of ingrained and unexamined societal prejudice. Having failed at masculinity, Bone explores racial mobility through her experiences with two major encounters with African-Americans. The first occurs when Bone's Aunt Alma temporarily leaves her husband and moves to an apartment where the majority of residents are black. Bone "had never seen colored people up close, and I was curious about these" (84). There is one black child in particular that shows a hesitant interest in Bone and the two steal glances at one another through windows but never make contact. Looking at the girl's "intent, determined face," Bone recalls "all the hateful jokes and nasty things people said about 'niggers,' but on my own, I had never before spoken to a colored person." Bone's curiosity makes her wish that the girl "would come out so I could try to talk to

her, but she never did more than look out the windows at us. Her Anney probably told her all about what to expect from trash like us" (86). In this passage, Allison establishes her frequent tendency to conflate blacks and whites based on their shared poverty. In this case, however, the conflation comes from the inside. Each side—black and white—has conditioned themselves to avoid the other, to the point that it stifles the curiosity of Bone and the unnamed, "determined," black girl. This is a failure of self-perpetuating prejudices. Of course, it has been argued that these prejudices were thrust upon them by the dominant elite whites in order to maintain their hierarchy and keep the poor blacks and whites from disrupting their classed ecosystem. But in this text, for the purposes of Bone's personal maturation, those forces remain invisible and only the results are seen. Bone never makes contact, and productive curiosity is stifled.

Bone's other major confrontation with racism occurs through Shannon, her middle-class, disabled friend whose parents manage gospel music singers. Obsessed with gospel music, Bone tolerates Shannon's rudeness and her family's higher-class prejudices in order to get closer to the music she loves. On one occasion, Bone accompanies Shannon and her family on a trip to meet with prospective gospel singers. While waiting outside, Bone hears music coming from somewhere else. She sneaks away and finds an African-American church singing. Hearing the black parishioners, Bone excitedly tells Shannon that she has discovered the next great gospel singers. Shannon dismisses it: "It's colored. It's nigger. . . . and you made me say that. Anney always said a good Christian don't use the word 'nigger.' Jesus be my witness, I wouldn't have said it if you hadn't made me" (170). Shannon's casual explanation of systematic racism troubles Bone: "the way Shannon said 'nigger' tore at me, the tone pitched exactly, like the echoing sound of Aunt Medinleine sneering 'trash' when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (170). Allison again conflates the plight of the black and poor white communities while also

portraying the roadblocks that inhibit a meaningful connection between the two. Courtney George reads this scene as a failure of the gospel music industry, an indication of the racist hierarchies that undermine Bone's seemingly healthy obsession with the gospel music outlet.[159] While the scene serves to further underscore the barriers that stand between Bone establishing any relationship with the black community, this scene also intersects discourses of race, class, and disability that highlight the nuanced interconnectedness of various identities.

Disability

Shannon Pearl is a sickly, partially blind albino girl, which marks her as "wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat" (155). Rather than simply categorize Shannon as "useful disabled" or "useless disabled," like Crews, Allison deploys Shannon to explore the realistic angst that comes with being physically different while still white and privileged. Allison even acknowledges the usual ways in which disability is processed. The first is by associating it with religion. While Bone finds herself fascinated with Shannon, others simply see her as "a trial, Jesus knows, a trial for her poor parents." The age-old sentiment that disability is the physical manifestation of spiritual punishment leads to the predominant American process of marginalizing the disabled via charity[160]: "Christian charity, I knew," thinks Bone, "would have had me smile at Shannon but avoid her like everyone else" (156). Finally, Allison acknowledges the usual ways in which disability is employed in literature.[161] Bones assumes that "because she

[159] George argues that, "while Allison illuminates the resistant communities in both gospel and country music through Bone's fantasies of musical salvation, she also explores how the commercial music industry works to squash these resistances and renew patriarchal power in the South, creating an imagined 'coercive' community which Bone and her female family members interrupt" (128).

[160] See Mitchell and Snyder's *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006).

[161] Mitchell and Snyder, for example, describe the trope of "narrative prosthesis," the "perpetual dependency on disability" that manifests in literature "as a stock characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device."

was so ugly on the outside, it was only reasonable that Shannon would turn out to be saintlike when you got to know her." She even cites the archetypal Tiny Tim when musing on how "a patient and gentle soul had to be hidden behind those pale, sweaty features. She would be generous, insightful, understanding, and wise beyond her years. She would be the friend I had always needed" (157). That Shannon was "none of these" qualities disrupts the usual representation of disability by three-dimensionalizing the disabled character.

But disability, like other identities, does not deliver Bone any existential answers. Specifically, "Shannon Pearl simply and completely hated everyone who had ever hurt her and spent most of her time brooding on punishments either she or God would visit on them." Shannon transforms spiritual punishment into retribution for her marginalization. She relays her stories of gruesome vengeance with "the aura of the real," using realist strategies to describe "decapitations, mutilations, murder, and mayhem" (157). Like Allison, Shannon deconstructs systems of power that surround various identities. Instead of simply swinging in the opposite direction of usual representations and casting disability as an altogether evil identity, Allison's portrayal shows the dangerous entanglements of class, ability, and race. The reader learns that, in addition to being socially ostracized because of her physical appearance, Shannon's hatred also stems from her deep-seated classism and racism. After being confronted with Shannon's racism near the black church, Bone and Shannon have an intense falling out. By the end of their argument, both characters resort to their cruelest insults. For Shannon, it's class: "you . . . you trash. You nothing but trash. Your Anney's trash, and your grandma, and your whole dirty family" (171). For Bone, it's a disability: "You're God's own ugly child and you're gonna be an ugly woman . . . you monster, you greasy, cross-eyed sweaty-faced ugly thing . . . you so ugly your own Anney don't even love you" (172). At this moment, each child invokes their culturally

ingrained conception of the other's identity, despite their relationship's previous progress at challenging such cultural stereotypes. Shannon calls upon the long-believed genetic explanation of the lower class while Bone calls upon the spiritual punishment paradigm of disability.[162] In their hatred, Shannon and Bone fail to realize that the two identities intersect and that the insults of one could easily be applied to the other.[163] The histories of class and disability in America parallel in uncanny ways, but strict delineation and segregation of identities keep these common grounds from being unearthed, just as it does with poor whites and African-Americans. The historical relationship between class and disability will be further explored in chapter three.

Feminism

One by one, identities fall—even feminism.[164] More than any other identity that the novel engages, feminism comes the closest to realizing the self-actualization that Bone intrepidly seeks. In the female enclave of her family, Bone sees the potential for participating in something liberating, a second wave feminist liberation. "I liked being one of the women with my aunts," she thinks, "liked feeling a part of something nasty and strong and separate" (91). Indeed, the novel, and Allison's writing generally, is unusual for its emphasis on the often-overlooked

[162] One common explanation, particularly in the South, for the persistence of an inferior, poor white population was biological, genetic inferiority. What separates them from the ruling whites is not culturally constructed, but genetically predetermined. This became a major basis for the eugenics movements and their push for sterilization. (see Wray). A common explanation for disability prior to medical pathologization and charity was the idea that disability was caused by divine intervention. Disability was a punishment on the parents, their community, or humankind more generally (See Nielsen).

[163] It is interesting to consider that just as Bone ultimately understands and harnesses her intersectionality, Shannon also shows her intersectionality—an evil version of it. Shannon's attempts to mingle the marginalized identity of disability with the hegemonic identity of the higher classes, proves incommensurable, or at least self-destructive. In this way, Shannon mirrors Walter's intersectionality in *Dirty Work*.

[164] Referring to a "feminist identity" is nebulous, as explored by Kelly Maura in "Feminist Identity, Collective Action, and Individual Resistance Among Contemporary U.S. Feminists." This chapter employs the rather basic definition of a feminist identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta and Jasper 285).

female experience in poor white Southern culture. A fierce feminist herself, Allison was deeply involved in feminist politics and activism, and critics have read *Bastard* as a distillation of her feminist views, most closely resembling third wave feminism, which was coming into focus in the 1990s (Jarvis; Bailey; Miller). If that is true, though, the novel also exposes Allison's views on the limitations of feminism.

One of the central feminist figures of the novel, the chronically ill Aunt Ruth, is instrumental in talking Bone through the struggles that define poor women. She tells Bone about her own father and about the women who were forced to rear the household. She helps Bone face reality: "you're right, girl. Glen don't like you much. He's jealous, I think" (123). Ruth sets a standard for confessional, honest discourse, particularly by movingly revealing her own history of abuse, illness, and unstinting dignity. Ruth forces Bone to see her as she does: "Tell me, Bone . . . you think I'm dying?" Bone will not say it. Ruth responds: "Well, can we talk to each other or not?" Ruth's method of healing is through raw and unfiltered honesty about the reality of her situation. In return, and for what she thinks is Bone's own good, she seeks reciprocity, an invitation to Bone to share in the liberating act of feminine confession, and Bone takes a first step: "Daddy Glen hates me" (122). But that is as far as it goes. When Ruth presses her, "Has he ever hurt you down there?" Bone knows the stakes: "tell her, I thought. Tell her all of it. Tell her," but she does not share. When Aunt Ruth dies, Bone is haunted by her invitation: "'Can we talk to each other or not?' she asked me. I had tried, but in the end I had lied. I hadn't told her that she was dying, hadn't told her the truth about my fear of Daddy Glen . . . I had been too ashamed" (233). She may have been a part of something "strong and separate," but it was too "nasty" for Bone to fully commit to.

The real tragedy of the novel, however, as previous critics have suggested, is not Bone's silence or even Glen's abuse; it is the disintegration of the mother-daughter relationship.[165] Anney chooses Daddy Glen over Bone, but not until after it seems that Bone is vindicated for believing in the awesome bond between mothers and daughters. Anney walks in on Glen raping Bone and fights him off: "*You monster!* . . . she was grabbing things, canisters off the stove, pans, glasses, plates, anything she could throw at him." Despite her trauma, Bone is lucid enough to note that Anney was rescuing her, that Bone was finally taking priority over Daddy Glen: "I smiled." The next few pages recount the harrowing journey of Anney attempting to remove Bone from the home while Glen begs her to stay and forgive him. Bone knows that they must get out. More than just her physical safety is at stake: "get out, we've got to get out of here," and later, "Keep moving, Anney" (288-89). At an excruciatingly slow pace, they go from inside the house to outside and in the car. Anney and Bone almost escape, but Glen succeeds in engaging Anney. She exclaims "Glen!" and holds his neck while they both cry. Bone, meanwhile, can only beg: "'Mama,' I pleaded, but she still wasn't looking at me" (290). In a decisive moment, Anney chooses Glen. Bone realizes the significance of this moment: "I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? . . . I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried" (291). Later, at the hospital, Anney visits Bone and tries to explain why she remains committed to Glen, but she only underscores Bone's understanding that "I had lost my mother" (306). The final and defining tragedy of the novel is the failure of love, even the seemingly all-powerful love of a mother and her daughter: "we had

[165] Theorizing the mother/daughter relationship, Woo's article "examines what makes this mother/daughter relationship unnatural and cruel, how the mother's behaviors influence the daughter's feelings, behaviors, and self-image, and how silence, the child abuse, and the mother daughter relationship work together with the protagonist's sense of autonomy and the gaining of voice in the novel" (692).

all wanted the simplest thing, to love and be loved and be safe together, but we had lost it and I didn't know how to get it back" (307).

Sexuality and the Intersectional Payoff

And yet, the novel ends hopefully. Despite the tragedies of Bone's rape and her mother's abandonment, Allison does not end the novel with the type of circumscribed violence found in Crews and Brown, she ends the novel with the prospect of Bone's fresh start with Aunt Raylene: "I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love. I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Anney, a Boatwright woman" (309). Mere pages after becoming disillusioned with the strongest love she thought existed - the love of a mother - she seems quick to accept another woman's love. But Bone's willingness to accept Raylene after being abandoned by her mother cements her transition from a vertical to horizontal approach to identity formation. Metatextually, Allison exhausted familiar narratives and genres in form and subject, a project of elimination that produced, for Allison and Bone, a more productive form, narrative, and genre.

