

12-2014

Trashed: The Myth of the Southern Poor White

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Trashed: The Myth of the Southern Poor White

Trashed: The Myth of the Southern Poor White

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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December 2014
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Abstract

The fact of class has been a powerful tool in the process of identity formation, particularly in the American South, which has been viewed as a region apart from the national imaginary. To counter this exclusion, Southerners have often relied on stereotypes. One of the most prevalent and tragic of these is the stereotype of poor white trash, a construction that has been utilized to insist upon elite white Southerners' exceptionalism and innocence and to assert their rightful place in American historiography. While it is difficult to calculate their level of success, as perceptions of the region have varied through the decades, the destructive power of white trash cannot be disputed.

This work utilizes a number of texts to demonstrate the myriad ways in which white trash, a relatively static construction of undesirable attitudes and beliefs since the antebellum era, has nonetheless been adapted to promote disparate agendas. At the same time, I explore the impact of the epithet on poor whites themselves, examining the stereotype's deleterious effects upon the economically disadvantaged and politically powerless.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe uses the threat of upper-class contamination by white trash to expose the ills of slavery. Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrates the displacement of the nation's long and shameful history of African-American disfranchisement onto white trash. In his Snopes trilogy, William Faulkner attempts to negotiate Southern past and present through white trash's intrusion on civilized society. Erskine Caldwell tries to shed light on poor white oppression, but his *Tobacco Road* is too steeped in stereotype to prove his assertions. In *Deliverance*, James Dickey fashions white trash monsters to exacerbate middle-class fears of poor white mobility, and Harry Crews's *A Childhood: The*

Biography of a Place examines the poor white's initial resistance but ultimate resignation to the limiting functions of the stereotype.

A hopeful shift in poor white depictions occurs in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Amy Greene's *Bloodroot*, two works which seek to confront the stereotype and call for a reevaluation of the beliefs and practices that have suppressed poor whites for centuries.

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Acknowledgements

Over the past four years I have received a wealth of support and advice from my dissertation committee. It is with sincere gratitude that I acknowledge Dr. Susan Marren, Dr. Lisa Hinrichsen, and Dr. Robert Cochran for their direction as I moved from abstract concept to firmly developed conviction.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, David and June Thompson, and my husband, Paul Young, with all of my gratitude and love.

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Introduction: White Trashing

In a scene from “Appalachian ER,” a recurring skit on *Saturday Night Live*, a heavily pregnant young woman with missing teeth walks into a hospital complaining of bowel problems. When told she is expecting, the woman insists with an over-the-top twang that she just has gas. Moments later, a second patient, this time a heavy-lidded and equally toothless man in overalls, comes in to have a matchbox car removed from his rectum. In a comic drawl, the man asserts that he has accidentally sat on the foreign object—again. The live studio audience chuckles (dutifully or genuinely?) for the thousandth time at these worn-out stereotypes, but it is not just the punchlines they are laughing at: hillbillies, rednecks, yokels—white trash—are inherently funny. But the humor is foregrounded in an ugly bias against this massive lower class: poor whites are naturally stupid, promiscuous, wily, and perverted. All that is missing from this episode is for the pregnant woman’s brother to step in and claim paternity.

What this scene and many others share is their revelation of a society that has become completely desensitized to the detrimental effects of the poor white stereotype. For many Americans, in fact, this is what a typical Southerner looks and acts like, and this is due to the South’s obsession with creating myths about its history. So strong has been the influence of Southern myth-making that fiction has become reality, and all lower class whites can be defined by a set of undesirable and frequently humorous traits. But how did this occur?

In order to understand this process, it is important to discover the ways in which the white trash stereotype developed. Americans began to construct myths almost before there was an America. When those first settlers set out to create a nation free of foreign rule, they were beset with many difficult questions. As they began to establish a framework of law and order with which to govern the burgeoning country, one of the most important questions, one that

would guide their actions and influence their decisions, was: What kind of history are we making? America's Founding Fathers wrestled daily not only with the impacts of their decisions in their own times, but also with the ways in which their words and deeds would be interpreted by generations of future Americans.

And so it was with the American South, which would be double-plagued by its status as both within and outside of the nation-at-large. In *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (2005), James C. Cobb notes that even in the nation's infancy, the role of the South in American identity formation was relegated to a state of Otherness, with the Northern states defining themselves in opposition to the South and claiming that their own superiority made them the true representatives of the American spirit (14). By the late 1700s, writings by William Byrd II, Thomas Jefferson, Dr. John Fothergill, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and Royall Tyler had established the South as an inferior national space, one populated by lazy, indulgent, ignorant, and frequently criminal ne'er-do-wells, and during this era, Northern writers often "employed a first-person/third-person 'we/they' dichotomy in describing Southerners" (*Away* 14). Indeed, "[t]he inclination to present New England as both the moral and intellectual center of the new nation was a recurrent theme in early writing about the American character" (*Away* 15). This focus on sectionalizing the nation, on sustaining "'a privileged national identity' by consigning most of the undesirable traits exhibited by Americans to the 'imagined space called the South'" (Jansson qtd in *Away* 3), set Southerners apart from the rest of the nation and excluded them from the process of American historiography. Southerners had little choice, then, but to create a history of their own, and this became especially difficult during the South's dark days of slavery and secession. The South had been forced to contend with Northern criticism of its peculiar institution for close to a century, but by the Civil War, the history of America was

indisputably the history of the North, and “the North’s military triumph [in the war] further secured its role as the true symbol of American society” (*Away* 4). For the North, control of dominant American history afforded

the comforting illusion that slavery, that blatant anomaly in republican and egalitarian America, had never been central to American culture but...only a marginal institution confined to the cultural peripheries of the colonial British American world. (*Away* 4)

The North, it seemed, was also involved in the process of myth-making.

When the strife between the two regions became impossible to bear at the start of the Civil War, the South turned its eyes away from the impression it would make on subsequent generations and began to develop a past as well, a tradition to cling to and a rallying cry for battle. For Southerners, the only way to develop that past—one that would work to repair its damaged reputation and posit a hopeful view of its future—was through myth. C.Vann Woodard explains that “[e]very self-conscious group of any size fabricates myths about its past: about its origins, its mission, its righteousness, its benevolence, its general superiority” (12). And the South did this with a vengeance; for 100 years it had labored under the interpretative historiography of an alien and hostile region, and it immediately set out to rewrite what it saw as the gross inaccuracies and biased depictions of the South by the Northern construction. Vann Woodard cites six important myths created by the South from the antebellum era to industrialization: the “Cavalier legend as the myth of origin”; “[t]he Plantation Legend of grace and elegance”; “a benevolent and paternalistic slavery system”; “Reconstruction as the common historic grievance”; “the infallible myth of unity”; and “the hallowed memory of the Redeemers” (*Burden* 13). The abundance of Southern myths, many of which developed concurrently, clearly

demonstrates the South's bitterness and resentment toward the North and its interpretation of the embattled region. The Southern reaction to the myth of inferiority produced a set of legends that would not only assert Southern equality, but total supremacy.

Each of these myths has been refuted or at least called into question by contemporary scholars, but the fact that they are false constructs has no effect on their relevance and importance in the formation of a distinctly Southern identity. Just as the North created myths of exceptionalism to further its agenda, so the South followed suit to create an ideology that celebrated the hallmarks of Southern life and culture. Scholars have proven these myths to be false, and yet many in the South believed and continue to believe them, which highlights the myths' privileged role in Southern historiography; these myths offered strong opposition to the national image of the South, and demonstrated Southerners' desires to rewrite that image. Belief in myths also demonstrates the power of the need Southerners felt to define themselves and to establish their place in the nation. True or false, Southerners readily accepted and perpetuated the stories they told themselves about their past, and contemporary Southern ideology continues to support the notion that many of these myths still remain part of the South's vision of itself.

Because these myths have been disproved, it would be easy to categorize them as unhealthy or unwanted relics, and the current critical attitude towards them is understandably and justifiably unfriendly. But we must acknowledge that Southern myths were useful in a number of ways. First, they offered a unifying vision of a region that was fraught with great disparity and frequently in danger of collapse. Second, they served as a balm for the bitterness and desperation of defeat after the Civil War. Third, they provided hope for the discouraged region during Reconstruction. Fourth, they encouraged a new vision of the South and ushered in an age of modernism and industrial progress. Through all of this, the myths propelled Southerners ever-

forward by providing a model to which they could aspire and by fostering an interest in growth, empowerment, and achievement. For these reasons, the construction of Southern myths must be allowed to stand as a highly beneficial endeavor to promote a successful Southern society—for one very specific group of Southerners, at least.

Unfortunately, we must also face the realization that “Southern society” was in itself a myth. When the South began to weave its fictions, the privilege fell to an elite group of upper class white males largely removed from mainstream Southern life. Having learned nothing from the exclusionary practices of Northern historiography, they committed the same mistakes and set about creating myths that ignored those outside of their own small community. When all of a region’s interpretive power is given to or taken by a select few, as was the case with the North’s dominance over the South, the effect is almost always to corrupt those at the top and to disfranchise everyone else; the Southern elites fell easily into this trap by claiming an exceptional status among the Southern masses. Because of this, their myths not only dismissed a large portion of Southern society, but actually disparaged them. For one slice of Southern society, African-Americans, this exclusion simply continued the Southern practice of disfranchisement. Many of those in the North who claimed to be most highly critical of slavery were not interested in African-American enfranchisement, no matter what they may have claimed in public, on the political platform, or in their literature. Across the nation, there was no safe space for African-Americans to freely contemplate their history, no place in which they could hope to be included. To be sure, this did not prevent them from writing, but a century after Emancipation, African-Americans were still struggling; it would take all of their efforts to finally effect a status change during the Civil Rights Movement.

Another group that lacked any avenues for representation was poor whites. Poverty, lack of education and trade skills, sickness and inadequate medical resources, landlessness, and virtually no social status had rendered them helpless during the antebellum era. The common belief about poor whites during this period, a fiction that has persisted in some form or other until today, was that they were

redemptioners and convict servants...It is generally held that they were uniformly shiftless or criminal, and that these characters, being inherent in the germ plasm, were handed on to their progeny, with the result that the whole body of them continually sank lower and lower in the social scale. (Cash 6)

It is from the poor whites' fictive origins that the myth of white trash first began to form into a proscriptive list of undesirable characteristics, and established the process of classifying the entire category of disadvantaged whites as trash. The myth of poor white trash was born.

In his work on Southern myth, F. Garvin Davenport, Jr. borrows Henry Nash Smith's definition of myth in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), which understands myth as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (5). Davenport asserts that myth is not fiction; rather, "it simply denotes one particular kind of perception" (5). While this definition goes a long way toward explaining the ease with which elite Southern historiographers could stereotype an entire class of poor whites, it is also problematic because "perception" is too easily confused with "fact." Indeed, if "perception" is not "fiction," how, then, can it not be "fact"? It was only through the perception of African-Americans as inferior, for example, that the nation was able to accept slavery for such an extended period of time. Another unsettling aspect of equating myth or perception with non-fiction is that it all too readily excuses the behaviors that result from it; elite whites, then,

become in no way culpable for the even unintentional oppression of the lower classes, and whites can offer a mistaken interpretation to justify slavery and African-American oppression. The notion of perception can also create troubling obstacles in the search for truth (however troublesome that term may be). If myth as perception is neither fiction nor reality, how do we counter it except through another myth? And then, how do we know which perception, if neither is fiction but both are incompatible, is true? And because the poor white stereotype utilizes a myth that places them in opposition to all elite whites, will our efforts at refuting that myth require the total condemnation of those who benefited from it? That we cannot answer these questions illustrates the problem with the assertion that myth is simply perception; as a faulty line of reasoning, the myth-perception theory offers no methods for understanding stereotypes and their insidious utilization by those in power, or their deleterious effects on the stereotyped group.

It is for these reasons that we must revise our definition of myth. In its place, I will argue that myth can be a fiction manipulated by those in power to promote their own agendas and to protect their privileged positions. My definition of myth offers a model for understanding the ways in which controlling a culture's interpretation of its history can simultaneously dictate its future. Over time, "perception" becomes reality, and nowhere is this clearer than in the example of the poor white stereotype, which I will prove to be a manipulative and calculated creation by elite white Southerners to justify their privileged status; displace undesirable attitudes and ideologies; rationalize the denial of aid; and protect the economic, social, and political system that favors the upper class by asserting a causal relationship between material conditions and self-worth. Once a set of hasty and faulty generalizations about lower class whites, "white trash"

is now an accepted reality that is so much a part of our national ideology that we rarely question it.

But now is the time. The South's unique way of interpreting and relating history and its obsession with myth construction has been detrimental to those non-elites who have lacked the privilege or opportunity to counter those myths by relating their own experiences. This argument is based on three facts. First, poor whites have never been given an accurate treatment in the South's history, and each of my chapters will highlight at least one example, from the eugenics movement, to the hookworm campaign, to the scapegoating of poor whites as the racist instigators in the rise of African-American lynching, to the disfranchising techniques that wrote the poor white as wholly responsible for his poverty, deranged and criminal, and completely beyond redemption. Second, poor whites have always been stereotyped as undesirable and/or uncivilized, as I will demonstrate through *Justified's* Boyd Crowder in Chapter One, Charles Chesnut's McBane in Chapter Two, Caldwell's Lester family in Chapter Three, and Dickey's hillbillies in Chapter Four. Third, the all-encompassing stereotype used to signify this Otherness is "white trash," which makes its insidious way through my entire work, sometimes coming from the mouths of the poor whites themselves. Fourth, over time, the strength of the stereotype and its near-universal legitimating led poor whites to accept or even incorporate it because they lacked the agency to change it or resist its implications, as evidenced by the tortuous formations of identity in the work of Harry Crews in Chapter Four and Dorothy Allison in Chapter Five. This type of incorporation has become a kind of self-fulfilled prophecy, in which many poor whites see themselves through the lens of the stereotype and act accordingly. By adopting and enacting the stereotype, they have been forced to participate in their own silencing and subjugation. It is only recently, in fact, that poor white testimony has begun to receive attention

by scholars, even though the myths that created the white trash stereotype have long since been called into question.

If we are ever going to put this stereotype to rest—and I believe we can and should—we must understand why it continues to assert a vice-like hold on our national consciousness, particularly in light of the fact that other stereotypes—those against African-Americans and women, for example—have begun to wane. This inquiry is directly tied to an exploration of Southern myth. While the process of Southern myth-making has been thoroughly treated by scholars, I want to broaden that scope to study the impact of myth on the Southern poor white, a figure who has not received enough critical attention. While it is clear that Southern myth-making has damaged those outside of the elite minority, there is still work to be done; it is vitally important to look into the specific damages that resulted from hegemonic creations of the past upon the poor white, who has always been subject to those creations. To achieve this end, we must begin with the Southern myth's first attempts to define the poor white, and follow it as it takes hold and dominates Southern identity. This study will also examine the struggles for poor white self-representation that began late in the 20th century, and follow poor white writers as they began the tenuous process of writing their history for themselves. My goal here, then, is to study the ways that the poor white stereotype began as a justification for elite slaveholding whites' claims to regional and social superiority; the political and social functions they serve as a way to deny federal aid programs and assistance to the lower class; the effects they have on the poor white community, as the myth of poor white inferiority has worked to indoctrinate the nation into an acceptance of poverty as a deserved condition and a marker of undesirability; and finally, with a broad understanding of the stereotype's role in the process of Southern myth-making, to offer alternative representations of poor white experience using emerging poor white voices to effect

the first counter-steps to battle what has become a disastrous tradition of mercenary poor white subjugation.

The Southern Poor White: A History

Initially, the Southern poor white was like most other Southerners, with perhaps the exception of the rare and legendary members of the Virginia Tidewater dynasties. Like the rest of the colonists, he came to America with very little and sought to better himself in the virgin land. As the nation began to take shape, he remained a part of what we now think of as the typical colonial experience, and when the Northern myth first arose, and Southerners were held as inferior to the New England colonists, he was still considered a part of the in-group. The North's claim to representative superiority did not initially distinguish between classes of whites in the South; all Southerners were lumped together and derided for their perceived laziness and lack of ambition, and their social customs were seen as backwards and uncouth.

An important reason for this lack of distinction was that the Southern poor white's origins were similar to the elite's; often, members of each group came from the same family. Both groups originated in the South as backwoods or frontiersmen; what separated them was that the elite group had been more fortunate, while the poor white group consisted of those who had been unsuccessful, who had not been able to afford good land and could not participate in the cotton industry. These less prosperous whites were pushed to the edges of society by those who had the ability to obtain great quantities of land. Like African-Americans, poor whites had been trapped in a system that punished them for their economic disadvantages.

While it is clear that white upper class did not purposely set out to oppress poor whites with the plantation system or disparage them in Southern historiography, the poor white

necessarily became collateral damage. The members of the Southern aristocracy had to defend themselves from the charges of idleness and depravity leveled at them from the North, and the poor white body became a convenient location to displace and contain these charges. Southern elites did not invent what has come to be the poor white stereotype; they simply did not go far enough to drive it completely out of the national or regional consciousness, so that while the immediate goal of Southern historians was not to stereotype the poor white, they nonetheless willingly sacrificed the lower class in order to make of themselves, their past, and their society something better than they ever were.

During the antebellum era, however, elite whites began to purposely use poor whites as scapegoats for all of the South's ills. Slavery was largely responsible for this shift, as the North's general critique of the system was displaced by Southern planters onto a specific segment of their society. In order to answer the Northern charge of slavery as unjust and inhumane, Southerner slaveholders created a fiction to refute it, a history of their making that would present the plantation system as the preferred American way of life. This history would justify and explain the ideology behind the slave system. The new Southern myth would usher in the era of the plantation novel and the sentimental/domestic romance, a genre of beautiful, chaste, virtuous white Southern maidens and honest, honorable, paternalistic gentleman. Plantation slaves were happy and content under the care (read: authority) of their white masters. Cruel and inhumane poor whites, however, threatened this utopia as slave traders and overseers. Their actions were criminal and brutal, and their horrific treatment of their helpless chattel was deemed both disgusting and unconscionable by their white betters, who openly rejected it.

The first chapter of this book explores contemporary uses of the poor white stereotype. I want to make it clear that the negative depictions of poor whites in the 21st century are very

much like those in the antebellum era, and I want to explore the social and economic environments that allow this to occur. The 2010 series *Justified* offers a powerful critique of the Southern poor white; from its opening episode, it is clear that the show's writers intend to place every tired stereotype onto the antagonist Boyd Crowder. Rehashing worn-out biases does not a compelling series make, but it does ensure the stereotype's survival, as another generation of Americans is ripe for indoctrination.

To understand the persistence of the myth of poor white trash in series like *Justified*, and its continued acceptance everywhere from popular culture to politics, it is important to trace the history of Southern poverty and the material conditions that allowed for poor white disfranchisement. At the root of the stereotype is an awareness and fear of the economic circumstances that set poor whites apart, and I want to center my exploration of the concept of lower class white inferiority around the class consciousness that initially created and continues to sustain it. As wealth became the most important marker of success and value in the antebellum South, poor whites were forced lower and lower on the social scale until they lost all position and were no longer included in the South's identity. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers a model for understanding the role of class in the construction of the myth of poor white trash. Matt Wray finds that Stowe "arguably did more to popularize, nationalize, and internalize the phrase 'poor white trash' than anyone in antebellum history" (*Not Quite White* 57). Indeed, there are many similarities between *Justified* and Stowe's abolitionist fiction; both endeavor to present Southern whites as an exceptional group at the expense of the lower class. While *Justified* is wholly self-aware and utilizes the notion of white trash to serve as an antagonistic narrative device which privileges the white-hat wearing, Southern-denouncing hero Raylan Givens, Stowe's objective was not to condemn poor whites, but rather the plantation system that

she believed created them. In her appeal to the ruling class, however, she unequivocally skewers the lower class. At this time in history, she had no other choice but to tell the elites what they wanted to hear if she was to have any hope of bringing about change in the South. The poor whites in contemporary pop culture serve the same function, as they present a South threatened by a takeover of poor white attitudes and behaviors; but this presentation directly contrasts Stowe's aims and instead launches an overt attack on poor whites simply because it has the authority to do so.

Chapter Two reaches back into the early 20th century to explore the ways minorities used the white trash stereotype. When the plantation fiction's popularity began to wane, and *Uncle Tom's* Simon Legree and Tom Larker faded away, the image of the poor white as racist did not. In fact, it seemed to enter the mainstream with newfound intensity. Newspaper and word-of-mouth reports frequently claimed that poor white mobs were responsible for African-American lynching in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in spite of evidence to the contrary, as historians have pointed out that, even in legitimate instances of poor white violence against African-Americans, upper class whites were usually behind the scenes; their ability to turn the frustrated poor white masses into angry mobs is identical to the way they used J.W. Cash's "Proto-Dorian Bond" in the antebellum period to invoke racial solidarity and to direct hostility onto an undeserving group of minorities.

The Southern myth also expanded during this period to rationalize the growing economic disparity between planters and the lower class. Northern conceptions of Southerners as lazy were married to the notion of poor white uncleanness and disregard of hygiene. These two fictions combined to move the focus away from the fact that many poor whites were not able to produce enough food for themselves and their families because the land was controlled by the upper

class, and to mask the desperation that led some of them to eat dirt. Poor white illnesses like malaria and hookworm were caused by their own filth, elite Southerners suggested, and were not due to their inability to buy shoes or obtain medicine. These stereotypes helped the upper class by raising their national and regional status, but they hindered poor whites in very real ways. The theory that poor whites were poor because they chose not to work and that they were sickly because they were dirty made any would-be aid slow in arriving. Worse yet, the stereotype provided the groundwork for the eugenics movement in the late 1800s.

Matt Wray finds that

[u]sing a variety of methods of knowledge production drawn from the emerging social sciences, middle-class professionals constructed the degenerate poor white as a biologically inferior type, one that could be distinguished on the basis of such characteristics as distinctive skin color; a nomadic and vagabond way of life; promiscuity and licentiousness (especially among the women); propensities toward violence and criminality; a broken family structure and a recurring history of miscegenation. (*Not Quite White* 83)

Wray asserts that, because social scientists believed they had already conclusively proven that African-Americans were inferior, eugenicists focused heavily on poor whites and aimed to demonstrate their inferiority as well (*Not Quite White* 73). It is no coincidence that the Eugenics Records Office (ERO) was located in Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, but most eugenics field studies were conducted in the South; social scientists knew what they wanted to find before they got there, and Wray argues that “[e]ugenics was the crucial vehicle for nationalizing and deregionalizing the stigmatypes of poor white trash” (*Not Quite White* 95). Eugenics studies led

to institutionalization and even sterilization of Southern poor whites and strengthened the white trash stereotype.

Perhaps because poor whites were generally considered at the bottom of the white hierarchy even before the eugenics movement, a curious paradox occurred in Southern fiction at the turn of the 20th century: at the same time that upper class whites were invoking a bond of racial solidarity with their lower-class counterparts in opposition to African-Americans, they were also publishing and reading works by African-American authors hostile to poor whites. Rather than operating under the same restrictions they applied to lower-class whites, that of remaining loyal to a unified Caucasian cause, privileged whites were content to sacrifice poor whites to their African-American “inferiors” in order to avoid race-guilt.

The practice of identifying racism as a characteristic of the poor white in the antebellum era continued long after Civil War and Reconstruction, but elite whites had more at stake during the 20th century than ever before. Their land was peopled with millions of free African-Americans, many of whom had labored under the plantation system and would not be convinced as easily as some of those in the North of the Southern myths that claimed the slavery system was a good one and that all masters were kind. These African-Americans, aided by Northern publishers, could tell a truth that would leave the Southern myth in ruins. Elite whites hoped to maintain control over both African-Americans and poor whites, and so they were forced to be relatively neutral. That African-Americans were grossly mistreated by all classes of whites is indisputable, but as the early 20th century African-American author Charles Chesnut demonstrates, African-Americans were particularly brutal in their depictions of poor whites; there are almost no decent or well-intentioned whites in his novels, but it is left to the poor white to commit the most egregious acts of racism and violence. Even when Chesnut depicted

African-American-on-white violence that leads to white deaths, upper class Southerners were largely silent. That someone on the very lowest rung of the social hierarchy could lambast poor whites with impunity is indicative of the white upper classes' estimation of both groups.

Chapter Two, then, will highlight the function of the poor white stereotype for African-American authors. Chesnutt's post-Reconstruction novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) demonstrates the ways in which upper class whites used race-based arguments to keep poor whites in submission while at the same time condoning negative poor white depictions by African-Americans to assuage race-guilt, and also the ways in which African-American authors used subversive techniques in their fiction to enlist white aid and support for African-American enfranchisement. Chesnutt's McBane looks, acts, and talks like Stowe's Legree and Loker, as Chesnutt utilizes Southern class consciousness to distinguish between the ways whites should treat African-Americans and the way they actually treat them. The use of a poor white antagonist allows Chesnutt to displace all the undesirable components of elite racism onto an acceptable vessel, the despised poor white trash figure. Like Stowe, Chesnutt had limited options through which to condemn the notion of white supremacy, and he walked an impossibly fine line between the white classes, but he took advantage of every opportunity afforded him and accomplished an important feat by successfully challenging white racism and discrimination through a racist so vile that he cannot be protected by his privileged whiteness. Unfortunately, in order to make this point, Chesnutt had to lampoon the poor white in the process, and his novel provides a clear example of the poor white scapegoat for both African-Americans and whites. McBane serves as a warning to elites to avoid association or unified race feelings with poor whites.

Chapter Three continues to follow the poor white's walk of shame through the 20th century, most notably in the works of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. While creating representative poor whites was neither man's objective, their Snopes, Lesters, and Waldens made certain that a new generation of readers would be wary of the poor white. Each author used poor whites to grapple with the troubling questions of Southern history, but their attempts to work through that history came at the expense of accurate depictions of the lower-class and negated any claims for reader sympathy. Faulkner followed the tenets of the Southern Renaissance and used the Snopes clan to demonstrate the violent collision of the past and the present, but his overzealous condemnation of the South's tragic past embodied in his Snopes characters served to overshadow his message of that past's shame and instead became a condemnation of the poor white family itself. Sylvia Cook Jenkins notes that "while radical writers began to depict the metamorphosis of a backward peasant into a revolutionary fighter, Faulkner was reaching back into Southern history, folklore, and mythology to revive both the humor and the horror of this character's tradition" (39). Faulkner appears to have fallen unfortunately between Fred Hobson's analysis of the two types of Southern writers, the apologist and the critic:

If apologist for the Southern way, he has felt driven to answer the accusations and misstatements of outsiders and to combat the image of a benighted and savage South. If native critic, he has often been occupied with Southern racial sin and guilt, with the burden of the Southern past—and frustrated by the closed nature of Southern society itself, by that quality which suppressed dissent and adverse comment." (4)

Hobson identifies Quentin Compson as Faulkner's avatar, as both men are tortured by great love of and smothering hatred for their region (5). Faulkner knew the South was guilty, but he could

not bear to lay the blame at the feet of those honorable and genteel upper class figures which he knew had never existed. I will follow Flem Snopes's progression from poverty to wealth without status, and the total rejection of the town to his invasion, to demonstrate Faulkner's disfranchisement of poor whites in the Snopes trilogy *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*.

Caldwell, on the other hand, overreached his efforts to highlight the history of economic practices that forced many whites into abject poverty and kept them there; his characters have long-since been tainted by a past filled with absentee landlords and corrupt credit schemes, and Caldwell sacrifices any dignity or integrity they may have possessed in the interest of social criticism. The greatest disservice that Caldwell does to his characters is to strip them of all humanity, as Cook finds that "no one is responsive or sympathetic to anyone else. Indeed, though we wait hopefully for a single sign of humanity or kindness, Caldwell refuses to ease the burden of acceptance—the economic plight of these people has made irredeemable monsters of them" (68). Because they are "monsters," who have no feelings for each other, we do not feel any obligation to question their status as trash. Perhaps the stigma of the poor white was so ingrained in each author's mind that he could not write otherwise; regardless, the damage was done, and its impact continues.

So pervasive was the poor white stereotype in the early 20th century that even non-fiction works which endeavored to truthfully narrate the unjust circumstances of poor white life for a contemporary audience frequently failed to elicit sympathy. James Agee wanted to give Americans the real story behind the poor whites' condition, and he approached his task with sincerity, but in the end, he failed to offer readers or the poor whites themselves any new understanding of history or the poor white stereotype. This failure was most likely due to his status as an outsider, a point to which I will return later; Agee the man could have the best

intentions, but Agee the upper class Harvard graduate simply could not speak for those he wrote about. After living with a family of Alabama poor whites for only a few weeks, the most he could achieve was an unbelievable aesthetics of poverty, one that appears naïve at best and disingenuous at worst. In spite of his optimism, readers are hard-pressed to find beauty in hunger, sickness, and lice, and Agee does not disprove the notion that poor whites brought these hardships upon themselves. Kirby doubts that Agee's true intention was unbiased documentary (61), but even if he is incorrect, he asserts that "it appears safe to generalize that Jeeter Lester and Flem Snopes were fixed, perhaps never to die"; in spite of efforts such as Agee's, "the school of poverty and degeneracy remained accredited" (Kirby 63).

The focus of poor white stereotyping shifted from primarily racism and laziness to violence through the 1960s and into the 1970s, when poor whites began to pose a threat to upper-and-middle-class whites as well as African-Americans. This is not to say that the poor white had never been cast as a danger to his own race before; Matt Wray has demonstrated the rise of the poor white as "cracker" or "lint-head" during the New South's industrialization period. Crackers and lint-heads were generally lower-class factory workers who grew dissatisfied with the stretch-out and their pathetic wages and resorted to strikes or riots to better their working conditions. While populism did find a momentary hold in the South, and strikes and riots did occur, they were not as frequent and they certainly did not lead to as much bloodshed as the Southern elite claimed. The real problem was that during the heyday of industrialization, poor whites were beginning to realize the value of their labor, and this led them to question the economic practices that favored the few. Privileged whites feared this burgeoning class consciousness, and they tried to direct its resultant hostility toward African-Americans. But African-Americans were frequently prevented from obtaining factory jobs, and poor whites were no longer willing to let

the upper class tell them whom to blame. The elites' only option, then, was to blame the poor whites themselves, and while the white ruling class was responsible for creating the angry mobs of desperate workers, they also created the stereotype that explained them.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the cracker became an even more dangerous version of himself, the redneck or hillbilly. The cracker was violent because he felt cheated, but the hillbilly/redneck reveled in violence because he liked it. This transformation may be linked to the Civil Rights Movement, a glorious time for African-Americans who, in the face of danger and uncertainty and at great risk of their own lives, rose up as a group to demand equal consideration. Although they tried to resist, elite whites found themselves in an unfamiliar South surrounded by cries for freedom and opportunity, and as the Civil Rights Movement began to make forward strides and the power of the Southern myth of white superiority began to diminish, elite whites looked desperately about for an anchor upon which to moor their outdated assertions of supremacy. And there, conveniently, was the poor white.

The stereotype of the white trash aggressor found its way into the literature of the 1960s and 1970s with relative ease. Mainstream America had come to take for granted the notion that poor whites were irredeemable, so this was how they were depicted in fiction. Most people subscribed to the white trash myth, so it is not surprising that when asked about the inspiration for the inbred, sodomizing, hillbilly murderers in his 1970 novel *Deliverance*, James Dickey asserted that he was writing about the Southern poor whites he knew. That such types could and do exist is incontestable, but Dickey makes them representative; the middle-class white businessmen from the city are in constant danger from every single poor white in the backwoods.

A closer study of *Deliverance*, however, reveals that the city white/country white dichotomy offers a glimpse of Southern whites in general trying to tackle the urban vs. rural/upper vs. lower ideologies of the modern South. Dickey's successful, middle-class whites go head-to-head with their opposites in a struggle for white Southern identity. Keen Butterworth finds that Dickey offers readers "a deliverance from the parts of ourselves which...hold us in a kind of bondage, which thwart self-knowledge and hinder our pursuit of vitality itself" (70). The middle-class Southerner is aware of or suspects the presence of a darker part of his psychology, an organic animalism that requires banishment in order for him to fully function. This suppressed self rejects economic and social hierarchies and offers the temptation to abandon the conformity and submissiveness required for national participation. In the end, there is no winner; the Southern man's identity is still split in two by his past and his present/future. Chapter Four will examine the notion of twinned identities and the problem of the bifurcated Southern white, as white authors began to question the accuracy of the stereotype and search for the agendas behind it. Unfortunately, the writers in these decades did not achieve the reconciliation for which they strived; the poor white stereotype had simply been in existence for too long and had taken so much hold on Southern ideology that even novels intended to do more than just maintain the status quo were relatively unsuccessful.

Perhaps the popular reception of the surface-level themes of Dickey's novel led the poor white to further accept his status, because *Deliverance* marks the beginning of almost two decades of poor white masochism. What makes these iterations of the stereotype distinct—and more disturbing—is that they come straight from the pens of poor whites (or former poor whites) themselves. Stereotypes often have a way of moving into the communities they stigmatize, becoming an ingrained marker of a group's identity, as evidenced in the work of Harry Crews.

His Grit Lit of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrates a remarkable attempt to insert the poor white experience into Southern history. Crews is sympathetic to his characters, and he is honest about the hardships they face and the hopelessness of their lives. Like Caldwell, Crews finds the unforgivable Southern landscape, the imbalance of opportunity, and the lack of resources to be the root causes of poor white brutality, and he offers an abundance of alternative figures in the poor white community. Crews's work is invaluable in the history of Southern literature because it opens new doors for poor white representation; Guinn finds that *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* "derives its importance in Southern letters as a record of those rural southerners left out of the pastoral tradition" (13). Crews applies the conditions of poverty to poor whites to reject the myth of the genteel agrarian tradition, which marked underclass whites as unequal; he "emphatically departs from the conventions of pastoral in his descriptions of agricultural life itself. For people of his class, the agricultural life was so brutal and bleak as to defy its conventional metaphorical use as a rebuke to modernity" (Guinn 8). In the end, however, Crews's work does not go far enough, as he finally finds himself straddling the line between the poor white community he knows, and the world outside that he yearns to join. Mainstream America will not let him be both poor white and contributing member of society; Crews's abandonment of his people, therefore, is not mercenary, but it comes to be his only option for survival. Chapter Four utilizes the work of James Dickey and Harry Crews to detail the incorporation and adoption of the white trash stereotype into the poor white community as evidenced in the first attempts by poor white authors to write their own histories, and their failures to produce new interpretations.