It appears odd to have analyzed identity in the novel without having discussed sexuality. Allison is a lesbian. She calls herself a lesbian writer. Yet the novel withholds any direct reference to a queer identity until the very end, when Raylene comes out to Bone: "One time you talked to me about how I live, with no husband or children or even a good friend." She explains that she had a lover when she was with the carnival, but she forced the woman she loved to "choose between her baby and her lover, between her child and her husband." Raylene connects her tragic relationship with Anney's choice between Bone and Glen. Like Bone, Raylene says that that period "just about killed me" (300). She is a survivor too. Indeed, the fact that a lesbian

writer's best known novel does not explicitly address issues of sexuality until the very end - and even then, it is a cursory treatment - puzzled critics since the novel's release. The choice seems more logical, however, when sexuality is placed onto an intersectional continuum, where Bone's understanding of her own sexuality is colored by her experiences with a myriad of other identities. Bone sees potential in engaging meaningfully with issues of masculinity, disability, race, and class - and she sees the limits as well. Allison purposely withholds confirmation of Bone's sexuality. This suggests that rather than writing a lesbian novel, Allison is writing an intersectional novel, where one identity, including but not limited to sexuality, is one in a series of painfully but necessarily constructed identity pathways. Perhaps a lesbian novel could not do the cultural work of transforming the thinking of mass amounts of readers. Perhaps, for this reason, it needed to remain desexualized. Part of the hope of the novel, then, comes in knowing that as Bone departs to a life with Raylene, she carries with her the trials and errors of her identity formation to that point. Bone is the fictional embodiment of the "intricate lattice" described in Allison's nonfiction. The result is a potentially healed, independent, experienced, possible lesbian, and probable—in her own white trash way—activist.

CONLCUSION

Chapter 1 took as its overarching consideration the place of Grit Lit in southern literary history and Crews's mediation of life writing with his sense of identity and place (geographically and within Southern literature). Brown employs literary naturalism to confront the seemingly fatalistic intersectionality of being poor, white, masculine, and disabled. This chapter further examined the concept of genre, exploring Allison's use of autobiography with fascinations with "realism" or "authenticity" alongside the literature's identity politics. Indeed, part of the realist

impulse comes from the realist perception of the women in the novel. Aunt Ruth teaches Bone the power of speaking plainly about one's life, about suspending the fantastic in favor of the real. While in Crews women told apocalyptic stories not grounded in the Bacon County of young Harry's childhood, Allison suggests that, in fact, women are precisely the people capable of detailing the raw detail of the poor white South while men cannot. And while Crews's memoir teleologically fails, and Brown's novel comes to a predetermined end, Allison's novel finds hope amidst tragedy.

In *Problems of American Literary Realism* (1993), Michael Davitt Bell suggests that "male realists were anxious about prevalent cultural assumptions in nineteenth-century America linking artistic activity with femininity" (qtd. in Barrish 11). Realism was a way to reinforce the masculinity of literary production. A different kind of realist, "feminist realism," used literary realism to explore dimensions of female life often untouched by other literary modes, including realism (Barrish 137). These realists—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Paula Hopkins, and Kate Chopin—focused on middle or upper-class women. They questioned Victorian notions of domesticity and rigid gender restrictions (136). Finally, Phillip Barrish suggests that "certain constructions of orientations towards the nitty-gritty real operate to assert prestige within literary realism" (9). Allison engages with this fraught and varied history strategically. As a white trash and lesbian American literary realist, she flips the gendered and classed performances of realism and fulfills the original anxieties of her male realist predecessors. Moreover, she lowers the focus of feminist realists from the domesticated, upper-class "New Woman," to the lower-class, undomesticated woman. Finally, and perhaps most impressively, she brings it prestige.

In Allison we see Grit Lit moving still further into the upper echelon of literary prestige. Allison's text was widely taught, widely written about, and remains the most famous text that this

dissertation engages, as well as being adapted into an award winning 1996 Showtime movie starring Jennifer Jason Leigh.[166] It is meaningful, then, that the most influential author of a white, male-dominated literary mode—though I argue it is far more nuanced and engaged in alternative identities—is a proudly proclaimed white trash, lesbian writer-activist.

Allison models the strategic use of genre. She builds off the limits of Crews's use of indeterminate memoir, challenges the tenets and criticisms of literary realism, and parlays these arguments into advocacy for intersectional realism, where the use of realism is a means to an activist-oriented, multi-dimensional end. While Crews provided a sampler of these identities, Allison throws them together in an intersectional stew. Crucially, she utilizes autobiographical realism, which helps her avoid some of the personally charged pitfalls of Crews's self-inventing life writing. Instead, Allison uses personally informed and brutally realistic fiction to arrive at something more liberating than Crews's wandering search for answers. Crews looks back while Allison pushes forward. Crucial to understanding the narrative of Grit Lit, Allison's story is the creation of an activist, not a story about doing activism, though the writing and reading of the text certainly promotes those ideas. The novel's primary focus is on identity formation, one that creates a space for activism, a space future Grit Lit authors will explore.

[166] Over seventy-five journal articles or book chapters have discussed the text, with several discussing the text as a pedagogical tool.

CHAPTER 4: "LINKED IN A SINGLE TETHER": GRIT LIT AND POOR WHITE RACISM

"White Southerners rarely speak of the mark made on the past and on the landscape by slavery, though they are quick to highlight any ancestors who had wealth . . . we spoke of the war but never of its real causes."

—Jim Grimsley

In Brian Carpenter's introduction to the anthology *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, he shows the tendency of Grit Lit practitioners and critics to either sidestep or oversimplify the concept of race: "race is a less contentious issue here than one might expect, reflecting perhaps the region's dramatic transformation from the apartheid state that was the Jim Crow South to the more integrated South of the post-civil rights era" (xxviii). Carpenter cites Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Brown's *Dirty Work*, Tom Franklin's *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*, and Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*, all addressed in this work as construing race as a non-issue. Allison, he says "comes to identify more closely with her black neighbors"; in Brown, the two characters' friendship supposedly projects the subject of race as a non-issue; and Bragg, who bravely admits his childhood racism before settling the issue by saying that "hunger does not have color" (xxix). Carpenter's introduction, which is an otherwise informative and foundational treatment of Grit Lit, gives the topic of race three paragraphs—about half a page. This oversimplification of race in Grit Lit belies the intersectionality in Allison and the unspoken racial violence in *Dirty Work*. The unproblematic presentation of race is problematic, and the literature eschews easy conclusions. Thus, at first glance, the literature does not foreground racial difference as an issue, and existing criticism reproduces that claim.

So far, this project has shown the progression of Grit Lit's engagement with race from what seems like a purposeful sidestepping in Crews, to including race as another step in the

formation of a self-actualized identity in Allison, to Brown's inclusion of a black character as a way of demonstrating and then subtly subverting the usual conflation of races. Perhaps this is too tidy a narrative. After all, whiteness cannot exist without blackness, and therefore, consciously or not, race is therefore baked into all of the literature. Perhaps Grit Lit models what Camille Gear Rich describes as "marginal whiteness," where poor whites have a "more limited access to white privilege, and relatedly have a more attenuated relationship to white identity," or what Khiara Bridges calls "racial sullying," where the racial privilege of a white person "has been diminished in some respects--by drug addiction, or welfare dependence, for example" (65). In Robert Duvall's *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction: From Faulkner to Morrison* (2008), white trash identity makes poor whites somehow non-white. Rather than view the absence of blackness in poor white southern literature as merely an absence of blackness, Duvall explains, "they use central white characters (who may be minstrels, but minstrels in whiteface rather than blackface) to underscore the otherness and alienation that results from their fundamental inability to assimilate to the values of their white communities" (3). Duvall cites Dorothy Allison's Bone Boatwright as an example of this whiteface minelstry, and Carpenter's introduction cites Duvall as critical precedent for placing Grit Lit on the right side of the race topic.[167] Interpreted in this way, the uncovering of race happening in Grit Lit is the uncovering of their own non-whiteness, their own inability to exploit white privilege despite being considered white by usual definitions (the state, the public), the sort of "disturbing liminality" Matt Wray means when referring to the white trash as "not quite white." For Wray, whiteness studies "stumbles" when considering

[167] Indeed, Carpenter cites Duvall's work of blurring "the boundary" between the races, citing his work on Allison's Bone's identification with her black neighbors over her own white culture as an example of the Grit Lit's unproblematic approach to race. But, as noted in the previous chapter, race is but one othered identity Bone, and Allison, looks to to theorize their own identity as poor white women. While this is certainly productive when considering Grit Lit's use of race to explain themselves to themselves, it is decidedly less useful for confronting the history and legacy of poor white racism in the South, and the ways Grit Lit does and does not reckon with it.

"white trash," because it indicates a "monstrous identity of mutually violating terms; two things that should be kept separate but are put together" (2). And while this might be used as a positive way to interpret the absence of blackness in white literature, it threatens to excuse the supposed absence of blackness in the name of a more abstract, subliminal project.

One must also actually address blackness, not just variations of whiteness. As Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* reminds us, the Africanist influence is always present, in the margins. This final chapter continues unpacking Grit Lit's engagement with race from its inception to the present. While CrewsLarry Brown, Rick Bragg, and a few others engaged the topic in the nineties, but sustained self-examination to race really took hold in the past fifteen years. This chapter analyzes those texts that either take race as its central focus or discuss it directly and in a sustained way. I first flesh out the historical relationship between poor whites and blacks in the South, some characteristics of which have been mentioned briefly but will receive deeper treatment here. Just as other forms of identity are explored through genre, this chapter looks at two memoirs' nuanced portrayal of real-life encounters with racism, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1998) and gay Southern writer Jim Grimsley's *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood* (2015), while also addressing the limitations inherent in the memoir genre. Turning to fiction, two novels by Tom Franklin, *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* and *Smonk*, engage racial history and memory by employing characteristics of the anti-western and mystery genres, and the novels posit the potential of genre fiction more generally to explore the causes and lingering effects of racism among poor southern whites.

These texts avow their racial past—the history of slavery, discrimination, and antiblacknessas—which Grit Lit has sort of done since its inception. Beginning with Crews in the late 60s, Grit Lit begins by avowing Southern racism, but also softening poor whites' own role in it through the conflation of poor white and black experience. At its worst, this approach appears to sidestep the issue, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. But starting largely in the 90s, during its first major expansion, Grit Lit has shown to be a supple mode, as Grit Lit authors continue exploring their own identity, through genre, they became better able to clearly see their place in a racial history—their own place in it, as oppressors and pawns—which allows them to better depict the day-to-day operation of poor white racism and challenge ongoing and evolving issues of race in the contemporary South. Southern literary studies has historically and problematically drawn a distinction between (elite white) "Southern" literature and (Southern) black literature. Grit Lit is working to dissolve those distinctions, shining a light on not ust class, but sexuality, disability, and race. In a moment of explosive, sometimes violent interest in history and race (monuments are falling, institutional names are changing), Grit Lit is well-positioned as a perhaps unlikely but extremely valuable ally in racial justice.

THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POOR WHITES AND BLACKS IN THE SOUTH

In "Briar Patch," Robert Penn Warren's contribution to the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, he says, "the fates of the 'poor white' and the negro are linked in a single tether. The well-being and adjustment of one depend on that of the other." In Warren's agrarian calculus, poor whites are an integral tool in addressing the perennial "Negro Problem," as it was termed at the time. For the black population to adequately raise themselves up, it must occur concurrently with

the poorest whites. Warren's assertion underscores two of the main ways poor whites have been discussed regarding the intersection of poor whites and blacks in the South. The two are either conflated, "linked in a single tether," or the poor whites are viewed as an instrument, for good or bad, in addressing racial anxieties. They either might as well be black, such is their disenfranchised nature, or they are socio-political weapons, convenient pawns in the ever-shifting racial chess match. A third, racial ignorance, what Ruth Frankeberg calls "color evasion" and "power evasion," is bound up in the first two. The poor white's willful ignorance of how they are rhetorically wielded paves the way for conflation and weaponization.