Hope was on the horizon, however, and by the 1990s poor white authors followed the path that Crews had blazed twenty years before. But this time the way was not so narrow.

Following the examples of other minorities such as African-Americans and women, who had earlier begun to reject mainstream histories, this new group of poor whites finally created a formula for their own testimonials. The motto was “Reject, Reject, Reject,” as they resisted the worn-out white trash stereotype and insisted that they were more than a set of undesirable traits. Dorothy Allison, who has identified herself as “white trash” and even used the epithet as the title of a short story collection, asserts her authority and establishes both her own and her characters’ identities inside a poor white community wholly unlike that created by the upper class. Allison’s poor whites are fully formed and capable of great love and understanding, and because of this they are redeemed. And because Allison does not shy away from the uncomfortable truths behind the overblown stereotype, it is a redemption they can admit they sorely need.

Chapter Five follows Allison’s endeavor to rewrite poor white history in the novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and uses its themes to predict the future of both poor whites and their literature. Allison does not settle for perception as an explanation for the Southern myth of poor white trash, and this frees her from the burden of having to construct myths of her own. Instead, she aims for a legitimate poor white authority, and some of her poor whites are those same undesirables included in the white trash myth. Her honest evaluation of her subjects allows readers to both criticize and sympathize, but most importantly it offers readers a testament that is neither as deleterious as the myth of poor white trash claims nor as commendable as the counter-myth would have to be to answer it. The exploration of the lower class as both protagonist and antagonist, burdened by poverty but desirous of change, constitutes “a new conception of a tragic South, illumined from beneath by the story of a Southerner expendable to the nation’s established cultural narrative, a young woman whose native means of negotiating identity call the validity of the entire culture into question” (Guinn 30). Another gauge of the hopeful

prospect for poor whites is that Allison refuses to limit her depictions to one group; her novel reveals the struggles of poor whites, but also the struggles of African-Americans, women, and lesbians. We are all in this together, Allison says, and it is only together that we can overcome.

The fifth chapter will also explore emerging 21st century poor white voices. Amy Greene's 2010 debut novel *Bloodroot* brings my work back full circle to my discussion of *Justified* in the first chapter. Greene's depictions of poor whites are antithetical to those in the television series; her characters are infused with dignity and kindness, and their love for one another in spite of their poverty belies the claim of a causal relationship between destitution and depravity. *Bloodroot*'s poor whites are forced to make heartbreaking choices because they are disadvantaged, but their humanity establishes them as fully formed participants in the society that has for so long excluded them. *Bloodroot* also signals a step forward for poor white representation because, while the characters are victims of economic bondage, they are not simply figures of class; their self-conscious disadvantage is not based upon their position in the social hierarchy. For this reason, *Bloodroot* portends a positive reevaluation of both poverty and the white trash stereotype.

But twenty years has not been long enough to destroy the stereotype of poor white trash, and before we can hope for a change, we must face the obstacles in front of us, obstacles of time and economics and class, barriers that have been utilized for centuries and which still, in spite of all we know, remain to be toppled.

Chapter One: The Myth of White Trash: Antebellum Beginnings, Impossible Ending?

In March 2010, FX premiered a new dramatic series about a rugged law man whose itchy trigger finger results in his transfer from a slick U.S. Marshals headquarters in Miami to a cash-strapped department in rural Kentucky. This is a typical fish-out-of-water tale, but there is a twist: Raylan Givens's reassignment is more than just punishment for breaking protocol; Givens is, in fact, banished to the hometown he had hoped never to see again. The Southern man who flees or is run out of the city and returns to his roots is nothing new, and unfortunately, neither are the central themes of *Justified*, particularly as they address the Southern poor white. The first episode rehashes every worn-out stereotype that we have come to associate with the epithet "white trash" and offers viewers a map of the overt biases which will color each subsequent episode. No matter what twists and turns the show's writers may weave into the narrative, we can be sure that there will be no mystery about the identity of the antagonist; we know his background and upbringing, his attitudes towards race and religion, the way he treats women, the people with whom he associates, the people who refuse to associate with him, and his intimacy with alcohol and violence. And we know all of this, before the first commercial break, because he is a poor white, the lowest of the low and a figure apart, even in the enlightened, tolerant 21st century.

American culture is thoroughly indoctrinated in the myth of poor white trash, a stereotype that has existed since before the nation's birth and has become a fundamental building block of national ideology. The white trash stereotype is one of the many preconceived notions that inform our awareness of national and regional culture, establish social hierarchies, and situate our identities within those hierarchies through separate and distinct categories. Duane Carr explores the nature of stereotypes and cites Walter Lippmann to explain that they persist

because in a world of ‘buzzing confusion, the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than in types and generalities, is exhausting.’ For this reason we are all, to some extent at least, ‘hurried observers,’ accepting for the sake of convenience stereotypes ‘already defined’ for us by culture. ‘We do not first see, then define,’ he maintains, ‘we define first and then see.’” (7)

While this explanation may rationalize the cavalier acceptance of white trash today, it does little to get at the advantages of the stereotype of poor white inferiority for a contemporary audience, nor does it identify the factors that led to its initial conception. Lippmann’s analysis closely resembles Davenport’s assessment of myth as perception, in that neither find fault in those who create or perpetuate stereotypes; rather, for both scholars, the adoption of and adaptation to elite myths of lower class white inferiority seem to stem from a population too lazy or complacent to resist the pull of mainstream feeling.

Carr’s elucidation of Gordon W. Allport’s theory of stereotypes is superior to Lippmann’s because he finds that they

justify or rationalize our acceptance or rejection of a particular group. It also acts as ‘a screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in perception and in thinking.’ Moreover, stereotypes serve ‘as projective screens for our personal conflict’ and they continue to exist because ‘they are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in...by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio, and television.’” (8).

Allport gets at the class factors behind the myth of poor white trash. First, elite whites fabricate ideological barriers between themselves and the lower class to mask the fact that their

distinctions are rooted in material conditions. Next, these barriers restrict lower class mobility and secure elite hegemony, and fictive characterizations of poverty work to guard the upper class from economic contamination. The “personal conflict” Allport describes began with antebellum planters seeking to defend their rights as masters, and continues today with the still-powerful assertion of (elite) white supremacy. Allport’s analysis of the methods through which the stereotype is disseminated falls short only because it was completed before the inception of the Internet, which offers everything from sites devoted to redneck jokes to the popular and Southern-centric “People of Wal-Mart.”

The latter examples demonstrate the way myths as stereotypes continue to evolve while reinforcing an initial premise; indeed, this must occur in order for the myth to maintain dominance, as Claude Levi-Strauss notes in “The Structural Study of Myth” that “[o]n the one hand, myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future.” Levi-Strauss’s work admittedly encompasses a larger range of mythologies and cultures than I am confronting here, but his analysis of the functions of myth are nonetheless amenable to the narrower confines of white trash. This understanding helps to explain why the notion of poor whites’ proclivities to violence, for example, can remain prevalent for centuries and yet adapt to specific historical conditions, such as the violent slave trade in the antebellum era, which transformed into the poor white as a member of the terrorizing Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century; the myth, in fact, continues to evolve.

Myths are also powerful because they are capable of subsuming new information and translating it through an established language. Levi-Strauss asserts that “myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted. Its *growth* is a continuous

process, whereas its *structure* remains discontinuous” (“Structural Study”). For instance, the myth of white trash situates the stereotyped lower class group in an inferior space, beginning with the antebellum scrub patch on which the poor white worked for subsistence. This location grew outward, to hovel and slum, and later trailer or modular home, collecting associations of filth and slovenliness, and later tackiness and gaudiness. This progression, which encompasses the shift from shoddy structures and loose animals to outhouses and junked cars to flamingos and year-round Christmas lights, is perpetually grounded in the notion of undesirable space.

Levi-Strauss states that “the question has often been raised why myths...are so much addicted to duplication, triplication, or quadruplication of the same sequence” (“Structural Study”). I argue that the stereotype’s adaptive and inclusive capabilities are both a logical consequence of their structure and also a necessary requirement for their maintenance. “[M]yth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is part of human speech” (“Structural Study”), and this necessitates renewal in each generation in order to survive. The myth of white trash, constructed to assert elite white superiority, must be reiterated in order to ensure that the social hierarchy that favors the upper class remains intact. Myth then expands to answer shifting notions or ideologies that potentially threaten the established order. Levi-Strauss answers the question of duplication by arguing that myths build upon, add to, and reiterate themselves because “[t]he function of repetition is to render the structure of the myth apparent... Thus, a myth exhibits a ‘slated’ structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition” (“Structural Study”). The white trash stereotype has, as Allport notes, appeared and reappeared in oral traditions, literature, television, and music, and continues to assert itself through the ever-expanding media outlets of the 21st century.

Another facet of myth construction, perhaps the most damaging for those lower class whites oppressed by the white trash stereotype, is that myths are rarely if ever amenable to multiple interpretations or versions. Levi-Strauss studied the mythologies of disparate and geographically disconnected cultures, and the scholars who explored each culture's various myths, and discovered that "comparative mythologists have selected preferred versions instead of using them all," in spite of the fact that

the structural analysis of *one* variant of *one* myth belonging to *one* tribe...already requires two dimensions...The confusions and platitudes which are the outcome of comparative mythology can be explained by the fact that multi-dimensional frames of reference are often ignored or are naively replaced by two- or three-dimensional ones ("Structural Study").

This tendency to privilege one version of a myth is clearly apparent in the white trash stereotype. First, the myth of lower class whites is constructed by elites, who structure the myth in such a way that it can only produce one result, the assertion of poor white inferiority. Second, by privileging their version, elite whites resist the efforts of those outside the hegemony to create alternative structures; this is evidenced by the futile attempts of poor whites themselves to construct a definition of underprivileged whiteness that works outside of the dominant myth, as can be seen in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man*; the dominant myth also institutes mutually exclusive categories that negate the possibilities for rewriting white trash, as efforts to posit a "good poor" category have failed to overtake the stereotype of "bad poor."

The structure of myth I have outlined above helps to explain why our national imaginary is saturated in the stereotype of poor white trash. It also illuminates the reason that series such as *Justified* continue to find an audience. The drama is compelling in spite of its ideological

limitations, and those limitations are not apparent to the average American consumer steeped in the doctrine of lower class white inferiority. Unfortunately, the prevalence of series which utilize the white trash stereotype, such as *Justified*, continues to endorse the myth's inaccuracies and blatant falsehoods.

Raylan's first assignment upon his return to Kentucky is to track the moves of and gather evidence against Boyd Crowder, an Iraq War veteran whose disillusion and dissatisfaction leads him to join the "Patriot Movement" and declare himself a "sovereign citizen" who is exempt from paying taxes. Boyd's anti-establishment right-wing extremism is only natural, as is his attempt, minutes into the first episode, to destroy a federal building under construction in his hometown of Harlan. Lacking the necessary firepower, Boyd and his cohort choose the next best target, predictably an African-American church. Boyd laments the changes in the South since Civil Rights and longs for the days when two "crackers in a SUV" would terrify the blacks in town. The death of white supremacy truly signals "end times" for Boyd and his ilk.

Several African-American parishioners stand in front of the church as Boyd pulls out his rocket launcher (!) and gleefully aims. His cut-off shirt reveals a gigantic swastika as he lifts his weapon and fires. The helpless congregants run for their lives as he shouts "Fire in the hole!" and blows their house of worship to pieces. Only a naïve viewer would be shocked by Boyd's behavior; the only surprising aspect of this scene is that the African-American church is his second choice. Boyd, played by Walter Coggins with a fine-tuned greasiness, is such a brazen racist that he does not even try to conceal his identity; his face is the most important part of the scene, because we need to remember his face and associate it with poor white brutality. A century before, Boyd would have donned a white robe and mask and rode with the KKK, terrorizing free African-Americans with burning crosses and the threat of the noose. A few

decades before that, he would have been a slave trader, abusing his chattel with the whip. Times may have changed, but the series reminds us that poor white trash is still the same.

After the racist and anti-establishment angles are developed, the writers move on to white trash fanaticism and hypocrisy. This is a complex commingling of zealotry and brutality, a specific brand of Dixie dogma and deviance. Indeed, on FX's web site, Coggins's biography and character summary is placed next to a picture of Boyd prominently displaying his Holy Bible. Boyd and his fellow trash live in a trailer behind which sits a weathered barn with the phrase "Jesus Saves" peeling away on its side. The men's hide-out is an abandoned church, its stained glass windows and wooden pews the only indicators of its former status as a house of God. But the God we remember is nowhere to be found, the walls of the church covered with Nazi posters and the pulpit littered with beer cans and other unidentifiable garbage. When Raylan finds Boyd in the dilapidated building, the two men, who, in a too-convenient coincidence, have a history dating back to their days digging coal together, share a jar of moonshine before Boyd preaches his version of the Word. This harangue is littered with Biblical references and loaded with hatred. The God that Boyd quotes, in whom he fervently believes and desires to obey, is violently opposed to "mongrelizing," and Boyd views himself as an angel of righteous retribution. Raylan listens with a smirk on his face—a smirk which he holds the entire episode, but especially when he is dealing with trash—before asserting that Boyd is full of "bullshit." This pronouncement from the protagonist makes it clear whose side we are supposed to be on, as if we had any doubt.

Just as the Devil quotes Scripture, so does the white trash racist, and both intend to twist the verses to fit their agendas. Boyd is wily enough to manipulate Christian doctrine to his advantage; after the death of his brother Bowman, for instance, Boyd announces his intention to

obey the Word and take care of his brother's wife, Ava. This act of benevolence thinly veils Boyd's lascivious desires. No one is deceived, including the widow herself, who had to shoot Bowman with her handy shotgun because he stopped simply beating her and finally threatened to kill her. As with Boyd, there is nothing new or surprising about these characters, except that Ava is sexed-up for the cameras.

Boyd's white supremacist friends are equally devious and deranged; they are also comic in a way that Boyd is not. Our first introduction to two unnamed neo-Nazis finds them attempting to split wood without a block. Although the man responsible for steadying the wood does not lose a finger—or a whole hand—on camera, we know that this will occur sooner rather than later. In another scene, Raylan is confronted by a redneck with a shotgun he was too stupid to remember to load. There is also a hint of effeminacy about them, as one of Boyd's friends calls him because he is concerned about Boyd's feelings. This is a shot at the stereotype's potentially subversive characteristic of white trash masculinity; the ostensibly rugged poor white who wants to chat about emotions is both comic and mocking. These humorous depictions of poor whites recall the local colorist representations of nonthreatening, entertaining lower class whites; the dumb rednecks are only relevant because their buffoonery makes us laugh and reminds us of our own superiority.

Boyd, however, is a different type of poor white, equally stereotypical but far more dangerous. Boyd never forgets to load his rocket launcher, and behind every threat he makes is the intention to carry it out. Boyd offers a picture of what Raylan would have become if he had not escaped Harlan and justifies Raylan's resistance to return. They are two sides of the same coin, and their battle is not for the peace of a few square miles of bluegrass, but for the entire South. At the end of the first episode, Raylan shoots Boyd in the chest, intentionally missing his

heart; in this enlightened age, the poor white is not so easy to dispatch—and besides, his villainy is too perfect to waste in forty-four minutes—and Boyd will live to fight another day. No matter what the writers have in store for the series, however, we can be sure of who and what the antagonist will be, his ideology, and the methods he will use to achieve his aims.

Justified is another in a long line of popular depictions of poor white trash. From Geico's hillbilly pothole to *Squidbillies*, from *The Simpson's* "Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel" to *SNL's* "Appalachian E.R." to every horror film involving murderous truckers and cannibalistic inbred subhumans, the white trash stereotype has been used to promote laughter and fear, derision and disgust, and unequivocal rejection, but never sympathy or acceptance. The poor white is America's Untouchable, the exact opposite of everything we value and believe in, a blight on our social and economic systems, and a model of undesirable and inappropriate traits, characteristics, and behavior.

History proves that the poor white was once a part of dominant white society before the Revolution and industrial era, which brought the New World into an economy that privileged a few but left the majority virtually indigent. The shaping factor of the poor white, then, is class. Before the Revolution, both Northern and Southern whites were largely the same, relatively poor transplants from Great Britain who worked hard to tame the wilderness and feed themselves and their families. W.J. Cash finds that the first Southern colonist was at the core "an exceedingly simple fellow—a backcountry pioneer farmer or the immediate descendant of such a farmer" (*Mind* 29); he was "primarily a direct product of the soil, as the peasant of Europe is a direct product of the soil" (*Mind* 30). This intimacy with the land and daily struggle for survival engendered many of the traits we now use to characterize poor whites, such as brute physicality, boisterous recreation, drinking, boisterousness, and a tendency to savagery. Cash is careful to

explain that these characteristics at one time applied to all Southern whites, “[b]ecause [they were] already in his mores when he emerged from the backwoods, because on the frontier it was the obvious thing to do, because he was a hot, stout fellow, full of blood and reared to outdoor activity, because of a primitive and naïve zest for the pursuit at hand” (*Mind* 30). At this stage in the nation’s development, the issue of class was nonexistent.