The ideals of freedom and liberty that define the US's emergence as a nation, are implicated in, depend upon, the violence settler colonialism, slavery, and the establishment of a racial calculus suited to these ideals. Even before later racial divisions, poor whites were compared with non-white populations. Indeed, the moment Theodore Allen says "invented" race, Bacon's Rebellion, saw a coalition of poor whites and Native Americans fight the oppression of the ruling elite.[168] Fearing that poor and working-class whites would become rebellious, the ruling elite established white supremacy as a form of social control, doling out "whiteness" as a bribe, a ticket to citizenship, land ownership, and suffrage. For poor and working-class whites, "whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline," says David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness*. But if whiteness was the carrot, it was also the stick. The privileges of white supremacy were always conditional on the poor and working-classes exclusion of non-whites. Whiteness is provisional, such that some groups—Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, sometimes

[168] As a response to this unified display of solidarity, the terrified planter bourgeoisie devised a series of laws and practices in the late 17th and early 18th centuries which implanted a system of 'white' racial privileges that enabled the imposition of racial slavery and white male supremacy.

Jews—have been granted whiteness only after showing proper compliance. Poor whites throw a wrench in the formula because they are not a specific national, ethnic, religious segment; rather, they are the dregs cast off from the republican, capitalist American project. They come to be seen as a perversion of whiteness and are thus more likely to be associated with their non-white neighbors than their legitimately white cousins.

During the Civil War, Northern generals fought to end slavery and liberate poor whites—Ulysses S. Grant maintained that an integral mission of the Civil War was to free poor whites from a socio-economic paradigm that relegated them to the fringes: "They too needed emancipation," he insisted, again conflating the plight of the two races and the paternalism it necessitates (qtd. in Isenberg 160).[169] Both groups, poor whites and African Americans, were victims of the ruling class. Blacks were kept enslaved while poor whites were kept landless and impoverished, and so their fates are linked. Even the origin of the term "white trash" is bound up in the comparison. Slaves called landless, shiftless whites "white trash," because they did the same work but were entitled to certain privileges, even though in many ways they lived similar lives (Wray 44). Some went so far as to suggest that the very existence of a literally diseased white underclass—the prevailing explanation for their being both white and useless—is due to the slave system, which put the otherwise normal but temporarily landless whites into contact with African disease, thus creating a deficient population (126).[170] In this regard, the two races

[169] In his memoir, Grant writes that in the "old regime" of the South, poor whites were nothing but "poor white trash" to ruling aristocracy. They were thus exiled to poor land. Grant rightly criticizes the Southern demagogues' manipulation of non-slaveholding whites (Isenberg 159-60).

[170] The "lazy cracker disease," also known as hookworm, a parasite common in the South's poor white rural areas. Early twentieth century physicians linked the spread of hookworm to human feces, thus connecting hookworm disease, and the poor, lazy people who got it, with excrement and waste (Wray 99). The hookworm "crusades" refers to the "charitable" efforts of eleven southern states to eradicate the disease through the curing of the poor Southern whites' chronic disease, thus bringing the poor whites out of their diseased states and into the industrial systems of the New South, and the privileges of the purely white. Just like their contemporary eugenicists, poor white degeneracy was rhetorically and pseudo-scientifically linked with disability. Unlike eugenics, however, hookworm crusaders thought they could fix the poor white scourge by curing their disabilities.

are conflated by more than proximity and shared circumstance; they share biological characteristics. The conflation of poor whites and blacks reflects the anxiety that a poor white population inflicts on a system of white supremacy. How could they be poor *and* white? To explain away their outward whiteness, poor whites are situated as non-white, or at least "not quite white," by conflating them with the black population. The legacy of this resonates in Grit Lit, when young Harry Crews identifies with his black neighbors and Larry Brown's *Dirty Work* seems to unite black and white characters under poverty and disability.

The other way poor whites were used, often as a natural follow-up to conflating races, was as political weapons, from all points on the political spectrum. Perhaps the most telling example occurred in the years leading up to and during the Civil War. In the rhetorical debate over slavery, two groups vied for interpretive authority—antislavery abolitionists used the white trash as an example of the terrible effects of slavery. Free Soilers in particular argued that poor whites were proof of the delibitation of slavery; Slavery crushed indivudal ambition through a monopolized economy, inviting "decay and death, and draining vitality from the land and its vulnerable inhabitants. Poor whites were the hapless victims of class tyranny and a failed democratic inheritance" (Isenberg 136). Proslavery advocates argued that poor whites are proof that the current system was correct;[171] the useless not-quite-whites were right where they belonged. And, just as Northern generals conflated poor whites and slaves in the name of emancipation, Confederate ideology converted the war into a class war, where the agenda was

[171] For the landed elite, poor whites' inability to rise in an economy based around slavery was proof that they were in their rightful place in society. Those who had ambition, they contended, were a quick step away from owning slaves, land, and respect in the antebellum South.

not just race but class revolution.[172] They needed the support of poor whites in uniform[173] (Isenberg 158).

The post-Civil War South was perhaps even bleaker for poor whites, with the system of sharecropping reaffirming the place of landless whites in a post-slavery economic landscape. Following WWII and the dawn of the New South, the priorities of the politically moderate ruling class were business growth, law-and-order, and segregation. To accomplish these, particularly the latter, white trash became synonymous with the Klan. After Jim Crow, spotlighting and inventing white trash racial transgressions distracted from the ruling. In short, the "white trash served as anachronistic survivors of racial primitiveness problematically present in the New South" (Taylor 72). Thus, the relationship between poor whites and blacks swung the other way. Instead of conflating the two, the two were violently separated in order to keep the South segregated while also appeasing the North during Southern industrialization.

How could the poor whites allow this? How could they fall under the sway of demagogues, fight to defend a system the benefits which excluded them, and willfully accept, and in many cases perpetuate, violent perceptions? Partly as an explanation, partly as a simple existential diagnosis, a common theme when pathologizing poor whites—in addition to the argument that they were "genetically inferior" argument—was their claim to whiteness. Indeed, while slaves, cognizant of their proximities, invented "white trash" as a comparative term, poor whites were seemingly content knowing they were white and therefore a short leap from

[172] Confederate appeals to poor whites rested primarily on issues of pedigree and purity. Jefferson Davis configured the war as a way of returning the pedigree of the founding fathers. As Isenberg writes, "The war proved that North and South were two distinct breeds. Whereas southerners could lay claim to a positive pedigree, their enemy could not. Northerners were heirs to a 'homeless race' . . .." (155)

[173] Desertion was common among the poor white population. The "twenty slave law" exempted slave owners with more than twenty slaves from the Confederate draft. Thus, the vast majority of the Southern military was composed of non-slaveholders and those with very few. Desertion was so common that General Robert E. Lee pleaded with President Jefferson Davis to somehow curb it (Isenberg 164). Deserters stole food and raided farms; they viewed desertion as "part of the daily resistance to upper-class rule" (165).

ascending to the ruling class, despite the latter's machinations to the contrary. This racial ignorance is best explained by two rather difference scholars, James Baldwin, writing during the Civil Rights Era, and W.J. Cash, writing just prior to the Great Depression. In a passage comparing the knowledge of Southern whites and blacks, Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*:

> Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held in spite of what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. The tendency has really been, insofar as this was possible, to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.

Baldwin finds a key difference in the racial interpretation of each as a matter of knowledge and self-awareness. Whereas the black population is acutely aware of the unfair hierarchies of race and class and its attendant oppressions, white Americans, "victims of their own brainwashing," remain willfully ignorant of the causes and most of the effects of their participation in those same hierarchies. Otherwise known as "racial innocence," Baldwin's term for the crime of being willfully untouched by racial injustices, and, further, as "the alchemy by which white Americans turn otherwise visible racial inequality into stories of redemption, virtue, and progress" (Taylor), it also accounts for the brainwashed poor whites' continued alliance with their manipulative, often populist demagogues, despite a definitive history of being pitted against the black population while simultaneously being denied the full stock of privileges enjoyed by the fully white. Such were the "psychological wages" of whiteness, says W. E. B. Du Bois, the compensation for their exploitation in American capitalism and politics.

Something similar is found in W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, a landmark study that makes crucial insights into the development and endurance of poor white ignorance/innocence.[174] When it comes to the mind of the poor south, he represents the population as a combination of natural and nurtured ignorance. They are lost in romance and hedonism, too simple to rebel, and too content with the most basic of living conditions. Furthermore, they believe in the inherent ability and superiority of the white person; no matter how bad things got for them, they are at least not black, for whom it was always worse. The collective mind, thinking of it regionally (which Cash argues we must do), is presented as unable, disinterested, and unwilling to keep up with the progression of American society. The historical relationship between Southern poor whites and blacks has been defined by conflation (they are similar and therefore both are non-white, or they are similar and therefore similarly oppressed), political weapons (either proof of grave injustices or proof of the natural order), and racial ignorance (they have been told they are white and, despite evidence to the contrary, are content to play their role in the racial order). Finally, as contested public memory has primarily been fought along racial lines, between pro-slavery Southern elites trying to maintain supremacy and blacks forging their own counter-histories, poor whites have consistently been denied representation in narratives of the American South.

By the 1960s and the Civil Rights era, poor whites were reconfigured from biologically deficient to, as Kristine Taylor terms it, ignorance, violence, and racist atavism. White trash had become untimely subjects unable to keep up with New South" (56). Thus, racial violence was

[174] Cash's work is not without its criticism, with critics rightly pushing back at Cash for his lack of engagement with the lives of non-white, non-male southerners, nevertheless. It is not lost that this text is similar in this regard, but whereas Cash's study approached the entire South and willfully ignored diverse voices, the present study explores diversity and difference in a literary mode dominated by white men. I argue that Grit Lit is anything but ignoring those voices, despite the demographic of the authors.

deliberately associated with the white trash, which contributed "the exoneration of the New South from the very racial exclusion their policies enforced" and reconfigured the poor Southern white as "ultimate figures of retrogressive white violence who threatened the emergence of the capital-rich New South" (57). And so the poor white took on a more active and sinister role as a symbol for racial violence beginning in the Civil Rights era as a way of obscuring the middle- and upper-classes' own maintenance of white supremacy.[175] Poor whites became a helpful scapegoat for racial violence and white anger as Civil Rights challenged constructions of race and, from the 1907s onward, neoliberalism eroded whatever social supports poor whites had from the New Deal era. Low- and middle-class whites took their anger out on nonwhites rather than those protecting the interests of the wealthy, white elite. As usual, the white trash was a handy tool in this regard. It was from this changing construction of the white trash (from tainted whites to unsanctioned white crusaders) that Grit Lit emerged, responded to, and combatted.

[175] Kristine Taylor writes in her excellence exploration of this phenomenon, "Untimely Subjects: White Trash and the Making of Racial Innocence in the Postwar South," "As the guilty, violence-prone corollary to the law-and-order champions of New South progress, white trash helped cement the entrenchment of racial innocence after the fall of Jim Crow. Moderates, seeking to emphasize the lawfulness of their school plans, the orderliness their policies imposed on otherwise mob-dominated desegregation battles, and the economic progress such law-and-order would enable, increasingly conflated racial guilt with the crude class behavior of rural white trash. Jettisoning white trash as unrepresentative of the region enabled moderates to preserve class-inflected benefits of white supremacy after Jim Crow's collapse and articulate those benefits as racially innocent, virtuous, and blameless" (65). She clarifies, "To be sure, the argument here is not that white trash and similarly extremist whites were any less violent than they appeared to be or that charges of racism were undeserved; this much is assuredly false. But by crafting white trash as repositories of racial backwardness and violence, political moderates produced fertile ground for the renewal of racial innocence: racial violence and domination in other forms, particularly those designed by moderates themselves, was conceptualized as conforming to national standards of law-and-order, racial neutrality, and pragmatic racial progress largely because what counted as "violence" was displaced onto the regrettable figures of white trash" (65).

REMEMBERING RACISM

A defining tension when it comes to race in Grit Lit is aptly contained in Grimsley's paradoxical statement: "as a child, I learned bias against black people from the good white people around me. For there is no one else from whom I could have taken this lesson" (75). Rick Bragg says something similar: "It is easy to see racism in the violent events . . . But I was taught to believe in white superiority in small ways, by gentle people, who believed themselves to be sharing God's own truth" (268-69). Herein lies the central role of Grit Lit memoirs on the subject of race. They are notable for their depictions and dissections of day-to-day, mundane racism. They are ubiquitous in their attempts to portray the nuances of white southern racism, not to obscure or excuse it, but to uncover the mechanisms of racism in the poor white South. They seek answers to how "good people" could, with perfectly clear consciences, teach "bias against black people." While issues of authenticity and the fiction of nonfiction no doubt color the texts, a topic previously discussed, they are nevertheless noteworthy in their explicit discussions of the topic of race. There are limitations, however. Namely, authors—often the creative types—tend to be precocious, or otherwise different, from an early age, so that while they implicate themselves in the cultural racism that surrounds them, they foreshadow their separation from it, and their own progressive counter-education. These are escape narratives. Finally, by their nature, the memoirs usually only focus on their childhood and, thus, a different time. While this period specificity lends itself to historical nuance, it also obscures present, ongoing racism. While the memoirs are no doubt valuable in their unflinching avowal of a racist past, the fact that they are focused on the past tends to leave the present understudied, as if admitting their racist histories and their personal growth settles the discussion.

Two memoirs that have explicit and sustained discussions of poor white racism are Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997) and Jim Grimsley's *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood* (2015). Bragg's memoir focuses on his upbringing in Alabama and the struggles and ultimate perseverance of his mother. Bragg tells his story of childhood poverty as well as his ascent and travels as an award-winning journalist. Grimsley's text selects a more specific time period. He addresses his formal and informal education from elementary through high school, before and after the desegregation of schools in his native North Carolina. In their own ways, both texts highlight the complexity, depth, and frustrations of poor white racism in ways that disrupt the usually cited reasons while also illustrating the pros and cons of period specificity and the escape narrative.

Bragg and Grimsley confront the typical explanations of poor white racism towards African-Americans in the South. While they acknowledge the usual racial discourses in the South—and, to some degree, admit the accuracy of some—they underscore the layers of social construction undergirding these tidy conclusions. For example, Bragg addresses the tendency to conflate poor whites and blacks: "White people had it hard and black people had it harder than that, because what are the table scraps of nothing?" (4). Bragg is careful not to obfuscate the privilege, however small and unstable, of the poor whites. He continues, "whites and blacks picked together, but did not make the same money. It wasn't right but it was the way it was" (34). Labor is often cited as a point of similarity between poor whites and blacks, and while it certainly makes them similar, it often neglects other intertwined topics, such as the pay they receive for their identical labor. Bragg also addresses the idea that poor whites, historically, are easily manipulated political pawns. Recalling a rally his family attended for notorious anti-civil-rights demagogue, George Wallace, Bragg recalls: "The governor talks about a lot of things but

mostly he seems to be telling us we are better than the nigras . . . We had not known we were better than anybody (61). In this case, Bragg doesn't dispute the charge so much as explain it. In a memoir about the intense poverty of Alabama poor whites, Bragg describes in detail situations that would make poor whites susceptible to the rabble rousing of a populist demagogue. In addition, it offers insight into the circumstances that lead to the perpetuation of racial innocence. Indeed, as Sarah Robertson, comparing Bragg to William Faulkner, whose Snopes family is probably the most recognizable Southern literary treatment of a white trash clan, comments, "Snopes's inability to see, or refusal to acknowledge, the link between the tenant labor of poor whites and blacks in the story's 1890s setting is echoed in the racial division that separates black and white neighbors during Bragg's childhood" (464).[176] Bragg furthers this racial inquiry but does so through personal memory rather than fiction, perhaps lending him credibility.

Like Bragg, Grimsley addresses race conflation, but in his case, it is used as a device used by the aspirant upwardly mobile as a way of separating good whites from poor whites: "there are white niggers, too, and they're just as trashy and low as black ones" (89). Thus, the term "nigger" and its connotations was, for Grimsley's family, a cross-racial term used for taxonomic reasons, where "the bad qualities that were attributed to the lowest class of white people were considered to be the normal qualities of a nigger; the neat construction explained the outliers in both races, the ones who did not fit the pattern" (90). Grimsley illustrates another unfortunate use of race conflation. Instead of conflating white and black to downplay or excuse racism, here it is used to reinforce hierarchy, where poor whites are trained to see themselves as temporarily degraded perversions of the worthy whites, an idea noted in Cash as well.

[176] Here again, the Snopes are the Southern literary barometer for contemporary Southern literature's approach to poor whites. Faulkner's poor white family continues to cast a large shadow

Grimsley's account shows a variation in the usually one-dimensional equating of white and black.

Grimsley also addresses the historical discourse surrounding poor white racism, but he focuses on the poor whites' relationship with history, rather than history's relationship with poor whites. Like Bragg, his comments speak to the causes and effects of racial innocence. He offers nuance by showing how *un*nuanced poor white southerners are when it comes to invoking and using history. For example, Grimsley discusses the generally accepted idea that Southerners are obsessed with history, that the South—usually (problematically) meaning the "white" South—is a region where history is everywhere and, like nowhere else, speaks through people and monuments. Grimsley confronts this, saying, "White Southerners rarely speak of the mark made on the past and on the landscape by slavery, though they are quick to highlight any ancestors who had wealth . . . we spoke of the war but never of its real causes" (64-65). Such passages underscore white Southerners' willful ignorance and shallow historical "pride" despite a lack of desire to learn more than is necessary to reinforce their tangential place in the hierarchy. Indeed, Grimsley offers a thesis regarding the use of history in matters of race: "The South is not inhabited by students of history. People were more inclined to repeat truisms about the past than they were to read the documents and learn the facts" (72). To understand and complicate the abuses of history in the name of racism, Grimsley deplores the lazy, essentializing rhetoric employed by phony "students of history."

Another important point of comparison between *How I Shed My Skin* and *Shoutin'* is the use of racist language. Taking the most infamous example of racist language, Bragg notes: "I grew up in a house where the word nigger was as much a part of the vocabulary as 'hey,' or 'pass the peas'" (61). He paints a straightforward picture of the poor white's use of the term, one

that no doubt reflects usual understandings of the term in the Southern white vernacular. Grimsley's memory of the word is different. He recalls getting in trouble for saying the word, not to combat his intolerance but to separate him from poor whites. "The prohibition against the word nigger," he writes, "had little to do with ideas of equality, and everything to do with standards of politeness" (87). Grimsley's family wanted to raise themselves out of the white trash label—something they never accomplished, except for Grimsley himself—and one way to accomplish it was to adopt the manners of the higher-classes. For the Braggs, who are presented as more accepting of their circumstances, such a prohibition is not necessary. Each author notes that their particular relationship with the word is based on their individual family's use of it, showing how localized its use can be. Neither use (or non-use) changes the underlying derogation, of course—the existence of racism is unquestioned in each—but it demonstrates subtle variations in the expression of racism based on circumstance and attitude. For the purposes of cataloguing racism from the poor white perspective, the memoirs offer nuance and depth.

The limitations of the memoirs' approach to race lie in the nature of the genre. Because a memoir is a first-person, nonfiction account of a published author's past, there is always a degree of separation from the speaker and the culture they discuss. In these memoirs, the authors tend to be precocious pre-adolescents or otherwise different, such that, while they implicate themselves in the cultural racism that surrounds them, they foreshadow their inevitable departure and underscore their inherent difference from the others. They are escape narratives. Bragg, for example, describes early on how he was a "different sort" of child:

> I was not much like either of them. I couldn't hammer a nail without bending it or severely damaging myself or someone standing near, and if you had depended on me to feed the fire or the hog we would have froze to death, huddled with our emaciated pig. I was a dreamer, and while I loved the woods and the creeks and

> the natural bounty of our world, I also loved to bury myself in books . . . When I was out of books, I just found a quiet place to dream. (91)

Like Crews's anxiety about his childhood home, "[I]n writing the memoir, Bragg has arguably attempted to appease his own guilt for being the one who escaped, the one who does not have to engage in manual labor, the one whose hands do not carry the traces of that labor," notes Sarah Robinson (474). Just as Crews's tenuous relationship with his (lack of) home place resulted in his unreliability as a spokesperson for that place, Bragg's fundamental differences from his family and peers must also color his representations and analysis of racism. Because he was, as he says, "a fairly liberal minded young man," Bragg's later enlightenment, post-Alabama experiences come through, such as when reporting on a story of destitute but brave black woman: "When I sat down to write my story, I closed my eyes and saw not an old black woman but a young white one . . . I let some of the admiration I had for her creep into this story of a stranger, but I don't think it hurt it much. It was, some people told me, the best story I ever wrote, in this job I was born to do" (269). Perhaps his color blindness is admirable, and it is reassuring to see how culturally ingrained racism can perhaps be overcome and the fight against it might be engaged. Yet it also risks coming across as self-congratulating and to undermine their tell-it-like-it-is approach, because, by characterizing journalism as "this job I was born to do," Bragg further establishes his inherent iconoclasm, suggesting that his later confrontation was more of a predetermination than a choice, a self-fashioning that sounds a lot like white saviorism.

In *How I Shed My Skin*, Jim Grimsley details his experiences realizing and then hiding being gay from his schoolmates. What his community would have considered an aberrant sexuality gave him a sense of solidarity with his black classmates and informed his narrative of escape from racism. At various points he muses: "What might I have done had I been a straight

boy? I have no way to answer this question at all" (58). Being gay allowed him a different lens through which to interpret the culture around him, including race, so much so that he finds it hard to speculate alternatives.

> I never connected my isolation from the other people, my queerness, with the change I underwent in the way I saw my black schoolmates. Only later would I understand the influence of the one on the other. I had never entirely accepted the social messages I received from my parents, my peers, and my surroundings, because I was different, and knew it. The white narrative of the world excluded people with desires like mine, and this prevented my believing that their ideas applied to me. I had already learned to see and think for myself in building my identity, even though I kept this part of myself silent and hidden. (149-50)

Like Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which theorizes intersectionality in the development of a progressive, accepting identity, Grimsley's recollections led him to realize the influence his own difference had on his unique acceptance of his black schoolmates. For a memoir that is at times successful in describing the "white narrative of the world," it is also quick to distinguish Grimsley's separate maturation from the typical white narrative. Indeed, he says that "in an all-white high school, the fact that I was queer would have caused me problems . . . But the fact that the social core of our school had been dismantled prevented the kinds of harassment I might have experienced otherwise" (198). Desegregation was useful for Grimsley, as it aided in his development as a gay student in a Southern school and probably contributed to his growing tendency to "think of white people as 'they' rather than 'we'" (154). In his most public moment of defiance, when the student body voted on whether or not to suspend black student protesters, he was the sole white student who voted with the black students. He is the exception, and maybe it proves the rule, but it is exceptional nonetheless.

The way the memoirs are set up, we know the outcome. The precocious but impressionable child grows up in a place they love but don't totally fit in. They will escape, adventure, do great things, reflect on their childhood, and retrospectively explain the place they

escaped from. They will offer a street level, kitchen-sink honesty when describing the sources and expressions of poor white racism while also distancing themselves from that culture by portraying themselves as separate from the norm they are documenting. The two tasks are seemingly at odds with each other.