During the antebellum era, plentiful land and an abundance of slaves moved the South into the most lucrative agricultural era it would ever experience. Suddenly, landowners had paper money and evidence of their prosperity. These planters would never through their agricultural pursuits reach the status of later affluent figures such as the Carnegies or Rockefellers, but their wealth set them a little apart from the majority of Southern whites. Cash finds that prior to this period, less fortunate whites “exhibited some diversity of condition...[from] the classical stigmata of true degeneracy” (23). This fact, coupled with abundant historical evidence of Southern white economic parity in the nation’s infancy, proves that the white trash stereotype of inherent and organic inferiority among a select group has no factual basis. The evidence used to mark a certain category of disadvantaged whites we have come to identify as trash simply never existed.

Poverty, however, was a fact, and as the South moved from a purely agricultural economy to an industrial one, a chasm opened up between the privileged minority and the rest of the South. While “[e]conomic and social distinctions hardly existed prior to the invention of the cotton gin” (Cash 26), after it, social boundaries began to appear. This process was aided by the brewing conflict with the North and the South’s defensive reaction to questions about slavery; it was, in fact, “the incessant need to justify its ‘peculiar institution’ [that] was to give birth to a definite philosophy of class” (Cash 87). Land- and slaveholding whites, the only group with

anything material to lose from Emancipation, became rabidly protective of their economic system, and this blind faith in their traditions necessarily forced them to espouse a class doctrine as well. Slavery was created by God, and white men were born to be masters, but elite Southerners faced a conundrum: how would they explain the vast group of white men who were not masters?

The answer to this question comes from a curious source, the antebellum abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rallied her Northern audience to war but had a much different effect on the South, which blasted it as deceitful propaganda and rushed to create an entire genre, the anti-Tom novel, to refute it. But the novel also affirmed a notion the planter class had been toying with all along, the idea that a line of delineation existed within the white race, separating those who were fit to lead from those who were destined to be ruled. The marker of this distinction, of course, was class. There is no doubt that Stowe fervently wished to see an end to slavery, but the novel is just condescending enough to provide a loophole for elite justification of their social and political system. This, too, centers on class, for in her pleas for humanity, Stowe appeals to the ruling class by setting them apart; the real danger of slavery is not its effect on the chattel themselves, she asserts, but on its potentially chaotic class disruptions: "If all the broad land between the Mississippi and the Pacific becomes one great market for bodies and souls, and human property retains the locomotive tendencies of this nineteenth century, the trader and catcher may yet be among our aristocracy" (21). This warning speaks to elite fears of upward mobility, as the poor could profit from their occupations in the slave trade and escape the boundaries of their economic bracket. Certainly only a few poor whites could manage this, but even one lower class figure in privileged circles would foul the whole society, as evidenced by *Uncle Tom's* slave trader, Haley. A stain on the elite category

also threatened the Southern myth of upper class gentility that the planters were just beginning to construct and hoped to offer as proof of the region's superiority. Stowe deftly makes her argument without impugning the planter class, and the novel is filled with elite masters, not one of whom is intentionally abusive; they are presented as helpless victims of a system they did not create. Stowe did not reserve her creative talents for the upper class, however, and her poor whites are subhuman idiots; their coldness and calculation perfectly suits them for their trade.

Stowe's appeal to the ruling class, cleverly laced with the threat of social upheaval, did nothing to sway slaveholders or Southerners in general. It did, however, offer a convenient scapegoat for the elites' race guilt. The constant Northern criticism leveled at Southern planters demanded rebuttal, and Stowe's displacement of racism and brutality onto the lower classes offered a model for negotiating that criticism. Stowe neglects no opportunity to distinguish between just and honorable elites such as St. Clare and Mr. Shelby, and despicable white trash like Tom Loker and Simon Legree. There is no common ground on which to evaluate the two groups, and the poor white suffers from every comparison.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a seminal text in the study of the white trash stereotype because it demonstrates Northern culpability in the construction of the myth of lower class inferiority. This is not to say that the myth was entirely a Northern concept; the poor white stereotype is an element of numerous Southern historical and domestic romances written both before and after the Civil War. Stowe's treatment of the poor white is also novel and represents another layer of the myth because it foregrounds white trash in economics. Stowe's assessment of the cause of that poverty is also novel;

[w]here Stowe differed from southern antebellum fiction writers—and it was for her a crucial difference—was in analyzing the cause of poor white depravity. The

cause was not...to be found in the degenerate body of the poor white, but in the economic and political system of the slave South. (*Not Quite White* 58)

The implications of this critique were lost on or ignored by elite Southerners, who read the assertion as an absolute marker of lower class inferiority based on the material circumstances of property and slaves. Poverty, as the foremost factor in class construction, was manipulated into a signifier of trash. The social and economic conditions of privileged whites identified them as superior, and the poor white's landlessness and lack of slaves indicated their lesser value; in a system ordained by God and maintained by the strong, the poor whites' disadvantaged status was simply a consequence of their inferiority. When the barrier of class was added to the notion of inherent degeneracy, poor whites were doubly damned, and the white trash stereotype was complete.

The introduction of this book traces the evolution of the poor white stereotype from the nation's infancy to today, but Stowe's text deserves special consideration because it exemplifies the disturbing connections between class and Southern myth. Stowe's description of the slave trader Haley emphasizes the function of class as a tool for evaluating categories of whiteness. In contrast to the upper class Shelby, Haley does not

come under the species [of gentleman]. He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world. He was much over-dressed, in a gaudy vest of many colors...His hands, large and coarse, were plentifully bedecked with rings; and he wore a heavy gold watch-chain, with a bundle of seals of portentous size, and a great variety of colors, attached to it,—which, in the ardor of conversation, he was in the habit of flourishing and jingling

with evident satisfaction. His conversation was in free and easy defiance of Murray's Grammar, and was garnished at convenient intervals with various profane expressions, which not even the desire to be graphic in our account shall induce us to transcribe. (Stowe 3)

Haley's depiction is strikingly similar to Charles Chesnut's McBane, which I will discuss in the next chapter; both men are constructed to assure readers that the divide between classes is great. Haley is not indigent, but he is also not a landowner or slaveholder. The nearest he gets to the upper class is when he sits in Shelby's parlor, offending upper class sensibilities with his gaudiness and ignorance. This scene reminds us that poor whites are easily identified; every one of our senses alerts us to the proximity of inferiority.

In *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (1998), Grace Elizabeth Hale studies the evolution of "Aunt Jemima," a white construction of blackness, from its initial use in 1855 minstrel performances to the commodification of her likeness and other representations of blackness in the 1870s and 1880s. The development of the "self-consciously white" consumer made black figures in advertisements appealing because "[t]hese racial representations figured the expansive identity of the consumer, increasingly seen as a member of a mass detached from specific localities and even gender and class identities, racially as well" (Hale 155). Trade cards, invented in the late 1870s, depicted African-American, Native-American, and Asian figures to market everything from yeast to furniture to tea and vinegar. The majority of the trade cards presented racist stereotypes of African-American adults and children with bulging eyes and "exaggerated white teeth," usually in absurd and comic positions (Hale 156). Hale notes that the same pictures appeared on many cards, as this was less expensive than hiring models for each advertisement; the economic expedience of this tactic doubles the notion

of African-American stereotyping. In addition, the carelessly reused pictures rarely had anything to do with the advertised product (154).

Hale finds that

the most popular commercial black imagery used in the trade card advertising...depicted African-American adults absurdly trying to mimic their white 'superiors.' In black and white pictures, mismatched patterns and awkward pairings signaled blacks' inability to achieve that increasingly crucial marker of middle-class status, respectable and proper attire. Color lithographs went further, painting African-American clothing in boldly bright and clashing color. To heighten the comedy, these outrageously dressed figures participate in activities seen as the province of leisured, elite whites. (156)

Hale cites an advertisement for Sunny South cigarettes which shows an African-American woman trying to play croquet and injuring herself in the process; a George W. Boos coffee advertisement which depicts an African-American man trying—and failing miserably—to ice skate; another, for J.G. Grippen hardware, presents an African-American in a ridiculous posture as he tries to ride a horse with an English saddle (156-157). What each of these pictures shares is their use of inappropriate attire, a “clashingly striped skirt...polkadotted pants...[and] checkerboard-patterned pants” (Hale 156-157), as a visual cue above and beyond the characters' blackness to indicate inferiority. Hale states that these images appealed to white consumers because “[i]ntended to be humorously entertaining, these advertisements addressed white fears of upwardly mobile blacks by insisting that African-Americans could never integrate into middle-class society” (157). These cards assured elite white audiences that even if the fact of race was

not enough to exclude African-Americans from white society, their clothing styles and incompetence would.

The only novel aspect of trade cards was their mass production for marketing purposes, as African-Americans had been objectified from the early days of the slave system. But so had poor whites, and for the same reasons that elites exploited inferior blackness. In both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, poor white characters who have reached a level of wealth that could potentially locate them in elite society are presented as visually unequal and ideologically inferior to the upper class. Uncle Tom's Haley does not know how to wear his expensive clothes or keep them clean; his poor white status fouls them with evidence of his ostentation, just as *Marrow's* McBane dirties his through the unsavory habit of chewing tobacco. Poor whites, then and now, are depicted as unattractive, frequently with missing or rotted teeth, dirty undergarments worn in public, and often with mangled or missing body parts which identify their status as manual laborers or heavy drinkers. Poor white women fare no better, as they are either clad in houserobes and curlers, or stuffed into ill-fitting clothing that accentuates their bulk and garish makeup. In recent years, one of the most popular poor white stereotypes involved the mullet, a ridiculous hairstyle that spawned Halloween costumes and Internet sites devoted to capturing mullet-wearing white trash in their native environs (see "The People of Wal-Mart"). Each of these visual cues signals a barrier between the privileged and the trash as an added security measure in the event of a possible rupture in the social hierarchy. Elites have placed both poor whites and African-Americans in an inferior space and clothed them accordingly.

In spite of the fact that the way he wears his clothing identifies him as a lesser inhabitant in the social hierarchy, Haley's occupation as a slave trader puts him into close contact with elite

whites, and this is the main thrust of Stowe's warning: the accumulation of poor white wealth disrupts the Southern hierarchy and places inferior humans on an equal level with those who naturally belong in the elevated sphere. Stowe's cautionary tactic differs from the trade cards at this juncture, because while she makes it clear that poor white attitudes and behaviors have no place in elite society, she does not assuage upper class fears through the designation of undesirable characteristics. Instead, she allows them to contaminate elite Southern notions of gentility and decorum, giving privileged whites a glimpse of their future if they persist in the slave economy.

Haley, as white trash, attempts to adopt an upper class demeanor, but, like the incompetent African-Americans on the trade cards, the fact of class prevents him from assimilating. Haley speaks of his great humanity, but in the same breath, he refers to the slaves as "critters" (Stowe 7) and jokes that "I've got just as much conscience as any man in business can afford to keep,—just a little, you know, to swear by" (Stowe 4). Haley's version of kindness allows him to condemn the practice of taking an infant from its slave mother, but only because the process can be accomplished with less hassle for the trader if the baby is lifted surreptitiously and with the promise of "some ear-rings, or a new gown, or some such truck" (Stowe 7). Shelby, forced to conduct business with this inferior, is offended by Haley's version of Christianity, and Haley's presence in his immaculate parlor is odious to him. Mrs. Shelby later asks her husband about "the low-bred fellow...[who] presumed on it to make himself quite at home" in their upper class sanctuary, and Shelby is too embarrassed to admit Haley's occupation (Stowe 32-33).

Haley's disruptive presence continues to offend on his next visit to Shelby, when he calls Mrs. Shelby "Old lady," and notes that "'she don't like your humble servant, over and above,'...with an uneasy effort to be familiar" (Stowe 43). Shelby can only remark, "I am not

accustomed to hear my wife spoken of with such freedom” (Stowe 43), but he cannot prevent Haley from entering his home or outraging his sensibilities. Only moments before, Shelby had warned Haley that “if you wish to communicate with me, you must observe something of the decorum of a gentleman” (Stowe 42). This precaution is impossible for Haley to take; he is white trash, and he cannot change his behavior. Even the slaves recognize Haley’s inferiority, as one of them asserts that “he *does* swar...I hearn him” (Stowe 41). Haley’s actions indicate his status, and not only does this burden the elite master thrown into an unharmonious intimacy with the poor white, but it also damages the myth of white supremacy in the eyes of the slaves, who are groomed to accept whiteness as the marker of authority.

Unfortunately for Shelby, his part in the slave system exposes him to men like Haley, who force themselves into polite society and pollute the once-glorious upper class environment. Worse yet, Shelby is in debt to Haley, and must trade Tom, his most faithful servant, in order to keep his end of the bargain. The title character, however, even though he suffers greatly until his martyr’s death at the end, is not the greatest victim in the novel, at least in the eyes of elite white Southerners. The character who suffers the most injustice is Shelby, who has to accept Haley’s presence in his home and his life. That this situation is directly caused by the slave trade is a fact easy enough to ignore; the problem of white trash is the most troubling issue for the upper class characters. Haley represents an entire category of poor whites and their threat to the natural order of the South. Haley’s desire to transgress the boundaries of his economic status reaffirms that status, and his undesirability calls for absolute rejection.

II. A History of Poverty

A synthesis of Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (1941), Duanne Carr’s *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* (1996), and Gavin Jones’s *American Hungers: The*

Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945 (2008) offers a detailed study of the evolution of poverty in the South. Cash identifies the antebellum agricultural processes that initially forced landless whites off of fertile land and confined them to patches of scrub barely suitable for subsistence farming. Jones finds that the issue gained national attention after the Civil War, when “the period between 1870 and 1910 saw poverty rise from a community problem to a national one, exacerbated by the end of a slavery that had long overshadowed poverty as a national concern” (65). The connection between slavery and poverty placed particular focus on the Southern poor, and for sixty years the South was viewed as the most destitute space in the nation; this belief was easily substantiated, because not only was the South behind in its industrial efforts and economic progress, but it also lagged behind in social improvements as well, with far fewer schools and triple the number of illiterate white adults.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the national economic crisis drew sympathetic interest away from the plight of Southern poverty. While Jones finds that “[t]he slumps of the antebellum era were magnified into major cycles of depression, most notably the ‘great depression’ of the 1890s...which helped create a new public consciousness of unemployment as an inherent problem of industrial capitalism rather than a result of personal handicaps” (65), Cash asserts that this consciousness was rewritten during the Great Depression, when public works programs created to assist the poor had the opposite effect. The Works Progress Administration, which offered labor opportunities for scores of disadvantaged Southerners, instead, through short hours, light work, and the opportunity to live in town, had deleterious effects on the poor whites’ pride and work ethic. Initially, most Southerners were resistant to the WPA, and Cash asserts that “[a] logical case might be made out against [the New Deal] for its failure to go more energetically about changing the policies which were helping to throttle the

cotton export market” (402). Had the government supported the South’s flagging agricultural system, poor whites would have had more and better opportunities for economic advancement. Instead, they were forced to labor under a system that offered them minimum wages and no more, and sapped their drive to ever work or hope for more. After a few short years, the Southern spirit of individualism and honest labor collapsed, and “[g]etting on WPA or direct relief had in fact literally become an object of eager ambition...for many of the common whites” (Cash 407).

There is no doubt that the authors of the New Deal were sincere in their efforts to improve the South’s economic plight. In a radio address on August 5, 1938, Harry L. Hopkins, the Works Progress Administrator, summed up the South’s difficult circumstances: “The South, with one-fourth of the population, receives one-seventh of the national income. With one-fourth of the people, it has less than one-third of the life insurance. The incomes of this one-fourth of the people produce but one-fourteenth of the total income tax revenue.” Hopkins identifies both the Great Depression and World War I as factors in the region’s economic collapse, as

[i]n addition to the long-time ills of Southern agriculture the World War further weakened the position of the South by converting the nation as a whole from a debtor to a creditor nation. As long as we owed Europe money and bought manufactured goods from them, they were glad to accept raw cotton and tobacco as payment. Now that they owe us money, it is much more difficult to sell them raw materials.

Hopkins cites the success of the WPA in creating jobs, reducing illnesses, and constructing sanitary systems for poor Southerners. These improvements, however, were not simply undertaken from sympathy or goodwill, as Hopkins addresses the effects of Southern poverty on the nation-at-large: “My interests...are national—not sectional...And what we have done and

shall do to improve these conditions will be from the standpoint of the best interests of the nation as a whole.” Hopkins understood the perpetual bias against the South and its potential to undercut any attempts to revive the flagging region; he asserts that “most of us dwell too long on the causes of the South’s difficulties and too briefly on what is to be done about them.” The difficulty lay in convincing both the Northern population—itsself traumatized by Depression and War—and elite Southern whites that anything could or should be done about the lower class.