Another effect of the memoir is its temporal distance. The *Washington Post* says that Grimsley's memoir shows "where we've come from and how we move forward." While the first part rings true, the second part is problematic because the first takes precedence at the exclusion of the second. By their nature, the memoirs are always focused on their childhood and, thus, a different time. For Bass and Grimsley, it was the 60s, the Civil Rights era. Though they frequently compare the racism of their childhood with what has and has not changed, contemporary racism is used as punctuation or further characterization of the past rather than a sustained subject in its own right. These texts adhere to a narrative of liberal progress, which can obscure liberalism's own roots in settler colonialism and slavery. For both, the memoir form offers a valuable portrait of a specific and detailed place at a specific moment. By using the trappings of Grit Lit, the inside-track, poor white Southern perspective, these memoirs are adept at situating the relationship between poor whites and blacks in a specific and nuanced historical moment. This comes, however, at the expense of "how we move forward." The authors escape their racist pasts, and the distance affords them a clearer lens to analyze their dirty past. One of the effects, however, is the now-versus-then effect. The use of memoir is critical to this, as bildung and narratives of progress threaten to obscure present racism by casting it back to an admittedly racist past. Indeed, this use of memoir as an escape narrative recalls Bone from *Bastard Out of Carolina*, who rejects escapist fantasy as a useful path to self-actualization, and Allison's own reticence to writing memoir, choosing fiction instead.

RACISM IN FICTION

Fiction is the other primary way Grit Lit engages with the topic of poor white racism. As opposed to the escape narrative, which is adept at describing the realistic mechanisms and complexities of day-to-day racism but comes short in offering larger historical perspective and solutions, the "genre method," similar to the technique found in Dorothy Allison, utilizes the characteristics of literary genres to engage issues of racial history and subtextually propose ways of moving forward. Like memoirs, however, and any self-identified white-authored literature that ponders racism against African Americans, Grit Lit fiction tends to focus on moments of dramatic, violent, or overt racism, where memoirs are good at documenting everyday racism. Examined here are two works by Tom Franklin, a recent author whose fiction engages racist Southern histories. Franklin's revisionist western *Smonk* (2007) uses the anti-western's characteristic of "mythoclasm" to comically caricaturize and satirize the usual historical approaches to understanding and representing poor white racism—and poor white culture more generally. *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* (2011) is a detective novel involving a cold case and the black sheriff's and white suspect's personal, racially-informed relationship, both as children in the 1970s and in the contemporary period. The novel manipulates the conventions of the detective genre to paint a meaningful portrait of the childhood formation of racism and the subsequent painful, possible healing.

The first edition book jacket of Tom Franklin's *Smonk* describes it as "a southern, not a western," referring to its co-opting of western genre conventions to the "wilderness" of rural, Reconstruction-era Alabama. More accurately, this novel is an anti-southern, or perhaps revisionist southern. Like the revisionist or anti-western, *Smonk* ratchets up the darker subject matter and the morally questionable treatment of white, western heroes on Others. As David

Evans characterizes the rise of the revisionist literary western in the 60s and 70s, "shaken by an era of traumatic political events and social upheavals, western novelists got serious, looked beneath the familiar myth to find the reality that it had suppressed, and began producing revisionist westerns intended to represent more accurately the unsettling consequences of settling the West" (407). But where revisionist westerns tend to carry a serious, somber atmosphere appropriate to its fallen landscape,[177] *Smonk* reads almost as a parody of texts like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), converting these tropes into the comic and absurd to satirize the various ways American colonization and myth-making went from north to south, not just east to west. The south depicted in *Smonk* is a parodic picture of how the south is often viewed as well as a comic rebuttal to northern sanctimony.

Indeed, the most apt comparison for the novel is McCarthy. Like McCarthy, Frankling uses minimal punctuation (no quotation marks, for example), mountains of viscera, biblical allusions and atavistic themes, and graphic, perhaps gratuitous amounts of sex and violence. Set in 1911, *Smonk* is about the titular character, a "syphilitic, consumptive, gouty and goitered" criminal who has terrorized the small town of Old Texas, Alabama for years. The town, which hides its own depraved secret, attempts to put Smonk on trial. The novel also follows Evangeline, a young prostitute who is followed by a rag-tag group of Christian vigilantes led by the class-conscious northerner, Walton. There are no heroic or virtuous characters in the novel. The closest it comes is the two black characters, Ambrose and Ike, the right-hand men of Walton and Smonk, respectively. The violent, peripatetic, and bawdy novel one-ups McCarthy to the level of absurdity.

[177] Many post-Classical Hollywood westerns fall under the umbrella of "revionist," including "spaghetti westerns," "acid westerns," as well as mainstream, commercial westerns such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Unforgiven* (1992), where the flawed outlaws become the protagonists, critiquing and questioning the moral ambiguities and social orders of the American west.

In *After Southern Modernism* (2000), Matthew Guinn employs the term "mythoclasm" to describe the work of postmodern southern authors like McCarthy and Hannah. In this deconstruction of modernism, works like McCarthy's *Suttree* render the southern promise of community and myth ironic by inverting historical tropes. Such an approach is a "direct attack on tradition," one that "rejects past" and "sets out for new territory" (109). McCarthy's iconoclastic, postmodern rejection of southern myth is taken up in *Smonk*, where among others, it mocks the southern myth of the Lost Cause of turning to the past for models of southern identity, of the virtuous, pure southern community and relations between the North and South. Included in this is Southern historiography's approach to racism. Specifically, the Northern character Walton comically models Jennifer Greeson's notion that the North influences and helps create the perceptions of the South by modeling and evangelizing the reasons for racism associated with the poor white south.

Walton, "for that was the head of Christian Deputy's Christian name," is a vigilante northern demagogue (16). He travels the Southern wasteland, collecting wayward recruits: "Bums, mostly. Drunks, Criminals. Men on the lam . . . While they suffered in steadfastness, loyalty, courage and obedience, they were cheap and easy to replace" (69). Exiled from what he claims was his aristocratic circumstances in the civilized North, it is later revealed that Walton was forced out for his lecherous misdeeds. Throughout the novel, his gang tracks—and is eluded by—Evangeline, a sly prostitute with whom Walton is sexually obsessed, despite his reputedly noble Christian intentions. More than any character in the novel, Walton articulates the novel's satire regarding class and race through his attempted manipulation of the ignorant South, which he perceives as being stuck in the past: "Perhaps left over from the War, lo all these years later. 'Sore' losers, these guerillas. Mis-perceived as heroes. Men unwilling to march out of the past"

(67). Walton's diagnosis bears a resemblance to Grimsley's own perception of Southerners' use of history. As such, Walton views himself as a missionary in an unholy land, sent to bring civilization, culture, and, crucially, class and race hierarchy, to the backward region.

Part of his self-imposed mission is to bring literacy to the poor whites. Walton sits his troop down and teaches them to read while also emphasizing the "natural order":

> He wrote words and underlined them. 'CLASS.' Didn't their misguided prey feel out-of-his-element there in the famous boardinghouse? Among 'GOOD' (Walton wrote furiously) 'PEOPLE'? Why wasn't he sleeping in an alley, or in a seedy hotel, where 'TRASH' traditionally stayed and where 'SIN' took place? Did he feel safer there? Less conspicuous? Or was he trying to rise above his 'STATION'? And if so, 'WHY'? (20)

The novel shows the ability of Grit Lit to dramatize to absurdity in order to accent certain things. It comically shows the Yankee carpetbagger influencing class dynamics in the South. It is an absurd representation of Greeson's argument that the North tries to influence the South, that it creates the regional neighbor it wants to see. But it also makes comically absurd how that argument denies the South agency in its own regional identity formation. Walton, while ultimately easily able to influence a small number of people, is hilariously unable to catch and kill Smonk or elicit any of the changes he wants. In a novel overflowing with the sexually grotesque, Walton's northern influence is impotent.

While proselytizing the correct position of classes, Walton further presents himself as gracious and forward-thinking when it comes to race, but this too is always comically undermined. His second in command, the black and literate Ambrose, "was teaching the troops to read. There'd been grousing about having a Negro tutor the men, but Walton had delivered a stirring lecture about the necessity of the races getting along. It was why, he confessed, he'd chosen a Negro as his number two man" (58). The "Negro" is literate, capable of teaching the men. But Walton also reveals his own engrained white supremacy by reassuring his men that the

only reason Ambrose got the job was to teach them a lesson, not because of his merits, even though Ambrose is one of the only competent characters in the book. Ike, Smonk's right hand man, conversely, clearly earned his position out of merit. At one point, Ike makes the executive decision to kick a couple men out of the gang, despite their whiteness. He swiftly slits one man's throat and sheathes his knife "before the tenant could fathom that today death was the color of a Negro. It ain't fair, he squeaked. Ike stepped aside as he fell. Fair, he said, as if there was such a thing" (111). Ike's outlook reflects the pre-sovereignty brutality of Hobbes's state of nature, a Darwinian landscape surprisingly promising for the enterprising black characters.

In the same scene, Walton tells Ambrose that he invented the word "bunker" and is "circulating it as a new word here in the Southland. It's a secret club I and several of my old college chums originated. As social experiments, we coin new words and use them with authority. See if they catch on" (68). He continues, "I'm practically an aristocrat, nearly a blueblood, and in addition to that of a northerner. In other words, *entitled.* You're a darky but one who can read . . . Such a stout word, I predict it catches on, especially if you'll explain it among your dusky pals when you return home on leave" (68). Here again, Walton comically shows the Northerner's attempted influence on the South via linguistic colonization. It also confirms his racism, his unfounded sense of being an aristocrat, his preoccupation with class, and the limits of his racial acceptance. This can be further seen when he beseeches a black character to let his envoy pass through a blockade: "Let us pass. This need not grow into a 'scuffle.' There are several of us. You are a Negro, alone and unarmed. Quite elderly as well. We are most of young, white and armed. We are trained, well-equipped professional lawmen on a mission to better this land for each us all, irregardless of the pigmentation of our skin" (166). Walton uses race as an intimidation tactic while simultaneously invoking his emancipatory mission as a

reason to obey him. Getting increasingly frustrated, Walton exclaims, "had every Negro in Alabama chosen today to assert his independence? Now, look here, the Philadelphian said, his voice rising in pitch. I'm normally very conscious of the lower races—" (167). Walton's constant assertions that he has African Americans' best interests in mind while also constantly revealing his own sense of racial superiority satirizes Northern racial paternalism and outright racism.

In *Smonk*, Tom Franklin's gross, gratuitous parody of revisionist westerns displaced in the South heightens the extremity of the genre to comment not just on the inherent absurdity of the blood-soaked subgenre but on the imaginative and always incomplete colonization of the South by the North, including its reinforcement of racial discrimination. It is difficult to decide where the novel finally comes down on this. While it certainly acknowledges the history of Northern influence on Southern place-making, as described by Jennifer Greeson, it also neuters the efforts of its primary carpetbagger, Walton. However, Walton's clan of easily brainwashed underclassmen demonstrate their susceptibility to such influence. Moreover, even though Walton's ineptitude might grant agency to the region, the Southern wasteland depicted, commensurate with the amoral landscape of the revisionist western, is a hellscape not worth defending. The South is capable of horrible things on its own. Franklin forgoes the subtlety of the memoirs—the novel is gleefully on the nose—in order to pack a bigger punch, but like the genre it adopts, despite all its iconoclasm, it comes out feeling empty.

Franklin's 2011 *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* offers a serious and perhaps more mature approach to both genre and race. The novel combines the subtle introspection of the memoir while also expanding it to include and spotlight a black protagonist's voice by using genre to heighten the thematic impact. By so doing, it dramatizes the type of racial conditioning found in Bass and Grimsley with the narrative and thematic heft that fiction offers. The novel

follows Silas, a once popular high-school athlete in rural Mississippi and current town constable, and Larry, an introspective, bookworm mechanic who used to be childhood friends with Silas. Silas is the son of a poor, black single mother and Larry is the son of a poor, white, abusive couple (particularly his father). The mystery at the center of the novel's plot revolves around the disappearance of a girl that Larry took to a drive-in in the 1970s. In the present, another girl disappears, and Silas is tasked with reopening the investigation into Larry and their complicated personal history.