Despite its aim, the WPA and relief brought great tragedy to poor whites; stripped of their dignity, they were thrown into “shiftlessness, the lack of ambition, the willingness to accept bad living conditions and the dependence which had always been growing up from the bottom” (Cash 412). In addition, the move from country to town necessitated by WPA jobs placed more and more poor whites in slums, where crime and disease were rampant; the murder rates in Southern towns were much higher than anywhere else in the nation during this period, as were the incidents of non-murder violence (Cash 415).

New Deal programs were not any more advantageous for poor whites in rural areas, either. Carr notes that during the Depression, “large numbers of tenant families, two-thirds of whom were white, lived on the border of starvation” (12). This destitution “played havoc with the health of those at the bottom of the social scale, producing hookworm and malaria...and forcing them to eat clay to survive” (Carr 12). Rather than recognizing the unavoidable illnesses of poverty and the desperation behind eating dirt, elite whites twisted these conditions into proof of poor white inferiority; Matt Wray’s superb study of these manipulations is fully explained in the fourth chapter. New Deal programs to aid the rural poor were “subverted by landowners,” who forced their tenants off the land and let it lay fallow to receive government aid (Carr 12).

The cruelty of these landowners is fully treated, albeit with dubious success, by Erskine Caldwell, whom I discuss in Chapter Three.

It is during this period that the notion of poor white inferiority becomes more complex. When poor whites were included in the Southern social structure before the Revolution, class was not a factor in their characterization. By the 1930s, the stereotype was firmly in place, but there is no evidence that poor whites' behavior was much different than any other groups; in fact, there is a strong case for poor whites' persistent endeavors to adopt and enact upper class attitudes and behaviors. During the Depression, however, poor white culture shifted to more closely mirror the stereotype constructed to contain and disfranchise it. As the lower class grew ever more indigent, they desperately clung to any federal assistance they could find, which limited their potential and forced them into undesirable habits and mores. It is vital that we understand this vicious cycle before we begin any inquiries into poverty and the poor white after the Depression.

During the Second World War, the issue of poverty received scant attention. This is because the nation's eyes were turned toward the conflict overseas, and because most Southern men were either away at war or employed by the war effort. A shortage of farm labor offered employment opportunities for those who did not fight or work in factories, and some poor whites had become content with their parasitic lifestyles and continued the unfortunate habit of collecting federal aid and refusing to take advantage of the new economic opportunities. These conditions remained stable until the end of the war, when many factories closed and the working population more or less returned to its pre-war numbers. Not even the great casualties suffered during the war or the baby boom fostered economic growth for most Southerners. The brief

respite from absolute destitution or involuntary reliance ended, and the lower class resumed its indigent position.

The 1960s saw a revival in awareness of poverty, and the War on Poverty began. However, the programs directed toward eradicating poverty were controlled by elites on a small scale, and “the local structure through which federal programs were filtered” subverted the government’s efforts (Carr 12); most of the money intended to assist the poor was lost in bureaucracy and Southern elites’ pet projects. This theft continued through the 1980s, when free-market capitalism “generally exacerbated the economic woes of families and communities in the rural South [by forcing them] into direct competition with the Third World countries for footloose industries” (Carr 13). In the 21st century, we are still experiencing the effects set by the precedent of outsourcing, as money-hungry corporations persist in closing their factories on American soil and moving them to countries that offer cheap labor and enforce few or no regulations. This outsourcing has had a profound effect on the national economy, because it is not only poor whites who suffer from inflated prices due to the cost of importing goods no longer made in America. The difficult import/export balance required by the global market weighs heavily against the United States, and not only do poor whites struggle to find employment, they—along with the rest of the nation—pay ever increasing taxes, and the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to expand.

Since the Progressive Era, which “witnessed the development of voluntary social work” (Jones 65), there have been rumblings of the suspicion that poverty is not an inherent aspect of lower class culture, and the WPA, New Deal, and myriad assistance programs since demonstrate that the notion of poor white degeneracy and culpability is not an unequivocally accepted idea. But any sympathetic attempts to study lower class white poverty in the United States have been

met with resistance by many in the upper echelon. The Southern myth of poor white inferiority has created a

long tradition in Western social thought of rationalizing poverty by describing the poor as inherently disordered and degraded. In the United States with its pronounced ideologies of social fluidity and equality of opportunity, difficult questions have surrounded the masses of people who lack the material resources for decent living, and who seem unable to rise freely on an economic scale. Doctrines of individualism have tended to downplay poverty as a problem of social structure by rooting its causes in the flawed character or in the immoral behavior of individuals. (Jones 2)

This position is frequently supported by the examples of the minority of poor whites who adopted the patterns of shiftlessness and criminality that Cash identifies as a product of New Deal programs. This unnecessary reliance on aid programs has been passed down through successive generations, and there is no doubt that some poor whites are just as lazy and deprived as the stereotype claims. But the number of these stereotypical poor whites is grossly exaggerated to fit elite agendas.

A second obstacle to understanding poverty is identified by Jim Goad. In *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (1997), Goad criticizes federal aid programs for exhibiting a kind of reverse racism: the federal analysis of poverty “willingly understands the economic imperatives behind urban street gangs but not rural moonshiners. It embraces Crips and Bloods, but not the Hatfields and McCoys. It celebrates diversity, yet consistently frowns on the experience of the white working class” (22). While Goad’s claim is admittedly politically incorrect and does nothing to understand the plight of

urban poverty, it generates troubling and conflicting considerations of specifically white disadvantage. To argue that federal agencies privilege poor minorities asserts a combination of raced and classed biases. It stands to reason that elite whites' long history of racism and discrimination against African-Americans would prompt them to sympathize more fully with minority underprivilege. I am not arguing that race guilt is the only or even primary motivation behind efforts to eradicate urban poverty, but it certainly is a component. The repercussions of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and anti-Civil Rights efforts have left whites with much for which they must atone, and the attempt to correct more than a century of injustice may lead elites to emphasize poverty among minorities.

The second obstacle to any analysis of poor white disadvantage is also rooted in upper class supremacy. In spite of the changing attitudes towards African-Americans after the Civil Rights Movement, the term "white" is still synonymous with "privilege," and white supremacy is still a very real part of the national culture. Indeed, burgeoning scholarly interest in whiteness studies "call for recognition of the ways in which whiteness serves as a sort of invisible norm, the unraced center of a racialized world. Whiteness is different from blackness (or any other 'racial-ness') in that it has long held the privileged place of racial normativity" (*White Trash* 3). Poor whites, then, threaten the myth by inhabiting an inferior space within the privileged sphere. In order to explain the existence of debilitating poverty within their own class, elites use the white trash stereotype, which "serves as a useful way of blaming the poor" (*White Trash* 1). The white trash stereotype protects the notion of white supremacy because it "marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves" (*White Trash* 2). This rationale shields elite whites from unflattering associations to the inferior class, and also masks the contradictions within the assertion of whiteness as normative or exceptional.

Identifying poverty as a pre-existing condition among stereotyped poor whites has other disadvantages as well. First, “cultural explanations of poverty place moral blame on the poor by emphasizing their passivity and disorganization, effectively rationalizing schemes to limit welfare and other forms of economic redistribution” (Jones 15). Elites are forced to accept the responsibility for their role in urban poverty, but they only have to spend a minimum of time and resources on minorities in order to assert that they are sympathetic to African-American underprivilege. To include poor whites in their philanthropy would require more than they are willing to give. If nothing can be done about poor whites because they choose or are responsible for their economic circumstances, elites must be excused from even attempting to help them.

Yet another way that the white trash stereotype benefits elite whites is found in Wray’s analysis of the epithet itself:

Split the phrase [white trash] in two and read the meanings against each other: *white* and *trash*. Slowly, the term reveals itself as an expression of fundamental tensions and deep structural antimonies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt. In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, *white trash* names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other. It brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order. (*Not Quite White* 2)

That stable symbolic order is the system of class that positions elites at the top of the social and economic hierarchy and forces the lower class to the bottom margins. It is also a system that requires the poor white stereotype of deserved poverty because, as Jones notes, “the prominence

of poverty in an American context poses more than just a social problem. It augurs the collapse of democracy itself as a social and political ideal” (*American Hungers* 1). Privileged whites must affirm their superior status through both race and class and protect the political conditions that allow them to do so, and they brand the lower class as white trash to support the very racialized and classed biases they assert.

Resting the burden of poverty squarely on the bent backs of the disadvantaged themselves is one of the most important functions of the poor white stereotype, and it is for this reason that the discussion of the myth of poor white trash must be grounded in a class context. From the antebellum era to today, it is material conditions that dictate all opportunities for advancement and achievement. Poor whites have always been at an economic disadvantage that excluded them from regional belonging and belittled and decried them in the national imaginary. The tempting fictions of the elite white myth of poor white trash have ensured that millions of the voiceless poor would be trapped in intolerable circumstances and denied adequate and accurate representation. Melanie Benson’s *Disturbing Calculations* (2008) explores the methods of determining value in the contemporary South and finds that the flawed mathematics of the current capitalist economy mirrors that of the antebellum slave system (2). Benson argues that both African-Americans and poor whites are oppressed by a system that ascribes them no value, and that capitalism fails to achieve an order that neutrally calculates the individual. This system instead creates a set of mutually exclusive “pluses” and “minuses”:

elite southerners fetishize their own racial primacy (as “original,” whole, and superior) by engaging mathematical fictions of increase, multiplication, and accumulation—tropes that have a bona fide correlative in the inequitable world of free-market capitalism, and that often betray a sense of compensatory entitlement

incited by the loss of automatic privilege and prosperity in a postslavery economy. Likewise, marginalized southerners register their difference as a lack or “minussnes,” a sense of perpetual absence or depreciation that they are ceaselessly attempting to factor away in order to achieve the fullness and prosperity associated with white mastery. (4)

Because they lack total agency, poor whites are helpless to correct the errors of this arithmetic, and “while poor folks engage in labor and algebra to find profit in the answers, the elite white simply sits back in the security of inherent superiority and stability” (Benson 52). This seems a perpetual cycle of poor white abuse: because they have no class status, poor whites lack the authority to rewrite their identities, but they must be able to rewrite those identities in order to gain status. The poor white cause in this light appears, indeed, hopeless.

Were they every truly a class left unto their own, the white trash stereotype would perhaps lose some of its power over the lower class. Instead, elite whites have a long history of exploiting and manipulating the poor. From the Proto-Dorian Bond of Caucasian unity, which prevented poor whites from recognizing or giving voice to their abuse, to the Southern demagogues who feigned sympathy and support to garner votes, to the race-baiting that began in the antebellum era and has continued steadily through the Civil Rights Movement and beyond and worked to place the poor of both races at odds in order to avoid the threat of a united, lower class assault on elite white supremacy, poor whites have been grossly misused by those in power. The lower class has been bullied or cajoled into giving their support to political, economic, and social agendas that always excluded them. And, because they are excluded and yet still desperately believe the privileged’s promises of support and aid, they are mocked and punished for their gullibility.

The white trash stereotype makes us feel good about ourselves, because we know that there exists a group that is unquestionably slower, meaner, and far more undesirable than we are, and it justifies our economic circumstance, social position, and moral authority because it proves that we are simply more deserving than they. Left in the hands of the Boyd Crowders of the world, the United States would rapidly collapse in upon itself, and we must do all that we can to deny them entry into the national system. Never mind that social activists claim that there are very few Boyd Crowders in America and that his construction is largely fictitious; we watch TV, and we know those activists are apologists, nearly as unsavory as the poor white trash themselves.

The political movement against poor whites requires a bipartisan effort, and this has become tricky in the polarized political climate of the 21st century. The left accuses the right of rejecting or restricting federal aid programs, and their charge is thoroughly documented, as Republican leaders such as South Carolina Lieutenant Governor Andre Bauer hint that the poor are not competent to be fully productive members of society and claim that federal programs only encourage undesirable lower class behavior. At a town hall meeting on January 23rd, 2010, Bauer, who was the probable Republican gubernatorial candidate, had this to say about his state's free lunch program, which feeds 58% of public school children:

“My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply... They will reproduce, especially the ones that don't think further than that. And so what you've got to do is to curtail that type of behavior. They don't know any better.” (*The Louisiana Weekly*, February 1, 2010)

Bauer, a bachelor, makes \$44,755 per year, has ample benefits and an expense account, and will retire with a hefty pension. It is worth remembering that he is talking about hungry children in this speech.

Bauer's appeal to his upper- and upper-middle-class constituents inverts the techniques used by former Alabama governor George Wallace. While Bauer wages a social-ideological assault on the poor, Wallace's covert manipulations of lower class whites exploited their voting power through a series of race-baiting tactics that invoked poor white fears of African-American supremacy. In *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (1996), Dan T. Carter finds that, although Wallace was an educated attorney, he followed the path blazed by Louisiana demagogue Huey Long and emphasized his rural roots to appear as a Southern Everyman (12). Wallace spoke to a category of lower class whites who "felt psychologically and culturally isolated from the dominant currents of American life in the 1960s" (Carter 12). Wallace created this identity in order to present to poor whites "a kindred spirit: a man despised and dismissed by distant social planners all too ready to sacrifice working-class families on the altar of upper-middle-class convictions" (Carter 13). Wallace used poor white dissatisfaction and alienation to his advantage, and Carter asserts that he

was one of the last grand masters of the kind of foot-stomping public speaking that characterized American politics—particularly southern American politics—in the age before television... Wallace reached back to the language of his 19th century Populist forebears as he celebrated the 'producers' of American society: the 'beauticians, the truck drivers, the office workers, the policemen and the small businessman,' who had formed the heart of the Democratic Party. (17)

His calculated attempt to downplay his privileged status drew many supporters from the disadvantaged white population, as “[t]he real foundation of his campaign kitty was the hundreds of thousands of low- and middle-income Americans who mailed ten- and twenty-dollar contributions—usually in cash” (Carter 11).

But Wallace’s strategy actually undermined the cause of lower class uplift because its race-based methods further dissociated poor whites from national efforts to assist the underprivileged. While the War on Poverty was beginning to formulate an approach to aid lower class Americans, Wallace was turning poor whites away from both the federal government and those in the African-American community who labored under the same disadvantage. Carter finds that Wallace’s “genius was his ability to voice his listeners’ sense of betrayal—of victimhood—and to refocus their anger” (17). Wallace indicted the White House, Civil Rights supporters, antiwar protestors, and the entire African-American race as the cause of rising crime rates, illegitimate births, abortions, divorce, and obscenity in literature and on film (Carter 15).

Wallace understood that he could manipulate his supporters by appealing to the notion of white supremacy, perhaps waning but nevertheless extant during the 1960s. There is no doubt that Wallace was racist, as his stand in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama proves, but Carter asserts that those who knew Wallace thought he adapted his beliefs to suit the occasion (8). Carter seems to imply that Wallace exaggerated his own racism to encourage it in his constituents. This speculation is irrelevant to Wallace’s own obvious bigotry, but it is nevertheless important because it illuminates Wallace’s feelings about the lower class of both races. His level of calculation is outrageous; for example, after losing a debate with an opponent who championed white rights, Wallace said, “Well boys...no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again” (Carter 2). That he believed that African-Americans were grossly inferior and

yet could adjust the level of racism in his public persona in order to foment poor white hatred reveals the depth of his exploitation of poor whites as well as African-Americans.

But the left, typically the party of the disadvantaged and minorities, is not above reproach, either. In the 2008 presidential election, the Tea Party Movement began as a response to conservative fears of an extremist left-wing government. The Tea Parties, held all over the nation, accused the Obama administration of socialism, rejected the economic stimulus bill, and decried universal health care. Liberal reaction to the Tea Parties was immediate, but one of the most vehement critics was actress-comedian Janeane Garofolo. During an April 16, 2009 appearance on *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, Garofolo ranted about her suspicions of the Tea Party agenda, saying, “I didn’t know there were so many racists left...as I’ve said, the Republican hype and the conservative movement has now crystallized into the white power movement.” Garofolo charged that the real motivation behind the rallies and protests was “about hating a black man in the White House. This is racism straight up.” Garofolo’s critique has been echoed by many, but what stands out is her characterization of the Movement’s members: “That is nothing but a bunch of teabagging *rednecks*” (emphasis mine). Her use of the white trash analog “redneck” reveals a deep-seated sense of supremacy and an espousal of the myth of poor white inferiority. Of course the Tea Party participants are racist, alarmist, and fanatical, because they are white trash. They are also ignorant and violent. Garofolo asserts that

“they have no idea what the Boston Tea Party was about, they don’t know their history at all...because the limbic brain inside a right-winger or Republican or conservative or your average white power activist, the limbic is much larger in their head space than in a reasonable person, and it’s pushing against the frontal lobe. So their synapses are misfiring.”

Garofolo's assessment of "a neurological problem" mirrors Bauer's claim that the poor should not breed; both smack of eugenics-era condescension. Garofolo's conflation of Republicans, conservatives, and white supremacists demonstrates the political power of the pejorative marker white trash. We cannot immediately see the similarities between conservatives such as Newt Gingrich or Rush Limbaugh and Boyd Crowder, but Garofolo assures us that they exist. All poor whites are white power proponents, and, like *Justified*'s antagonist, they are stupid and hypocritical; Boyd would most certainly be a member of the Tea Party, if he was not so busy with his neo-Nazi agenda. He would also fervently promote violence. Garofolo is encouraged by Olbermann, who asks (suggests?), "What happens if somebody who's at one of these things hurt somebody?" Garofolo shrugs, "That is an unfortunate byproduct since the dawn of time of a volatile group like this of the limbic brain." Her entire interview is given to bashing the Tea Party and conservatives through the association of white trash, and the real victims are not the right-wing political activists she derides, but rather lower class whites. By asserting that the members are racist, violent, and even mentally dysfunctional, and tying those characteristics neatly into the category of "redneck," Garofolo's claims both rely on and perpetuate the stereotype of poor white trash.

Both Bauer and Garofolo exhibit a striking sense of entitlement that takes for granted their superiority over the lower class. Their casual exploitation of the poor exemplifies the way that elite myths build upon themselves and exert the dominant interpretation of poor whites in the social and political sphere. Bauer's speech associates poverty with incompetence and animalistic promiscuity, while Garofolo's comments reiterate the connection between poor whites and stereotypical violence and racism, and both assert poor white mental degeneracy. The self-perpetuating function of myth is evidenced by the fact that while Bauer and Garofolo reach

into the past to present long-standing poor white stereotypes, their comments also propel the myth of poor white trash forward.

The reaction to Bauer's speech also brought two interesting concepts to the fore. First, liberals blasted him for what they saw as the obvious racism of his statement. The media focus on minority underprivilege solidifies Goad's claim that the nation privileges African-American poverty. Indeed, Doug Henwood asserts that

[t]he typical poor person in the American imagination is urban, black, and young—either a single teen mother or her issue. There are undeniably many such poor in America. But portraying poverty that way makes it easier for ruling ideologists to stigmatize the poor through appeals to white male bigotry. The American poor are a wonderfully diverse assemblage. (*White Trash* 183)

The cry of outrage—mostly from white liberal politicians and political commentators—on behalf of the African-American community shows that whiteness as a category still denotes privilege, and that upper class whites are far less sympathetic to the poor of their race. These repercussions also hint at a troubling latent national racism, as they illuminate a persistent conflation of blackness and poverty.

The second startling revelation comes from the popular reaction to Bauer's statements and highlights the way those who were offended by the speech targeted Bauer's status as a Southerner. On the ThinkProgress.org message board, admittedly not the site of scholarly discussion, but nonetheless a fairly accurate gauge of the sensibilities of everyday Americans, messages accused not just Bauer, but the entire South, of incest, idiocy, and promiscuity; rants included "The sad result of generations of inbreeding in the South"; "I wish South Carolinians

would get a little hipper, and just appoint Foghorn Leghorn to be their Lord Chancellor for life”; and “After the speech Mr. Bauer left early to attend a meeting of his local Ku Klux Klan.” These messages have no relevance to the issues that lay behind Bauer’s comments, but they offer a glimpse of the lasting power of the myths the North created about the South, myths that elite Southerners adapted to apply solely to white trash. ThinkProgress.org’s message board is a terrifying warning to elite whites that may eventually offer the possibility of rewriting the white trash stereotype; after over a century of discriminatory tactics and privileged constructions of the poor white as undesirable Other, the stereotype has had the effect of legitimating the pre-Revolution Northern notion of the inferiority of the entire South. It has grown so large and become so prevalent in the national mind that the elites’ carefully crafted lines of delineation have blurred, and mainstream culture dismisses the Southern social hierarchy in favor of broad and unflattering generalizations about the entire region. The stereotype of the South as backwards and worthless will not die, and the myth of poor white trash, created to protect elites from Northern criticism, threatens to overtake its master.

III. The Middle Class

There is some debate about the exact dates of the rise of the middle class in the South. Cash asserts the existence of the “yeoman farmer” in the years before and immediately after the Civil War and a definite middle class by the 1920s (266), while David Roediger identifies a “working class” in the antebellum era whose associations with the poor white category is difficult to assert and often contradictory (25). Cobb emphasizes the New Deal and World War II eras as the defining moments of middle class development in the national mind (*Redefining* 27). I address the impact of middle class whites on the poor white during the 1970s, admittedly long

after scholars assert its genesis in the South. Several important considerations lead to this decision.

The first is that, irrespective of its date of origin, the middle class did not exist as a unified category until well after the myth of poor white trash appeared; as such, middle class Southerners could and did espouse the stereotype, but they had no part in its initial construction. Second, American capitalism preaches the doctrine of progress and achievement, and middle class whites have at all times focused on the goal of upward mobility. This means that the middle class has been easily led by the upper, which has consistently dictated Southern notions of class. Middle class whites have voluntarily adopted elite ideology because it serves as a link between the two groups, and because it is a grooming tool for the entrance into privileged society. Third, the material circumstances of middle class culture engender an instinctual aversion to poverty and the poor white; Gavin Jones notes that this aversion is particularly pronounced in a “turbulent economic climate,” when poverty needs to be interpreted as a product of degeneracy in order to soothe middle class fears of downward mobility (25). I begin my exploration of the middle class’s role in the perpetuation of the poor white stereotype in the 1970s because during this decade the three above conditions collided in the South, and middle class whites achieved full participation in the myth.

Due to its origin and most prominent uses, my study of the white trash stereotype centers on the elites who created it and who were responsible for its dissemination into Southern ideology. Indeed, privileged whites have used the stereotype against the middle class as well, which I will explore in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*. The often tenuous position of the middle class—as evidenced by America’s recent recession and the skyrocketing unemployment rate—renders it unreliable as a gauge for measuring class feeling. There is evidence that the nation’s

economy will shortly revive, but millions of middle class whites and blacks may already be trapped in the downward spiral they so greatly fear, and these are ill-suited to evaluate the shape of class politics. The middle class is also relatively isolated from critique because it is the cornerstone of our capitalist economy and because it is not middle class greed or corruption which disfranchises the lower class. For these reasons, I generally eschew explorations of middle class culture.

Chapter Two: Minority Myth-Making

For all the difficulties the poor white faced in the 20th century South, his troubles still paled in comparison to African-Americans'. No amount of psychological damage or social exclusion could rival the regular abuse African-Americans experienced at the hands of the majority of whites. Poor whites and African-Americans had several commonalities, however, in terms of their characterization in the Southern and national imaginary. Both groups were to be separated from upper-class whites, both were seen as fundamentally inferior, and both were encouraged—sometimes subtly but often not—to stay in their places. Had the two worked together against their oppression, in-roads to equality may have been more quickly established; they, after all, made up a potentially powerful majority. Instead, poor whites and blacks often found or placed themselves at odds, and the only group that benefitted from this disharmony was the elite white.

While their configurations in the Southern imaginary may have had similarities, African-Americans had far more prejudice with which to contend. No other group has had to bear the weight of history the way they have, first as slaves, then as political pawns during Reconstruction, then as citizens of the second class during the era of Jim Crow, and finally as targets of aggression and discrimination during the Civil Rights Movement. Through it all, the fictive constructions of Southern history loomed largely, asserting first that African-Americans figured as three-fifths of a whole, and thereafter insisting that the whole to which they could amount was still somehow wanting. Indeed, while even the poorest white could find some satisfaction in the color of his skin—no matter how little else he had—black skin always signified lack.

In spite of their treatment, African-Americans managed to do something that poor whites did not: they told their stories in literature. This is an impressive feat given that most African-Americans were not allowed an education prior to the Civil War, and a large number could not read or write. It was, of course, in the best interests of the ruling class to keep their inferiors ignorant. The determination to give their testimonies is even more impressive in light of the fact that upper-class whites in the South were less than kind to African-American writers. Earlier authors such as Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass had published narratives that were decried as propaganda by white pro-slavery enthusiasts, who accused them of plagiarism, and marked them as mouthpieces for the Northern agenda.

There is great cause for the celebration of African-American writers who were courageous enough to produce their own literature in the face of such antagonism. It is perhaps more surprising—given what we know of the white ruling class—to discover the ways in which they depicted poor whites as the crux of their oppression. A natural conclusion would predict that any negative portrayals of whites—poor or otherwise—would be met with elite disapproval and censure at best. This had certainly been the case with the antebellum and immediately post-Emancipation slave narratives, which tend not to distinguish between the white classes, at least in terms of material circumstances; after the Civil War, the South discouraged all but the most celebratory writing about the region, leading to the popularity of authors such as Henry Timrod, Daniel B. Lucas, Abram Joseph Ryan, and Thomas Nelson Page.

Yet, as early as the turn of the 20th century, African-Americans such as Charles Chesnutt were using poor white characters in a number of unflattering ways, and all with the apparent acceptance of upper-class whites. Chesnutt's poor whites embody all of the racism and

antagonism of the white race, and they bear most of the responsibility for African-American oppression and exclusion. Chesnutt's works demonstrate the usefulness of the stereotype of poor white trash for a disfranchised people; the upper class were not the only ones who found it practical to identify an inferior group.

Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) points out the flaw in the notions of elite white superiority and African-American inferiority; additionally, it highlights a number of the ruling class's most utilized historical inaccuracies, those of the Black Beast Rapist and White Southern Womanhood. The importance of a text written by an African-American that serves to dispel widely held but nonetheless wholly false beliefs cannot be overestimated. What is troubling about the novel, however, is the lengths to which the author goes to create lines of delineation between white economic classes. Chesnutt identified whites as his target audience, declaring that his works would be given "not so much [to] the elevation of the colored people as the whites" (Scruggs 3). In spite of this assertion, it is clear that Chesnutt employed the stereotype of white trash to achieve that elevation, thus alienating an already disfranchised segment of the white population. While never completely exonerating upper-class whites for more than a century of racism, he nevertheless locates the source—and to a great extent the blame—in the poor white. It is through a poor white character that Chesnutt exposes the hypocrisy and racism of those in power, and I therefore assert that the depictions in the novel constitute a subversive tactic that allowed the author to achieve most of his ends without condemning his work to elite white rejection.

Several facts must be established before a study of the poor whites' use for African-Americans can begin. First, as an African-American, Chesnutt was already at a great

disadvantage in terms of elite white reception¹; second, he could predict the backlash that would ensue from a work of fiction that targeted upper-class whites for their mistreatment of blacks²; third, he was well aware of the stigma against poor whites; and fourth, the stereotype of white trash was so powerful by this time that its use brought no repercussions. These facts point to the notion that Chesnutt was at liberty to lambaste poor whites in a way he could not with upper-class whites. The elite whites in Chesnutt's writing do not face the same levels of derision the author levels at poor whites; while the motivation for such blatant stereotyping is troubling here, the impact of Chesnutt's construction of white trash is clear.

Chesnutt adapted one of the techniques used by the antebellum abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe discussed in the first chapter, that of cushioning his condemnation of the ruling class by blurring the fact that they were responsible for the hateful practices of discrimination. Chesnutt does not excuse elite whites or pretend that they are blameless, but he simply does not focus on their conduct and culpability to any great extent. Both Stowe and Chesnutt present lower-class whites as a threat to the Southern peace and present upper-class whites as victims of inherited ignorance, trapped inside a system that has grown out of control. In the antebellum era, only a harmless white Yankee woman could get away with critiquing Southern whites and their practices—and even then she was roundly denounced below the Mason-Dixon. But after the Civil War and Reconstruction, when even the most unrepentant Southern white had been forced to acknowledge at least momentary defeat, and the impetus to protect white supremacy had been temporarily overshadowed by the more pressing needs of survival, poor whites could be stereotyped with relative impunity.

¹ By 1897, Chesnutt had published a number of short stories and a biography of Frederick Douglass, but critical reviews had omitted his race (Scruggs 5).

² For an example, see the plethora of anti-Tom novels published in the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Probably the main reason negative poor white depictions were so readily accepted by the upper class was that they reaffirmed another Southern myth, one that had grown out of the plantation-Cavalier myth of the antebellum era: the myth of the Lost Cause, which served to assuage the bitterness and despair that set in after the South lost the Civil War and was forced to release its slaves from bondage. Things grew steadily worse during the Reconstruction era, when the South felt subjected to Northern smugness and revenge. Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* (1879) describes the "[s]adness and gloom [that] covered the land" (113) after the South's defeat:

The returning braves brought no joy to the loving hearts who had sent them forth. Nay, their very presence kept alive the chagrin of defeat. Instead of banners and music and gay greeting, silence and tears were their welcome home. Not only for the dead were these lamentations, but also for the living. If the past was sorrowful, the future was scarcely less so. If that which went before was embittered by disappointment and the memory of vain sacrifice, that which was to come was darkened with uncertainty and apprehension. The good things of the past were apples of Sodom in the hand of the present. (113)

The South had gone into battle assured of the justness of the cause and the certainty of victory, but heavy casualties and embarrassing losses had followed. The region to which they returned was no longer glorious, and a deep depression, one which extended far beyond the economy, settled in.

Although they were forced to accept defeat for a time, it was not long before Southerners nonetheless rebelled and began to construct a myth that contradicted Northern views of Southern life and culture. This myth was a partial response to the Northern practice of placing African-Americans in powerful political positions, which Tourgee asserts was destined to fail due to the

high rates of African-American illiteracy, landlessness, destitution, and ignorance borne out of their exclusion from politics (151). Tourgee is sympathetic to the plight of the newly freed African-Americans who were burdened with a task for which they had never been allowed to prepare, “the burden of restoration, reconstruction, re-organization” (151), but white Southerners focused on the grave injustices to their own race and took this political disruption as an affront. Indeed, Booker T. Washington, only a child during Reconstruction, understood that this practice could not succeed: “the ignorance of my race was being used as a tool” with the purpose of “punish[ing] Southern white men” by placing African-Americans into positions of power (49). W.E.B. Du Bois, hardly Washington’s strongest supporter, identified the same dilemma, albeit with a more balanced summation; DuBois found that, while organizations such as the Freedman’s Bureau began as a way to protect African-Americans from a justice system constructed and controlled by elite whites, it instead “prejudiced the Bureau in favor of the black litigants, and led without doubt to much injustice and annoyance” (19). While they were no doubt necessary, “Bureau courts tended to become centres simply for punishing whites” (19). Disempowered whites reacted strongly to the new political climate, and the myth of the Lost Cause came to symbolize all that whites believed had been good about the South’s past political system; it also rewrote the history of slavery in much the same way that the plantation myth did, with respectable and responsible Southern gentlemen and happy Negroes all living in perfect harmony in a bountiful land. Northern victory had not effected a necessary change in the region, whites argued; it had merely momentarily disrupted a once-great society that could be so again.

The Lost Cause explained Southern defeat in the Civil War as God’s test of their faith and steadfastness. Cobb notes that white members of the clergy drew parallels between Southerners and the people of the Old Testament Israel, “explaining that ‘for wise purposes’ God

sometimes allowed his people to undergo ‘apparent defeat’” (*Away* 63). It was God, after all, who ordained slavery and charged masters to rule with wise benevolence. Southerners, then, were modern-day Israelites and, like their Biblical antecedents, if they kept the ways of righteousness even in the face of great trials and tribulations, they, too, would one day be restored to their former glory. All they had to do was hold out hope and continue to believe in the justness of their actions, and the Lost Cause served as a constant reminder of this difficult charge and its eventual reward.

While not specifically addressing the poor white, the Lost Cause for all intents and purposes excludes him from its category of elite whiteness. The Southern gentleman of the Lost Cause was first and foremost a landholder and slave owner; it was, in fact, these two great responsibilities that molded the Southern gentleman into the superior specimen that he was. But land and slaves were objects that the poor white could never acquire, and so he was necessarily left out of the conception of Southern white personhood. Unfortunately, this exclusion made him vulnerable to exploitation, and because the Lost Cause could not outright deny the atrocities committed against both slaves and free African-Americans—the slave narratives had seen to that—landless poor whites were conveniently available to take responsibility. Angelo Rich Robinson notes that as soon as the military enforcement of the Compromise of 1877 was lifted, “the white South was anxious to reverse any and all progress made by blacks and sought to return to the past when white supremacy reigned” (98), and when elites controlled their own characterizations. In this way, all upper-class Southern whites could be kind, paternalistic masters who never mistreated their human chattel, just as Stowe had described them before the Civil War, and the Lost Cause would be invulnerable to charges of false witnessing.

Chesnutt's use of the poor white operates along already marked lines of delineation within the white race, and his strongest criticism is directed toward the inferior poor whites. While his work is not an attempt to pander to or flatter elite whites, the effect of his hyperbolic constructions of white trash is to allow him to make valid criticisms about the racism and discrimination endorsed and enacted by all whites. Chesnutt centers his critique on white trash figures, and because upper-class whites were eager to shirk responsibility for their own misdeeds, they were complicit in the scapegoating of the poor white. Although it created and was sustained by a false construct which held that economically disadvantaged whites were inferior to those who prospered, this shared perspective on stereotyped poor whites benefited both groups: African-Americans found more freedom to air their grievances against at least some whites, while elite whites were spared the uncomfortable guilt they deserved.