Many of the hallmarks of the Grit Lit memoir are on display in the novel. It centers on the personal history of a precocious white boy, whose nose was buried in books, seemingly oblivious to socio-cultural mechanisms of racism. It is even set during the usual period of desegregation and integration common to memoirs. When first considering his budding friendship with Silas, Larry thinks, "Having a black friend was an interesting idea, something he'd never considered. Since the redistricting he was around them constantly" (44). Despite his blank-slate attitude towards race, like the memoirs, the novel narrates the formative moments in the conditioning of a potential young racist. At school, Larry gets taunted by black schoolmates and strongly considers hurling racial insults at them. They pelt books at him and he thinks, "*Monkey Lips . . . Nigger nigger nigger nigger*" (50). Like Grimsley's memoir posits, young Southern whites are hardwired with racism, or they have been so definitively implanted in them at a young age that it appears hardwired. In the air all around them, the often-unspoken hatred creeps up in these moments of confrontation. But like the young Grimsley, who feels the pull of racism but doesn't act on it, Larry also—perhaps because he is so different from his peers—suppresses outward projections of racial animosity, though they exist inside him. He pursues his

friendship with Silas, and it appears he is on his way to the type of racial escape modeled in the memoirs.

Along the way, Larry uncovers the type of informative subtlety found in the memoirs. For example, at a certain point during their friendship, Larry discovers that Silas's mother doesn't want him playing with Larry. Larry is confused:

> "Larry was puzzled. It had to be his color. What else could it be? He'd known his own father would disapprove. He would never tell Carl about the friendship, but wouldn't it be different for Silas? They'd given them coats, a car. He'd assumed the anger that black folks felt was a reaction to white people's attitude toward them. *Yall started it*. But if somebody white was willing to befriend somebody black, offer them gifts, even a place to live, shouldn't the blacks be grateful?" (75)

This passage models the type of "gracious" thinking that Larry has. Despite his noble willingness to "befriend somebody black," his assumption that that willingness should be met with gratitude demonstrates his continued white supremacy. The novel models the complex thought process of a practicing, developing racist. Further, it does what the memoirs fail to do: it ventriloquizes black perspective. This can of course be problematic, since the authors are white, but it is nevertheless valuable that the fiction is willing to consider other racial perspectives. While memoirs are bound by their genre to consider only the viewpoint of the author, fiction affords Franklin the ability to acknowledge counter-narratives. Finally, the "gifts" Larry refers to were charitable donations given to Silas's family by Larry's. The material coats are inconsequential; the symbolism is not. It is a gesture meant to emphasize the natural Southern hierarchy. The poor. white family demonstrates their elevated position by acting paternalistically to their economic equivalent. The novel dramatizes the small ways poor whites participate in the age-old belief that their whiteness keeps them somewhat elevated. In this moment, Larry's family is

performing the part of the aspirant paternal Southern aristocrats, graciously bestowing help on the naturally lower castes while simultaneously reinforcing the social hierarchy.

Like any decent mystery, the larger mystery obscures an even more personal, damaged secret underneath. In the case of Larry and Silas, the secondary mystery is the question of what happened to their friendship? Why did they grow apart? Was it simply that Larry had been pegged as a murderer, and, despite being cleared, has been labelled a predator by the town ever since? The novel reveals that, after discovering that Larry had lent Silas a gun belonging to his father, Larry's father, Carl, forces the boys to fight. Drunk and racist, Carl seizes the moment to punish Larry both for being different and befriending a black boy. He says: "Momma's boy reading the livelong day. Warch your cartoons, play with your dolls, read your funny books. But you can't unscrew a god dang bolt to save your life, can't charge a dad blame battery. And here when it comes to knuckles, you can't get your own daddy's gun back from the boy that stole it" (88). In forcing them to fight, Carl deliberately and enthusiastically creates "a dispute between the races. Yall got to fight it out. Man to man. White to colored" (88). Forced to fight his best friend, Silas quickly gains the upper hand, leading to Larry pleading for him to stop: 'Ple-ple-ple-please.' Silas held on." HIs father continues to goad him for being a bookworm and a pacifist: "'La-la-la-la-listen at the little stuttering baby,' Carl said." In a desperate attempt to end the beating, Larry finally utters: 'Quit it Sssssilas!' he cried. 'You,' Larry burbled, 'you n-n-n-nigger.'" (90). Here, Larry's dramatic racist indoctrination is also bound up in masculinity, where his lack of racism is connected to his emasculation. Whereas the memoirs note the differences in the uses of and attitudes towards racist language, it is of course never uttered by the authors. To do so would undermine their escape narrative.

The novel dramatizes, in a way that the memoirs don't, how ingrained and socially constructed racism is forcibly coaxed out of children in a racist cycle that rejects individual difference. Immediately after the incident, Larry "was already sorry but knew it was too late" (90). Left alone, Larry is left with the fallout:

> His knees had buckled and he opened and closed his mouth, tasting blood, sorrier yet for what he'd called Silas and seeing, through his flooded vision, *Night Shift* facedown in the dirt. Somewhere behind him he heard their voices and looked back to a world that would never be the same. (91)

Larry has at once been punished for being different and allowed himself to succumb to the urges that he had previously quelled. From then on, he retreats further into himself. He makes it his mission to learn the trade of mechanics and runs his father's small business after his death, perhaps out of spite. Larry's circumstances at the beginning of the novel are not that of a reformed escapee, but of a defeated, seemingly assimilated man. Uttering the hateful language at the coaxing of his father did not drive him from away and lead to a prodigal son's return and retrospective. While he retains his love of genre fiction (Stephen King is his favorite author), he resigns himself to being seen as a murderer by the town and a racist by his former friend. The novel rejects the simplistic escape narrative.

Larry's indoctrination into the "death cult of white supremacy" (Cottom) reveals a difference from the memoirs that comes from a similar place. Two fundamental differences between the novel and the previously discussed texts is its extensive inclusion of a black character's perspective and the text's meditations on genre as a constructive and active agent of change. By virtue of who produces Grit Lit and the content of the literature, Grit Lit rarely engages in the perspectives of non-white characters. While over time, what was once an aversion to discussing race became an earnest attempt to reckon with Southern racial history, it was still averse to portraying the perspective of a racial other. And while this might be partly due to the

discomfort of white authors attempting to speak for black characters—it could lead to charges of a kind of authorial blackface—it is nevertheless a conspicuous absence. Franklin offers an interesting, if unorthodox, perspective: a white author's fictional rendering of a black character's perceptions of poor whites. At first, this results in a typical stock characterization of the poor white population. Driving into what he calls "White Trash Ave.," Silas comments on his surroundings:

> Every time he cruised past, the white residents frowned from chairs on their porches, thin tattooed bleach-blond women with babies on their laps, strained-looking grandmothers in housedresses smoking cigarettes, garbage in the yards . . . He didn't know what it was about white folks and four-wheelers, but every damn house seemed to have one. (27)

Contained in his amusing illustration are the most persistent hallmarks of poor white stereotyping: unhealthy ("smoking cigarettes"), lazy ("from chairs on their porches"), inhospitable ("white residents frowned"), and lacking pride in their surroundings and appearance ("housedresses"; "garbage in the yards"). Crucially, however, Silas's initially stereotypical impression of the community is undercut by his obvious interest, even respect, for some of its residents.

Finally, and most germane to the thematic through line of this project, is the use of genre fiction to discuss difficult concepts. Most obvious is Franklin's use of the mystery or detective genre to unearth past racial trauma in the childhoods of Larry and Silas. Their violent incident has been long-buried, and the genre formula pulls it to the surface. A genre invested in the idea of truth-seeking leads to a productive discovery of the motivations and long-term effects of childhood, race-based violence and allows the characters to begin to heal.

Genre is a rehabilitative device. Larry is an avid reader of genre fiction. His bedroom is "piled with paperbacks," and he belongs to numerous book clubs. The novel clearly indicates the importance of popular culture and genre by citing many examples throughout the novel. At the

novel's end, while Larry is recuperating in the hospital, his love of Stephen King becomes an anchor into their friendlier past. He asks if Silas brought him *Night Shift*, the same book that was lying in the mud after their fight. Larry asks Silas if he had read it. Silas says that he had. When asked if he enjoyed it, Silas says, "No . . . Horror ain't my thing. Too much of that in real life." He is outwardly dismissive of genre, but internally thinks: "He wanted to say how Larry's versions, way back when, were better" (219-20). Genre storytelling, both in established popular culture and of their own invention, is what keeps Larry and Silas tethered together in the intervening years. Larry maintains his enthusiasm for escapist fiction, and Silas keeps his appreciation for Larry's oral renditions of genre fare. To cement this link, Franklin includes an additional King reference, this time uttered by the genre-skeptical Silas: "Easy, Cujo" (242). Beyond serving to bind the interracial characterization of Larry and Silas, a genre artifact has direct influence on the plot and its outcome. The final clue Silas finds, the one that pulls the mystery together, is Larry's old monster mask (244). Earlier in the novel, Silas recalls how he had worn the realistic zombie mask to school, and how, despite normally being unpopular, fellow students were interested and excited in his genre memorabilia. Silas remembers thinking that "Larry must've felt almost normal" (143). As a motif, genre signifies a common space for exploring individual, community, and regional trauma.

CONCLUSION

Fitzhugh Brundage predicted the increasingly radicalized divisions regarding Southern memory and race: "the politics of memory in the South eventually will divide sharply along partisan and racial lines, substantive and productive consideration of divisive historical issues is certain to be hindered" (41). Public memory has and will remain to be integral to Southern identity. From the

postbellum era, when elite whites dominated the creation and maintenance of public memory,[178] through civil rights, when black challenges to cultural custodianship upended traditional memory politics,[179] poor whites have been silent(/ed). Grit Lit can help challenge divisions between white and black historical memory. Like the elite Southern whites sought to cement their supremacy post-slavery, even into the twenty-first century, poor whites are trying to carve out a cultural space, not of dominance but of relevance and allyship. And, just like the history of race must be painfully reckoned with, Grit Lit has increasingly turned to the complex relationship between poor whites and blacks.

Race undergirds every Grit Lit text. Whatever identity can be fashioned, salvaged, or discovered in a literature of poor whites is rooted in the complicated history between whites and blacks. Initially, race was reduced in Grit Lit, typically by conflating black and poor white experiences. In Allison, race is highlighted as a piece in Bone's identity puzzle, while Brown sneaks in a dynamic argument about the legacy of racial violence despite apparent attempts to reduce it to a non-issue, as scholarship on Grit Lit has also done. Poor white literature's narrative with racial history mirrors the earlier South's. Poor whites sought a little cultural capital, some time to reflect on their own identity, before acknowledging the racial past. As a cluster of literature with the task of theorizing the poor white identity, Grit Lit has increasingly confronted race as a central component, leading to a handful of texts that deal primarily, or at least

[178] A major manifestation of this, and one that is still being fought in today's South, are Confederate monuments. In large part spearheaded by women's organizations such as the Daughters of the Confederacy, monuments were erected to claim and sustain control of the Southern public memory. Today, the monuments are being contested and removed, to the chagrin of those who claim that removing monuments is erasing the past, while dismissing the contested and constructed nature of the monuments and public memory.

[179] Black countermemory has always been a part of Southern public memory. Brundage analyzes the "black remembrance in the age of Jim Crow," where "in one the most profound ironies of the Jim Crow era, blacks used state and private resources to turn schools into essential sites of collective memory that performed a role comparable to that of museums, archives, and other memory theaters in the white community" (140). But black countermemory has been consistently dismissed and ignored for a century after the Civil War. "Not until the 1960s did blacks command the political power necessary to insist on a more inclusive historical memory for the South" (10).

explicitly, with race. Memoirists like Rick Bragg and Jim Grimsley explore the subtle permutations of southern racism via life writing, while Tom Franklin's fiction uses genre to unpack conceptions and legacies of racial history. While this movement shows progress, there is clearly still room for further exploration.