Chesnutt's poor whites resemble Stowe's in a number of ways, and his George McBane in *The Marrow of Tradition* is an expansion of the one-notes Simon Legree and Tom Larker of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. All three men have been involved in unsavory occupations, Legree and Larker as slave trader and slave hunter, respectively, and McBane as the overseer of a convict chain gang. They are all vicious and uncouth, and they serve as counterpoints to the well-mannered elites. While they are tolerated by the upper-class whites with whom they associate, each of these men is unquestionably excluded from belonging to the elite white in-group. Their physical descriptions are also similar; they are dirty and practice questionable hygiene, and they bear all the markers of disrepute and dishonor. Like Stowe, Chesnutt uses his poor white figures as a catch-all for the racism of the entire white race, but Chesnutt does not simply tread the same ground as Stowe; he takes his critique a step further by tentatively placing the white trash McBane inside of the elite's social sphere and giving him all of the economic opportunities

Stowe warned that poor whites would have if the South persisted in its slave system. Legree and Larker are indisputably outsiders; McBane is the next generation of poor white, dissatisfied with life on the fringe. McBane is a troubling character and a threat to elite white purity because, unlike the traditional destitute poor white, he has acquired enough wealth to gain access to the elite social circle. While his acceptance into this privileged category is met with elite white resistance, he nonetheless possesses enough economic power to force at least reluctant acknowledgement by his social superiors. Wealthy whites used class distinctions to justify their power, and Chesnutt makes this notion explicit while playing upon upper-class fears of intermingling.

Chesnutt's employment of the new-money/old-money paradigm condemns white privilege in general but does not overtly attack the privileged themselves. Chesnutt takes great pains to distinguish McBane's appearance, behavior, attitudes, and actions from those who fully belong to the upper class. Stowe warned elite whites of what would happen if they continued to support the plantation system, and Chesnutt makes good on that warning by taking a poor white product of that system and giving him all the wealth and power that Stowe predicted would eventually be his. As an unrestrained white trash character, McBane wreaks havoc on upper-class society; he was not born into or groomed for a place alongside the privileged, and his contact with them has the capacity to taint them. Chesnutt's creation of McBane allows him to go further than Stowe ever could; because McBane is wholly depraved and Chesnutt focuses the reader's ire onto him, he is able to gently probe the deep-seated and less obvious racism of McBane's superiors.

The white trash McBane stands in direct contrast to his reluctant associates, General Belmont and Major Carteret. The three men are brought together by a shared political purpose

and racist agenda, to wrest control of the state from the Fusion Party, a group founded on the Reconstruction doctrine of racial equality. McBane, Belmont, and Carteret are bound together in their white supremacist agenda, and they are all three men of considerable means; additionally, their cause unites them and makes them momentarily indistinguishable from one another as their ugly ideologies bind them together. Temporarily, the poor white and the elite are equals.

Soon, however, it becomes glaringly obvious where each man belongs on the social hierarchy, as Chesnutt plays heavily on McBane's innate unfitness. It is important to note that, because wealth functions in many ways as an equalizer, Chesnutt must play heavily upon poor whites' inherent inferiority. Elites claimed that, in regard to poor whites, class served the same purpose as race for African-Americans, in that both were incontrovertible. The first tactic Chesnutt employs is wholly visual: McBane is "burly" and his face displays "strength, energy, and unscrupulousness" (32). To make sure there is no way to mistake his brutishness, Chesnutt notes that McBane shaves carelessly, and there is dried blood on his face, marks of a savage. Even his clothing gives him away; in spite of the fact that he attires himself to copy Belmont and Carteret, McBane can still be singled out because his coat is covered in dandruff and stained with tobacco (32). Here the poor white can adopt the dress code of his betters, but he cannot hide the fact that he is not competent enough to keep himself presentable. This description hints at an innate incompetence as well, highlighting the notion that McBane does not really know and is powerless to discover how to wear the accoutrements of supremacy.

Another clue to McBane's inferiority is the "showy diamond" he wears on his shirt (32). The white trash stereotype pokes fun at poor whites who try to legitimate themselves with objects signifying elitism, and McBane's jewel is overstated and ostentatious; in short, McBane is trying too hard to look a part he is constitutionally unable to act. The inability of improved

material circumstances to transform a white trash character into an acceptable figure has lasted well into the 21st century. McBane is almost comically unfit; he is only a few decades removed from the stereotype-saturated phenomena of reality television, and one can easily think of a number of contemporary counterparts. The *Anna Nicole Show* (2002-2004), a reality series that followed the life of the late stripper-turned-heiress Anna Nicole Smith, employed this stereotype with gusto. Smith, whose marriage to an elderly tycoon made her wealthy, spends a great deal of money on gaudy clothes, garish décor, and the kinds of junk food that have come to signify the white trash palate. Cameras followed Smith from one misadventure to the next, documenting the hedonistic choices she made with her money. Like lipstick on a pig, Smith's accumulations worked to highlight her status as white trash rather than solidify her place among the elite. McBane's jewels serve the same purpose, making it clear that he has no concept of aesthetics but rather an obsession with artifice. McBane can afford to dress himself like his betters, but even the best suit of clothes cannot mask an imposter.

The third physical marker of his status is McBane's corporeal grotesqueness. He has only one eye, having lost the other in a fight with an African-American. The deformity is a constant reminder of his inherent cruelty and a marker of shame attesting to the fact that he has been bested by an inferior; it is also an example of the grotesque physical markers, such as stunted limbs, club feet, and misshapen heads, that came to denote Southern poverty. Everything about McBane's appearance assures the reader that he is dangerous, capable of great acts of violence; his entire body is a text of warning to reject association with white trash. The description of McBane is both the most thorough and the ugliest in the novel; little description is given of the elite—but, after all, we do not doubt their cleanliness.

Lest his clothing and habits do not go far enough to separate him from the privileged whites he aspires to join, Chesnutt explicitly reveals McBane's origins: he has "sprung from the poor white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity" (34). I have discussed the presumed origins of the poor white in Chapter One, and Chesnutt plays upon a notion here to which he does not personally subscribe, that of inherent inferiority; McBane's ancestors are the lazy, violent, immoral breed who gave the South its initial concept of class, and whose characterization sets the precedent for what the reader can expect of him. Chesnutt's assessment of abolition's effect on the poor white speaks to elite fears of lower-class white mobility; for upper-class whites in the early 20th century, poor white advancement was a concept to be greatly feared, and McBane is an illustration of all the reasons this was so. A white world on the brink of chaos had opened the way for the poor white to trample upon the plantation fictions of honor so much that McBane has achieved a military rank—although it is not an indication of real honor but rather a "reward," conferred upon him by the state, for "questionable political services" (Chesnutt 34).

In "'Awakening a Dormant Appetite': Captain McBane, Convict Labor, and Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*," Gene I. Gorman explores the parallels between slavery, convict leasing, and later, chain gangs, finding that McBane "embodies a particular racist element of the Old South that successfully established itself in the progressive New South" (4). Chain gangs served as a means of control by targeting African-Americans "who suddenly became free to vote, earn money, and gain power and political standing after the Civil War" (Gorman 6), often by incarcerating blacks for charges rarely brought against whites. That McBane has been an integral part of such a racist system further highlights the differences between his new associates and himself; while Belmont and Carteret benefit from the free labor

of the chain gangs, McBane has literally been in the trenches, enacting the most violent aspects of a white supremacist agenda. The importance of McBane's former occupation cannot be exaggerated, and I will return to it when I explore Chesnut's subversive strategies in the novel.

Belmont and Carteret have earned their titles from military service, and to most Southern readers steeped in Lost Cause ideology after the Civil War, those titles would represent Southern courage and valor. The illegitimacy of McBane's designation renders his capacity for such courage and valor doubtful. In spite of the fact that he has not earned the rank, however, McBane is still "Captain" McBane, which brings him ever closer to men with whom he should not be allowed to consider himself equal. As Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown discovers, however, the human capacity for evil links all men and places them on equal footing; it is ironic, then, that McBane's title confers no honor because the actions which led to it "had not commended themselves to humane people," while Belmont and Carteret deserve their superior designations for their fight against African-American equality (Chesnut 34).

McBane's spotty character is just as important as his careless appearance. Even though Chesnut notes that Emancipation was a boon for poor whites and afforded them a real chance for honest achievement, McBane chooses to succeed through sneakiness and deception, "preferring to seek his ends by secret 'deals' and combinations rather than to challenge criticism and promote rivalry by more open methods" (35). This is the way stereotyped white trash acts, and no amount of opportunity or social uplift will make of McBane an honest man. His apparent cowardice flies in the face of Southern notions of elite honor, but no one can stop him because they share a common goal. McBane's disrepute serves to further the distinction between upper and lower-class whites while at the same time bringing them ever closer. This association also calls into question the validity of upper-class claims of exceptionalism; if elites were truly better,

McBane would never have been allowed to operate within their community, but his entrance into it sheds light on the economic circumstances that gave upper-class whites their power. And, through those opportunities afforded by abolition, including the aforementioned convict leasing and chain gangs, economic conditions may be easy enough to subvert. It is important to note again that Chesnutt himself was as unconvinced of the notion of class inferiority as he was race inferiority. The way he manipulates class lines to suit his purpose demonstrates the necessity of subversion.

Chesnutt draws even further upon elite white fears by giving McBane a terrifying agenda: because he knows that he will never be truly accepted by those whites he wishes to join, he secretly plans for their destruction. McBane's hatred for elite whites may be greater even than his resentment for African-Americans, for no one in the latter community has the power to ostracize him or stand in the way of his agenda. McBane grudgingly accepts Belmont's and Carteret's condescension just as they reluctantly accept his presence in their lives. But give the poor white an inch, Chesnutt warns, and he will eventually destroy you.

And McBane is well on his way toward making good on Chesnutt's warning. When the white supremacy campaign shows little results, the men are placed at odds. Belmont is a model of civility and suggests that diplomacy is the best way to achieve their goals; he advises reasoning with other whites to convince them of the justness of their purpose. McBane, on the other hand, is in favor of force, and he does not care about the lives—African-American or white—that may be lost in the process. Here again Chesnutt uses the poor white to demonstrate the worst of white racism and violence. McBane has no compassion for African-Americans, and he therefore violates the paternalistic code of the Southern gentleman; in addition, he also repudiates the notion of racial solidarity because he cares nothing for whites, either.

Like the stereotype of the simple-minded Tom, who needs an elite white male to think and to care for him, the poor white needs to be guided—and often restrained—as well. According to the code of the Southern gentleman, Belmont and Carteret should not have any dealings with McBane; they should be giving him their wise counsel instead of listening to his outrageous and ill-conceived plans. They have little choice in the matter, however, having already embarked upon a partnership that empowers him. The stereotyped poor white is an imbecilic creature who will mindlessly follow his base instincts, most of which propel him toward violence and a menacing disregard for his victims.

While McBane "represent[s] the aggressive, offensive element among the white people of [the] New South, who made it hard for a negro to maintain his self-respect or enjoy even the rights conceded to [him] by Southern laws," Chesnutt does not limit his critique of racism to the lower class. His displacement of the most violent components of white supremacy onto poor whites allows for a still-powerful indictment of elite racism among all classes. Belmont and Carteret adopt a type of kindly condescension toward African-Americans, and they appear to be relatively benign in that they have no desire to actually physically harm their inferiors. In spite of this, their vehement beliefs in inequality make them just as guilty as McBane, and perhaps more so, given that it is their support which allows McBane to carry out his plans.

Chesnutt appears to assert that all three men are racist, but Belmont's and Carteret's racism is an expected and accepted aspect of the Southern concept of gentlemanly paternalism that ostensibly does not inflict real harm upon African-Americans. McBane's ideologies pose the greatest threat because he himself has the most damage to inflict upon upper-class whites. Indeed, Carteret's African-American servant Jerry, who spends his time mimicking his white master and trying to ingratiate himself with the upper class, notes that McBane "ain' nothin' but

po' white trash nohow" and it "pears to [him] the bottom rail is gittin' mighty close ter de top" (Chesnutt 36). Jerry's assessment of McBane is echoed by William Alexander Percy's fears about the poor white in *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941), in which Percy "complained that the 'bottom rail' had moved to the top. His own aristocratic family and their peers had given way to the abhorrent common whites" (qtd in *Away* 164). Jerry reaffirms the elite's feelings about the poor white and justifies their necessary exclusion from privileged society. When all of the rails move to the top, complete collapse of the Southern aristocracy cannot be far behind.

While Chesnutt seems to give credence to this idea, his goal is not simply to disparage poor whites while protecting the upper class. Rather, he demonstrates that elite racism cannot be accepted as the status quo because it will bring the upper class into close contact with poor whites. Chesnutt writes the upper class as victims of poor white aggression as well. In *God Shakes Creation* (1935), David L. Cohn lamented the great numbers of poor whites who had settled in Mississippi and argued that the state would shortly find its "civilization...completely altered; its racial and social habits changed; its pride trailed in the dust; its memories erased and its flickering dreams of a better way of life extinguished" (qtd in *Away* 164). Chesnutt plays into this fear and presents elites with their worst nightmare, a lower-class takeover of their precious culture and traditions. This approach to the assertion of elite white benevolence and paternalism works against the racist upper class at the same time that they subscribe to its vision of poor whites. In this way, Chesnutt draws power away from the dominant class by appealing to its pride and by painting an image of the region if poor whites are allowed to further mingle with their betters. The concept of Southern exceptionalism stands to be demolished, and elite whites are to face a devastating loss of power and prestige.

The loss of tradition and culture is explicitly connected to inaccurate but widely held beliefs about genetic degeneracy in the novel. That poor whites descended from criminals was an accepted belief among Americans of both regions and led to the pseudo-scientific Eugenics Movement I will discuss in Chapter Three. Eugenics theory asserted the negative influence that poor whites could have upon established elite sensibilities and their polluting potential upon elite attitudes and behavior. Chesnutt keeps Belmont and Carteret relatively shielded from McBane's influence for most of the novel; the line between the three men may be fading, but it is still present in regards to ideas of manners and decorum. Not so impervious to McBane is Tom Delamere, an elite white man from the younger generation of the Southern upper class. Tom is careless and finds himself in closer connection with McBane than either of the elder elites, and his youth and inexperience—in short, his weaker ties to Southern codes—make him vulnerable to McBane's machinations.

Chesnutt's treatment of Tom is both novel and interesting because it signifies the overt probing of upper-class depravity. Certainly Tom is the only elite who truly descends into vice under McBane's nefarious influence, but Tom represents all upper-class whites who do not firmly ground themselves in their lofty place and remain wary of their inferiors. Tom's own grandfather, Mr. Delamere, is the only redeemable elite white in the novel; his devotion to his African-American manservant Sandy offers a counterpoint to Tom, who is known to "kick an inoffensive negro out of his path" (Chesnutt 96). Tom's mistreatment of his harmless and helpless inferiors indicates his lack of respect for the Southern gentleman's doctrine of paternalism and situates him in a kind of upper-class limbo; he knows how he is supposed to act, but he has not fully committed to obedience. A less-than-wholehearted adoption of the elite code leads to his downfall at McBane's hands.

Tom knows his place and his society well enough to reject McBane's offer of friendship, but his penchant for gambling puts him into McBane's debt. Because he does not go far enough to shield himself from poor whites, Tom is the victim of a subtle scheme that places him not just on a level with his inferior, but actually beneath him. This situation is odious to Tom, who bristles each time McBane addresses him by his familiar name rather than the formal and Christian "Thomas" (Chesnutt 160), but he has no choice but to endure it for the sake of his reputation. Attached to the warning against association with poor whites is a scathing critique of elite hypocrisy; Tom does not truly care about living a respectable life, but he does not want anyone to know of his sins, having "reached that degree of moral deterioration where, while principles were of little moment, the externals of social intercourse possessed an exaggerated importance" (Chesnutt 160). Like the Southern myths themselves, there is no substance behind the façade Tom has created and wants to protect, and Chesnutt calls the claim of upper-class superiority into question by showing that even elites fall short of its codes of honor and morality, and that "moral deterioration" is not an exclusive occurrence among the lower class. Tom's story is a direct assault on the notion of elite white purity because it exposes the impossibilities of anyone ever living up to its requirements; the story goes further, as well, asserting that the makers of these requirements were well aware that they were impossible to achieve. The importance for the upper class is not that they adhere to the myth, but rather that they appear to do so.

The sting of this revelation is softened a bit in that, while Tom certainly falls short of that code, he is not truly ruined until after he partners with McBane, who uses his poor white cunning to bring Tom to the brink of destruction. In order to pay McBane's bribe, Tom robs the rich widow Polly Ochiltree, who dies in the process. Tom frames his grandfather's domestic Sandy

for the theft and murder, moving further outside the code by disregarding familial bonds and making Mr. Delamere, who had earlier identified Sandy as proof of African-Americans' integrity, look like a fool. In the end, Sandy is exonerated, but not before he is almost lynched, loses the religious faith that had sustained him, and becomes a drunkard. And by the time Sandy recovers, Tom has left a string of other victims, from his grandfather to his fiancée Clara.