Over its fifty years, Grit Lit has evolved from carving out a space for poor white artists to reckon with their identity, culture, and region to an important strain of Southern literature imagining new, less destructive and more accurate ways of contributing to the literary treatments of racial discourse in the South. What began as simply a (difficult and valuable) counternarrative, these chapters argue that Grit Lit has moved towards an intersectional understanding of a people often viewed (from inside and out) with isolation, conservatism, and ambivalence. Harry Crews includes in his personal narrative the disparate identities that touched his own. Brown begins constructing the bridge that joins these disparate identities by positing a pessimistic but potentially hopeful intersectionality. Dorothy Allison makes a more explicit turn towards activism and agency. The texts discussed here excavate, describe, and avow the poor Southern white's role in the history of racism as well as its role in the future of racial justice. As the conclusion will demonstrate, Grit Lit has expanded its reach, output, and subject matter. It has also made a more formal turn to activism, particularly when it comes to environmentalism, in addition to raising pressing questions related to new stereotypes and the possible romanticization of white trash culture. How exactly race will figure into this expansion remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF GRIT LIT AND WHITE TRASH REPRESENTATION

"Blast Grit Lit for fetishizing and commodifying the Rough South, and bless Grit Lit for giving voice to the voiceless"

—Vernon et al.

An enduring legacy of Grit Lit is the rough and abrasive portrayal of the white trash as subjects rather than objects, and the multi-faceted approaches Grit Lit makes to genre conventions, literary movements, and aesthetic modes. This project has demonstrated how, beginning with Crews's soul-searching life writing, which laid the thematic and aesthetic foundation for later waves of Grits, the exploration of identity through genre blossomed into an intersectional understanding that perhaps the best way to understand southern poor white is through its relationships with other marginalized identities against which they are typically set against, while acknowledging their culpability in the continued oppression of these minorities. Indeed, while willful isolation and a lament of lost culture runs throughout it, the subtext and literary-popular trajectory of Grit Lit show the necessity of crossing borders and exploring liminality in order to effectively find its voice and artistic agency.

Grit Lit is experiencing another, perhaps its biggest, expansion. This expansion is both formal and thematic. The literary output has moved away from self-reckoning and towards either the (positive) turn towards activism or the (negative) romanticization of the poor white subject. While activism and romanticization were features of the earlier texts, they were not as central or definitive. Whereas for earlier texts the medium was the message, increasingly for recent Grit Lit, the message is the message. In her fiction, Dorothy Allison, a proud and vocal activist, focused more on Bone's process of identity formation through her interactions with various other identities than she did on specific issues for remedying social ills. For her and other authors, it's

hard to fight for change before you know who you are or how to productively express yourself. With a lot of previous identity groundwork laid, more recent texts like Ann Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007) have more explicit, actionable goals, such as the end of mountaintop removal. Furthermore, while romanticizing the poor white subject has always been an unavoidable side effect in Grit Lit, recent works are far more shameless in using Grit Lit as an uncomplicated container for stereotypical representations and far less concerned with the repercussions of their portrayals.

If earlier authors looked in the mirror, current authors and creators look out of the window. Armed with a still-complicated but better-theorized identity, and now that Grit Lit has found a place in the larger popular culture, how is that identity represented by its artists and perceived by its consumers, a great deal of which, no doubt, simply enjoy the titillating depictions of a foreign and usually unsympathetic culture? When it comes to the thematic legacy and political-cultural applications of Grit Lit, there has been a fork in the road. On the one hand, Grit Lit faces an urgent confrontation with what Zackary Vernon calls the "romanticizing of the rough south," whereby the content and aesthetic brushstrokes of Grit Lit perpetuate a negative representation of the poor, a repackaging but continuation of white trash objectification.

Zackary Vernon's article, "Romanticizing the Rough South: Contemporary Cultural Nakedness and the Rise of Grit Lit," airs several of the pressing anxieties that come with the popularization of Grit Lit. Vernon warns against "poor white exploitation," the fetishization of white trash authenticity as a last remaining vestige (ironically) of American heterogeneity. For the "culturally naked," residents of a late capitalist, culturally homogenous (post)South and beyond, the roughness of Grit Lit provides an anti-romanticism that has itself become

romanticized.[180] Vernon points to writers like Tom Franklin and Ron Rash as authors who yearn for the authenticity of a past fast fading or already faded. Vernon points to the disappearing speckled trout in Ron Rash, signifiers of a similarly disappearing culture. The most detrimental side effect of writing these "dueling hardships" is that if we romanticize, "then we don't address and confront the social and economic problems faced by those down-and-out southerners who have become the principal subjects of the genre" (91). Moreover, Grit Lit reflects what Vernon sees as a post-civil rights anxiety about being associated with the South and its racial legacy; thus, they sought new but still authentic ontological means of identifying with the region (82).

Vernon's arguments are urgent and valid, particularly in the midst of the latest expansion of Grit Lit, and I will raise some texts that problematically participate in this type of fetishism. But this flattening and ultimately stereotyping trend he identifies is precisely what Grit Lit sought to challenge. The most recent generation of writers, for a variety of reasons and through a variety of techniques, moves away from Grit Lit's history of being self-aware of, bothered by, and haunted by authenticity. While earlier writers no doubt mourn the growing cultural nakedness of the South, they are more concerned with exploring their own identity rather than prescribing their culture on others; the anxieties Vernon articulates have been there from the start, as Chapter one argued. Further, while the complicated racial discourse in Grit Lit is important to note, and indeed I have noted Grit Lit's participation in the sidestepping of race, singling out nostalgia as Grit Lit's primary directive ignores Brown's, Allison's, Grimsley's, Bass's, and Franklin's active engagement with racial discourse and history. Finally, while Rash's

[180] Here, Vernon uses the word "naked" to describe the effects of late capitalism and cultural homogenization. It is interesting to compare this usage with Crews's and Allison's, who use "naked" to describe the personally revealing, exposing processes of writing. Also worth comparing to Vernon's use of the word, Crews labels as "naked" those Americans who seem particularly culturally untethered, like the outcasts and eccentrics that populate his fiction and journalism.

disappearing speckled trout symbolically speaks to this same nostalgic imperative, it also ignores the fact that the speckled trout *are* disappearing, and Rash's fiction is engaged in a relatively recent ecological activist turn in Grit Lit.

ACTIVISM

Several recent Grit Lit authors have taken as their primary directive, not nostalgia—though that is often a means to this end—but ecological activism. The South is often associated with pastoral literature and unspoiled nature. When poor whites are subjects, the South is held up as a destructive example of extraction, overuse, and exploitation, as in James Agee and Erskine Caldwell.[181] Indeed, the early work of Harry Crews also models this type of pessimistic ecology in *Childhood*. Unlike the authors who present rural life as a pastoral ideal, Crews rejects the bucolic, saying instead: "the rural life, as I knew and experienced it in childhood, is, without exception, dreadful" (Bledsoe 57).[182] While acknowledging the natural beauty of his environment, he also sets up an antagonistic relationship between the sharecroppers and the land they farm. It is not a harmonious dance; it is a violent fight.[183]

But ecology as an issue in Grit Lit has evolved from lamentation. A theoretical text that is useful here is Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). "Slow violence" is the violence that occurs gradually and out of sight.[184] Environmentalism of the poor

[181] Both authors, Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Caldwell in most of his writing (but most famously in novels like *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*), describe (in starkly different terms) the environmental and cultural fallout from the exploitation of poor whites and the land they work (but don't usually own).
[182] Bucolic representation sprung up with the urbanization of ancient Greece; it's innately nostalgic and romantic (see Berger).
[183] A fight, it should be noted, in which the sharecropper nevertheless recognizes their own powerlessness to nature (recall the negative reaction in *Childhood* when Crews curses the sun).
[184] In the article "Slow Violence" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nixon succinctly defines slow violence thusly: "We are accustomed to conceiving violence as immediate and explosive, erupting into instant, concentrated visibility. But we need to revisit our assumptions and consider the relative invisibility of slow violence. I mean a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries. . . . Emphasizing the temporal dispersion of slow violence can change

refers to the people lacking resources to both combat or reap the benefits of environmental exploitation, who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Since the poor are often so closely associated with the environment, and since they are largely denied the resources necessary to combat the incremental violence of ecological destruction, they are among the most impacted. Moreover, since environmentalism has primarily been the work of the elite and the problems facing the poor are often quite urgent, as opposed to the seeming uneventfulness of slow violence, the poor are less likely to realize the urgency of environmental issues. Finally, neoliberalism is a system that values fast speeds, creates a gulf between rich and poor, and is a covert form of violence that is a catalyst for ecological destruction and cover-up—what Nixon calls "greenwashing." I bring up Nixon's work because Grit Lit's approach to the environment has changed significantly from Harry Crews to the present. Simply put, Crews demonstrates a parasitic, antagonistic relationship between the land and the poor. Who cares about poisoning the land when people are hungry? Later writers such as Janisse Ray, Ann Pancake, and Ron Rash present an ecological vision that is more aware of the poor whites' intimate and fraught relationship with the environment, the symptoms and effects of slow violence, and the more urgent environmental issues facing the poor South.

Janisse Ray's memoir, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, tells the story of being raised poor in a roadside junkyard in the middle of the longleaf pine forests of the wiregrass region (the same area of Harry Crews). Ray's nature writing switches between snippets of her life—including her sometimes mentally disabled father, woods-dwelling grandfather, and the wayward vagabonds that stumbled into their junkyard—with profiles of endangered or threatened animals and foliage. By the end of the memoir, the two things begin to merge, with her poor white

---

the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social crises, like domestic abuse or post-traumatic stress, but it is particularly pertinent to the strategic challenges of environmental calamities."

childhood taking on some of the Edenic language of the woods, and the nature around her taking on some of the blue-collar resilience of her humble beginnings. Far from an antagonistic relationship, Ray argues for a poor white identity that is based in nature. She mirrors the loss of culture found in other Grit Lit texts with the disappearance of the native environment. She thus converts what sometimes comes across as conservative whining into environmental activism, a call-to-arms for poor people to protect their land.

The Grit Lit fiction of Pancake and Rash, meanwhile, apply that ecology-based identity to moments of acute environmental destruction. Rash's *Above the Waterfall* (2016) explores the relationship between Southern class and environment. The novel features an eco-terrorist, a park ranger, and a rural community stuck between corporate interests and the damages of the meth trade. The novel also suggests that despite the cultivation of ecological consciousness, contemporary cultural issues, such as the meth trade, present a clear and present danger to both the environment and poor Southern culture. An ecological consideration suggests a history of crippling the land that connects it thematically with earlier southern literature such as Caldwell's. Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) focuses on the destructive effects of mountain-top removal in Appalachia.[185] Pancake explores the obstacles that face poor, rural environmentalism, the limited agency available to the affected population, and the day-to-day impact of those most directly impacted but seldom discussed in contemporary environmental discourse.

[185] One of the many major environmental repercussions of mountaintop removal is the covering of small springtime streams. "These streams, often no more than a foot wide, teem with microscopic, insect and animal life that is the foundation of the forest and river food chains and biodiversity." Once removed, the "ecological fallout extends far beyond the edge of the valley fill, into the surrounding forest and the larger perennial streams and rivers down the mountain" (McQuaid).

ROMANTICIZATION

Yet the central concern of Vernon's, romanticizing the rough south, cannot be ignored, and indeed, grows ever more concerning. Vernon highlights *A Land More Kind Than Home* (2013), the critically acclaimed debut novel by Wiley Cash, as a prime example of how brutality-as-authenticity devalues actual sociocultural concerns among the culture it fetishizes.[186] And while authors like Franklin use popular genres to unpack and re-approach assumptions, others do just the opposite. Brian Panowich's *Bull Mountain* (2015) is an engrossing hardboiled mountain crime saga spanning the outlaw Burroughs family's movement from moonshining to marijuana farming to the production and distribution of meth. As the dust jacket advertises: "*Bull Mountain* is a story about family, and the lengths men will go to protect it, honor it, or in some cases, destroy it." The novel features the usual nuts and bolts of Grit Lit—violence, drug abuse, landscape, family, disappearing culture and modernity—but many of the ideas that were groundbreaking in previous Grit Lit—poor white hubris, the complicated relationship between poor whites and blacks, relationships with the landscape, addiction, and disability, among others—become in this text bits of undeveloped, uncomplicated narrative tropes or character fodder.[187]

Indeed, in Matthew McBride's *A Swollen Red Sun* (2014), another hardboiled white trash thriller, the hallmarks of Grit Lit ultimately end up reifying the good country people vs. white

[186] Specifically, Vernon argues that "[a]lthough this novel was hailed by critics and other writers, it reads like a pastiche of antiquated southern narratives . . . the mountain hollers of *A Land More Kind Than Home* are populated with hardscrabble tobacco farmers and fanatical serpent-wielding Pentecostals. This may sound like fitting subject matter for a southern novel, but such characters no longer reflect the reality of the modern South. Instead, Cash relies on regional stereotypes that, judging from how wildly successful the novel has been, are still desirable to publishers and readers" (90).

[187] More often, though, reviews mischaracterize these moments as original, deep interrogations. As one *L.A. Book Review* piece lauds: "These tough guys of the American South, these modern-day cowboys, have been worn to the marrow by history. They've become twitchy, incapable of bearing the weight of their sins and the dozens that were perpetrated by those that came before" (Colón). But these readings ignore the nuance of earlier authors and generalize (and potentially normalize) the violent, apocalyptic representation of poor whites of the rural South.

trash distinction so stringently combatted in earlier generations of Grit Lit. The central villains of the novel are the meth-cooking Pogue clan, more of a cult than a family, made disabled and villainous through "generations of degenerations" (64). And while the novel humanizes an ultimately heroic meth addict and seeks to empathize with the recent meth epidemic in rural America—"who smokes crank? Not just the shit bums . . . it was blue-collar people who rolled their sleeves up and went to work every day. It was a white-collar banker" (109)—it maintains that people like the Pogues are always a step below, as one poor white says to a Pogue: "don't try 'n confuse your own white trash existence with mine" (97).[188] Reinforcing genetic explanations of this degenerate white trash class, the new distinction between some sort of "good" and "bad" poor, participates in the same taxonomies used earlier to support eugenics, scientific racism, and natural class hierarchies, as well as the maintenance of the Southern caste system. At its worst, romanticizing Grit Lit retrofits the content formerly used to combat the same socio-cultural paradigms it once again reinforces; the literature fuels the fire it was trying to put out.

THE EVOLUTION OF POOR WHITE REPRESENTATION

Perhaps for the reasons Vernon argues, the fetishization of authenticity in an increasingly "culturally naked" America, the rough South aesthetic can be seen beyond literature mediums. The evolution of white trash representation in media beyond literature brings issues usually associated with a niche literary subgenre to audiences of more popular products. Television shows, film, and comic books increasingly make use of poor white characters and settings in more dynamic ways than previously. In the past, the most widely disseminated vehicles for

[188] Mentioned in the intro, McBride also included a disclaimer in the novel's acknowledgements that people in his town are mostly good, honest people, further highlighting that he's writing about the "bad" poor, a violent outlier that gets the brunt of cultural attention.

white trash/hillbilly representation -- hick sitcoms and comic strips -- were static by nature. Otis did not change over the course of *The Andy Griffith Show*, nor the Clampetts in *The Beverly Hillbillies* or Little Abner Yokum in *Li'l Abner*. Changes in the entertainment-industrial complex facilitate the evolution of poor white representation. The rise of independent filmmaking in the 1990s allowed filmmakers to produce content not usually condoned by the studio system. For example, modern seriality in television allows for the three-dimensionality and character development important to these more dynamic examples of representation. This is further compounded in the streaming era, with the explosion of televised content, the increasingly compartmentalized, personalized content tailored to appeal to increasingly specific market segments creates spaces.

Sometimes, this expansion compounds anxieties over the re-stereotyping of the white trash, and the familiar caricatures are similarly expanding, particularly in the recent genre of reality television.[189] Fortunately, a number of examples offer nuanced portrayals, a representation that would be at home in works by earlier Grit Lit authors. The comic book series *Southern Bastards*, for example, begins as though it is exploiting the rough South setting. It follows a no-nonsense ex-marine, Earl Tubb, as he returns to his small Alabama hometown to find it overrun by the criminal empire of the local high school coach. With righteous anger (and wielding a tree branch), the protagonist sets about rectifying the damage done while he was away. But in a surprising turn, the series kills off the initial protagonist, choosing instead to explore the perspectives of other characters, including the antagonist, Coach Boss, his henchmen, a religious zealot woodsman, and Earl Tubb's vengeful daughter, the African-American Roberta

[189] Examples abound: *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Swamp People*, and *Call of the Wildman* (featuring "The Turtleman," who is from my area of Kentucky; he is a source of local pride and shame).

Tubb, who negotiates racism as well as her Southern identity. The television series *Justified* (2010-2015) also subverts stereotypical expectations after presenting the series main antagonist, Boyd Crowder, as a one-dimensional neo-Nazi before developing his character in the subsequent seasons, showing his education and maturation, until the line between antagonist, anti-hero, and protagonist are as complicated as the problems in Harlan County, Kentucky.[190]

And the flood of popular, far-reaching depictions of the white trash continues to build. Independent filmmakers Jeff Nichols, David Gordon Green, and Billy Bob Thornton much earlier, continue the Grit Lit tradition of making high art with low culture, with many of their films garnering considerable praise and featuring big names performers like Matthew McConaughey, Nicholas Cage, Michael Shannon, and Reese Witherspoon.[191] Recent Grit Lit authors, such as Donald Ray Pollock and Frank Bill, have had their work adapted by Netflix, whose colossal subscriber base will provide perhaps the largest audience of any other rough South texts. Also produced by Netflix, Hollywood stalwart Ron Howard's adaptation of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* capitalizes on the success of Vance's popular and timely (especially during the 2016 presidential election) memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* for a broader audience. While not always confined to the South, "prestige" television, noted for its dark tones, round characters, and complex, long-term narratives, has shown a consistent appetite for white trash crime with shows like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), and *Ozark* (2017-). While in most cases these recent examples are, like earlier Grit Lit texts, more nuanced and sympathetic in their treatments than the majority of popular culture representations of poor whites in American history, in the aggregate the sheer volume of examples reinforce the unnuanced

[190] *Southern Bastards* and *Justified* are among the most acclaimed examples in their respective mediums.
[191] See Nichols's films *Mud* (2012) and *Shotgun Stories* (2007), David Gordon Green's 2013 adaptation of Larry Brown's *Joe*, and Billy Bob Thornton's immensely respected and frequently parodied *Sling Blade* (1996).

association of poor whites with crime and violence, depictions based somewhat in reality but exaggerated by their consistency.

Of course, a major distinction between these texts and those by the Grit Lit authors discussed in this project is self-identification. Being able to claim a poor white identity, however unstable and fraught it may be, is a foundational feature of Grit Lit because it allows that identity to fashion a voice for itself. The "authenticity" of newer representations is harder to nail down, if it's there at all. Billy Bob Thornton grew up in Arkansas with no electricity or plumbing ("Billy Bob Thornton"). Jason Aaron explicitly identifies with the culture he portrays in *Southern Bastards.* Indeed, he precedes the comic by noting some of the same complicated feelings towards region and culture that mark most Grit Lit texts, including an uneasy pride in his working-class genealogy:

> I love the south.
>
> The south also scares the living shit out of me.
>
> I was born in Alabama. In a dray country, in a town called Jasper . . . My grandfather was a Baptist preacher and a coal miner. My great grandfather died of rabies. My great great grandfather once stabbed a man to death in an argument over some sheep
> . . .
> I love being from the south.
>
> But I don't live there anymore. And I don't plan on ever moving back.

But other others' white trash bonafides are uncertain or nonexistent. Part of this has to do with the mediums themselves, which rely on more than a single person to shape the representation. For film adaptations, a single author's perspective gets filtered through the filmmaker, crew, and whatever producer oversight a particular project has. Long-form television has the added dimensions of responding to viewer response, changing writer's rooms, shifting showrunners,

and longer running studio influence. The ability to self-identify in these contexts is rendered practically impossible. This project has shown how authenticity is a construct and a contested source of anxiety for the artists, but it is a productive problem, one that helps keep their representations from straying into caricature or stereotypes. With varying degrees of white trash self-identification, new representations are better stewards of poor white culture while others use it to enforce usual stereotypes, elite and self-serving representations.

FUTURE STUDIES

Much work is left to be done with Grit Lit and white trash representation. While this project has touched on a variety of topics briefly, its focus on fashioning a poor white identity via genre and intersectionality left many of these topics undeveloped or entirely. Future studies of Grit Lit, therefore, should carry on these important topics. I discuss how Grit Lit confronts and subverts traditional conceptions of Southern literature and Southern studies more broadly, but how does Grit Lit interact with contemporary Southern literature? Especially as monuments fall and the South continues its (hopefully productive) confrontation with racial history, how does Grit Lit aid, if it does, these changes? A major feature of Grit Lit was processing poor Southern culture in a neoliberal, globalizing, culturally homogenized society; how does it process the era of Internet and social media? Was Grit Lit a passing phase, the product of a single moment in time and space, or is it flexible enough to engage new times and spaces? A deeper look at the relationship between Grit Lit and reading class, between the culture Grit Lit writes about the elite audience that consumers it. Most importantly, if the Grit Lit examined here began a liberalizing process of acknowledging and incorporating difference in its self-conception, how does future Grit Lit expand upon, evolve, or undo this work? With the recent increase in scholarly attention and the

new wave of authors operating under the Grit Lit label, such questions become even more urgent in this particularly contested historical moment.

While this project has focused on Grit Lit as one part of the larger history of poor white representation, there are countless other representations that deserve critical attention. The aforementioned boom in white trash reality television, for example, requires analysis, especially since scholars have noted how reality television creates disciplined, neoliberal citizens within systems of global capital and surveillance (Grindstaff; Ouellette and Hay), as do the ways that social media, the fragmentation and so-called democratization of content affect the production, consumption, and reception of white trash representation. Especially in the post-Trump era, future studies in the social sciences should work to address the sociological and economic factors influencing poor white ideology, things like austerity economics, global finance, and the military industrial-complex. And while I have tried to historicize throughout this project, future work would benefit from a more in depth contextualization of recent American history in relation to poor white attitudes and politics—wars in the Middle East, gun control and abortion discourse, debates over healthcare, prison reform, and social programs.

Two areas I want to highlight here are non-Southern representations of poor whites and representations of poor whites by non-white authors. As far back as 1994, Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* explored the dynamic between a degenerate family of poor whites and their new middle-class neighbors. More recently, a slew of authors has cropped up in areas strikingly similar in circumstance and culture to the poor white South. Bonnie Jo Campbell, for example, writes about the poor whites of rural Michigan, Donald Ray Pollock writes about rural Ohio, and Benjamin Whitmer writers about rural Colorado. These authors bring cultural concerns once restricted to an isolated Southern enclave to a wider, national audience. They

demonstrate how, instead of occurring at a comfortable distance from the reading class, issues like meth production and addiction happen right down the road.

Furthermore, opening up the analysis of the poor white, Southern and otherwise, to other voices, such as black and indigenous writers, would facilitate the kind of cross-racial alliance Grit Lit begins to envision. How do these authors conceptualize poor white culture and characters in their work? With specific regard to the relationship between blacks and poor whites in the South, future work should explore the ways poor whites complicate and enrich discourse of black literature's engagement with whiteness. How do black representations of landless whites impact analyses of whiteness by black authors, which are often based in ideas of materialism and property? Some examples include the character of Amy Denver ("whitegirl") in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the "white crackers" of Zora Neale Hurston's Seraph on the Suwanee, and other "white life" writing by black authors in the South. And while the function of the white trash figure throughout Southern history has either been as an agent of white supremacy or as an example of biological and racial degeneration, how is that figure employed in twentieth and twenty-first century black literature? Amy Denver's interaction with Sethe in *Beloved*, for example, is a fascinating and illuminating exchange, one that departs from previous uses of poor whites in black literature.[192] Sethe names her daughter after the shoeless white trash woman that helped her deliver her baby while she was escaping slavery. Such work would provide unique and urgent interventions in black literary studies, whiteness studies, and the continuing studies of Southern white trash.

[192] April Elizabeth Thompson analyzes how black authors, such as Charles Chestnutt, have used poor whites as literary devices to embody "all of the racism of and antagonism of the white race" and how the stereotype of poor white trash can be useful for a disenfranchised people (63-64).

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