Two important Southern traditions are highlighted in the episode of Polly Ochiltree's robbery and its aftermath: whites in blackface, and the concept of White Southern Womanhood. Chesnutt employs them to show the harm done by the blackface tradition, and to demonstrate the way that White Southern Womanhood was used to manipulate whites into violence against African-Americans and to promote white supremacy and Southern loyalty. Separate and distinct notions, blackface and White Southern Womanhood nevertheless worked together to promote African-American disfranchisement by playing on elite fears of African-American male sexuality, and Chesnutt weaves them together in *Marrow* in a tactic that highlights the inaccuracies of both.

When Tom robs Polly Ochiltree, he disguises himself as Sandy, wearing Sandy's clothes and using burnt cork to black his face. This is the second time in the novel that Tom dons blackface; the first is to entertain a group of Northerners who want to see what life is truly like for Southern African-Americans. Tom hams it up for the visitors in the first scene, dancing and enacting the part of the complacent Southern darky necessarily overseen by whites. This performance of the comic Sambo role deceives his white guests, probably primed for acceptance due to their knowledge of Southern myths. Based on the success of this initial deception, Tom believes he can frame Sandy for the robbery. Tom's subterfuge is much more complicated than it first appears, however, for his use of blackface goes beyond simple trickery or entertainment;

Chesnutt uses Tom to get at the complicated racial and social constructions in the South. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), Eric Lott explores antebellum minstrelsy as it both drew connections between and ripped asunder the ties that bound African-Americans and poor whites. Lott asserts that minstrelsy gave lower-class whites an outlet for the frustration inherent in their social positions and also a vicarious thrill by allowing them to enact the sexual and social transgressions that whites were not permitted to perform—at least, not publicly and without shame or fear of ostracism.

Poor whites had always feared being associated with African-Americans, but at the beginning of the 20th century, when the South faced a destroyed economy, blue-collar whites found themselves closely associated with blacks. Lott sees this class consciousness in racialized terms, determining that “America’s capitalist crisis...equated working-classness with blackness” (71). Minstrel shows, then, served in one way to widen the divide between the two groups through ridicule; Zip Coon and the Watermelon Man were convenient bodies within which the notion of white supremacy could be grounded, and minstrel performances frequently used “blacks” to reaffirm “white” values. This notion is clearly seen in Tom’s impersonation of Sandy; as an upper-class white protected by the myth of gentlemanly honor, Tom cannot commit such a heinous crime. Tom in blackface, however, is guilty of robbery, and, arguably, manslaughter. The only other character in the novel who is guilty of murder is McBane³, and the two crimes place the men on equal footing. But that equality is still foregrounded in the notion of Tom as African-American, for when he removes his blackface, he is instantly returned to a privileged position that places him above McBane. Chesnutt again condemns elite white

³ Josh Green kills McBane, but only after McBane shoots him. I would argue here that Josh is really acting out in self-defense. Regardless, because he is African-American, my argument that elites would locate depravity in the inferior race and classes does not suffer.

hypocrisy when several of the elite whites discover that Tom is guilty and do not reveal his crime or even assert Sandy's innocence. The privileged are content to let the fact of Sandy's race speak for itself, and the white townspeople are content to be deceived. It is interesting to note that, as an upper-class white, Tom can freely transgress racial boundaries, but the (former) poor white McBane cannot even fully overcome social boundaries within his own race. This is one of the aims of minstrelsy: to promote elite white supremacy while at the same time corralling poor whites and African-Americans into an often singular category of inferiority.

But there is another reason that Tom uses blackface, foregrounded on a second purpose served by minstrelsy. To enact blackness was to behave in ways which were largely decried by whites of all class, conduct purportedly exclusive to African-Americans. Whites in blackface could swear, tell bawdy jokes, and freely express their sexuality. Poor whites in minstrel shows were able to play a part they found liberating under the guise of criticizing the very behaviors they displayed. Although he is not a poor white, Tom also revels in the freedom blackface provides.

There are a number of reasons Tom's blackface is sexualized. First, although he is handsome, Tom is not considered "manly" (Chesnutt 16). That distinction goes to McBane, whose poor white heritage gives him all of the qualities of masculinity largely absent from constructions of gentility. By contrast, Tom is less visually powerful and therefore unimposing. This is a drawback implicit in the Southern construct of the elite white gentleman specifically as it relates to African-American males, for a common charge against slaves and later freed black men was that they were oversexed, unable to control their libidos and likely to

violate a white woman's chastity if given the chance⁴. This falsehood had the unintended consequence of stereotyping all black men as sexually potent and predatory. The effeminate Tom, then, is able to achieve a measure of masculinity and sexual dominance while in blackface that he would not otherwise possess.

The second reason Tom's playing at blackness can be viewed as a sexual act is that it loosens the restraints of proscribed white male behavior in 20th century society. Tom's engagement to Carteret's ward Clara binds him to celibacy and eventually fidelity, both of which are limiting and contrast with the dominant image of black sexuality. In blackface, Tom can reject repression, "engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry...[and] inherit the cool, virility" that made up the stereotype of African-American masculinity (Lott 52). When Tom gains the illusion of power and sexual prowess, two characteristics that are largely denied him in the elite Southern world—at least in respect to white women—he also violates African-American manhood by asserting dominance over the conception of black sexuality. Tom's strength comes from both his status as temporarily black and his place as white; he can exert his will both in and through the two conflicting personas. This duality reaches a crescendo when Polly Ochiltree's death is inexplicably rumored to have involved sexual violation.

The echoes of white female rape by African-American men reveals the way white male jealousy and envy over African-American male sexuality butts against the tradition of White Southern Womanhood in *Marrow*. White males created the fiction that African-American males were obsessed with raping white women in order to counter their fear of African-American virility. This led to the myth of the Black Beast Rapist, a terrible and potent man who looks for

⁴ This belief lasted well into the 20th century and gave rise to a number of fictionalized accounts, such as can be seen in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and—more tragically—to real-life violence, as was the case for Emmett Till (1955).

any opportunity to copulate with white women. Interestingly, the genesis for this idea was Northern claims that Southern white women would be raped by former slaves during Reconstruction. The idea was particularly troublesome because, in the antebellum era, Southern men had begun to identify white womanhood with the South itself, and an assault on the purity and sanctity of either was inexcusable. Because of this, elite Southern whites conflated blackness and sexual assault such that all efforts for black autonomy were perceived as threats against white women. Another component of the Black Beast Rapist came from white male insecurity; Cobb notes that long before American nationhood, white men had feared the stereotype of the “well-endowed and virile black [man]” (*Away* 74). That fear was exacerbated by the Civil War, when defeat on the battlefield led to white men’s failures as providers for their wives and children. These men felt inadequate and emasculated, and in an effort to compensate, “[p]rotecting their wives and daughters from anything resembling black male aggression was a last-ditch imperative if their personally and socially constructed manhood was to be preserved” (*Away* 174). The fears of African-American assault and the preservation attempts aimed at white women come together in *Marrow*. Carteret asserts after Sandy is captured that Polly Ochiltree’s violation “is a murderous and fatal assault upon a woman of our race—upon our race in the person of its womanhood, its crown and flower” (Chesnutt 182). Carteret warns that “[i]f such crimes are not punished with swift and terrible directness, the whole white womanhood of the South is in danger” (Chesnutt 182). For his part, the less discriminating McBane openly calls for a scapegoat, and his rhetoric is both shocking and disgusting: “Burn the nigger,” he insists,

“We seem to have the right nigger, but whether we have or not, burn *a* nigger. It is an assault upon the whole white race, in the person of old Mrs. Ochiltree, committed by the black race, in the person of some nigger. It would justify the

white people in burning *any* nigger. The example would be all the more powerful if we got the wrong one. It would serve notice on the niggers that we shall hold the whole race responsible for the misdeeds of each individual.” (Chesnutt 182)

McBane uses the epithet “nigger” six times in his harangue, and he promotes several arguments: first, that one incident of crime can represent the depravity of an entire race; second, that scapegoating is a rational way to respond to this depravity; and third, that all members of a group are alike and must be equally despised. McBane’s hypocrisy is glaring here, for the same arguments were made against poor whites.

McBane’s character and actions easily render him the most hated figure in the novel. His sins are displayed on each page, and every other character is allowed to freely and publicly criticize him. This is not the case for Tom, who is described as McBane’s unwilling cohort, and as such is therefore not entirely to blame for his actions. Although he gambles, Tom’s true error is that he does not practice moderation, for gambling was considered a relatively benign activity; after all, the members of the Tom’s club frequently play cards, and Ted Ownby notes that, while frowned upon by the church, gambling was a fairly common pastime for Southern men (7). Tom’s misstep is found in playing cards with the wrong man, an inferior who does not follow the Southern code of honor. It is not so much that Tom would have followed the wise counsel of his elite elders and given up the habit if he had not strayed outside of the acceptable social circle, but that those same elders would have been able to use their authority to protect him if he had never agreed to interact with McBane. Transgressing the established social boundaries would appear to elites to victimize Tom just as much as it does Sandy.

In spite of his actions, Tom is redeemed by the novel’s end, and Chesnutt uses the poor white again to illuminate the hypocrisy and deception of upper-class whites. When it is revealed

that Polly Ochiltree has been neither murdered nor raped, Sandy is released—but there is no effort to find the real suspect. The fact that Tom is not guilty of murder seems to soothe his townsmen, especially in light of McBane's role as catalyst for the robbery. No elite apologizes to Sandy or doubts McBane's responsibility for the tragedy, but Tom is reinstated among his class, albeit after a short banishment and with his club membership revoked. Tom loses very little, in spite of the fact that his actions brought one death—however unintentional—to his community and very nearly caused another. Through Tom, Chesnutt exposes the seeming impunity upper-class whites enjoy.

McBane, however, does not fare as well. Just as Tom is defiled by his association with the poor white, so are Belmont and Carteret, who, under McBane's influence, unwittingly start a white riot that murders a number of African-Americans. Carteret is especially shocked by this turn of events; the greatest courtesy he has ever extended to McBane is a grudging tolerance, but even that has the capacity to taint him. Again, Chesnutt highlights upper class foibles by allowing Carteret to “wash his hands” (Chesnutt 307) of the whole affair when the mob grows out of control; Carteret's status, like Tom's, makes him impervious to indictment, and he is free to walk away. The responsibility for the atrocities will rest squarely on the racially stigmatized and the economically weak.

While Tom, Belmont, and Carteret return to their safe and isolated social sphere, McBane is killed during the riot by Josh Green, an African-American man who represents the resentment born out of oppression. Green's grievance against McBane is also personal, for the poor white murdered Green's father years before. Class inequality is written over the scene, as McBane dies for a crime very similar to one for which Tom does not pay. It does not matter that it is Carteret's newspaper that sets the stage for the riot, or that McBane's power has come strictly from the

authority of his superior associates; what matters is that the poor white is the only figure who can be responsible for injustices against African-Americans.

It would be simplistic to assert that Chesnut's construction of the poor white was a practical approach to achieving publication, just as it would be impossible to prove that he subscribed to the stereotype of poor white trash. It is indisputable, however, that Chesnut wrote *The Marrow of Tradition* at a time when African-Americans were free in name only. The South of the early 20th century was unkind to dissidents, particularly those who had the disadvantage of being born in black skin. The fate of his work undoubtedly rested upon his ability to negotiate the complex raced and classed ideologies of the region. Chesnut was not a simpering, wily African-American man—like Jerry—who pandered to elite whites for approval and acceptance. Nor was he a rage-filled avenger—like Josh Green—intent on the decimation of the white world. Chesnut was angry—his description of Green's suffering and ultimate triumph is too powerful to suggest otherwise—but his writing had far greater implications than placation or incitement. To confront the elite white population head-on would have been to invite war with a group far more politically and economically powerful than he. Dominant Southern ideology and the notions of superiority and trash were so pervasive that it was futile to resist them. Instead, Chesnut uses these myths against those whom they had always benefitted.

Chesnut's use of the myth of poor white trash stems from African-Americans' long-established practice of making distinctions between classes of whites. Fanny Kemble, a Northern guest of Boston socialite Mary Caton, first recorded the term "poor white trash" in an 1833 letter to her husband describing the way African-American slaves spoke of Caton's white servants. Matt Wray speculates that these slaves may have coined the term because they resented the fact that whites who performed the same tasks and held the same jobs they did were given voting

rights and other considerations by the law and Jacksonian democracy of the 1820s: “blacks, in labeling white servants poor white trash, were reacting with resentment and hostility to white domestics’ claims to superiority” (*Not Quite White* 44). This tradition continued well into the 20th century, with writers like Langston Hughes, who used poor whites to signify the harsh realities of racism long after Emancipation. In “Cora Unashamed” (1933), African-American housekeeper Cora Cook works for a white family who treat her “like a dog”; still, Cora is grateful to work for them instead of a lower-class family: “She stood it. Had to stand it; or work for poorer white folks who would treat her worse” (Hughes 3-4). Hughes identifies the white trash stereotype’s effect on the African-American community, as elites used it to excuse or diminish by comparison their own abuse of minorities; even in the 20th century, the upper class promoted the antebellum notion of privileged white paternalism, and African-Americans had to endure it.

But there is another reason African-Americans drew a line between the white classes, which Chesnutt reveals in the short story “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare.” Nick Johnson, or “Ole Nick,” as the slaves call him, is the overseer for plantation master James McLean. Nick’s treatment of the slaves is no harsher than McLean’s, but the slaves differentiate between the two men’s authority to enforce their wills: “He wuz wusser’n Mars Jeems ever da’ed ter be,” the African-American narrator says (75). The slaves justify McLean’s behavior because he is an elite white: even though they object to their treatment at the hands of both men, the slaves expect it from their master because he has land and slaves, possessions which give him “a right to do ez he please”; Ole Nick, however, is “nuffin but a po’ buckrah, en all de niggers ‘spised ‘im ez much ez dey hated ‘im, for he didn’ own nobody, en wa’n’t no better ‘n a nigger” (75). A moment later, the narrator goes even further to claim that, at this period in the nation’s history,

“any ‘spectable pusson would ruther be a nigger dan a po’ white man” (75). In the same way that lower class whites could find a measure of value in the color of their skin and its indication of superiority over African-Americans, African-Americans themselves turned this notion on its head by affirming their equality or even superiority to white trash. Slavery and disfranchisement had thoroughly indoctrinated them into an acceptance of their inferiority to privileged whites, but they could place themselves above the lowest rung of the white hierarchy by critiquing the poor whites’ manners and behavior. African-Americans could not claim superiority over their masters or post-Emancipation upper-class whites, but they could at least assert their supremacy over a part of the race and address its discrimination. The assertion that one would rather be African-American than poor white at a time when African-Americans were literally bound in slavery gets at the truly deplorable nature of both the white trash stereotype and the desperate economic and political circumstances that allowed for its creation.

The concept of poor white antagonism to African-Americans in general—and to equality and enfranchisement in particular—had to be exaggerated in order for this comparison to work, and upper-class whites were complicit in the scapegoating of lower-class whites. In his study of the white working class, David R. Roediger notes that prior to 1800, many of “the ‘lower sorts’ of whites appear to have been pleasantly lacking in racial consciousness” (24). Roediger cites G.S. Rowe, who found “that ‘the lower classes of both races often accepted each other on terms of equality much more readily than did their social betters,’” and there is also evidence that lower-class whites were participants in slave revolts and helped fugitive slaves with their escape attempts (qtd in *Wages* 24). It is easy to understand why African-Americans might choose to remain blind or give scant credit to these seeming anomalies, but upper-class white participation

in the construction of the white trash stereotype is more complicated and involves the manipulation of both African-Americans and poor whites.

Elite whites had to first extend some measures of protection for their lower-class brethren; this protection came first in the form of the antebellum Proto-Dorian Bond, and later, during the modern era, in the form of an American “herrenvolk republicanism, [which] had the advantage of reassuring whites in a society in which downward social mobility was a constant fear—one might lose everything—but not whiteness” (Roediger 60). This reassurance was especially necessary during the South’s industrial period, a time in which poor whites were rapidly finding employment in mills and factories. Mill work was generally exclusively given to whites; Sylvia Jenkins Cook proves that most mills, in fact, were populated by displaced poor whites (31). Job competition was fierce, and working conditions were poor.

Poor whites, however, were hard-pressed to understand how this intolerable situation was the fault of African-Americans. Work in the mills did something to assuage poor whites’ fears that they would have to compete with African-Americans for employment and share social circles. For all of its psychological benefits, life in the mills was hard, and as the eyes of the lower class were opened to the greed and corruption of the upper-class mill owners and factory bosses, their faith in the power of their whiteness and the paternalism of the elite began to give way to dissatisfaction with their place. Scholars disagree about whether antebellum whites felt the same type of discontent over the economic disparities of the plantation system, but there is no evidence to suggest that they felt they could do or tried to do anything about it. The decidedly more narrow confines of the mill and the factory brought poor whites closer to their employers than the plantation system ever did; it also made their exploitation at the hands of elites clear. Increasingly, poor whites grew discontented and began to search for ways to alter their positions.

But they faced many obstacles. Cook sites several reasons poor white mill workers had difficulty expressing their outrage: the factory system was for a long time as paternalistic as the plantation system had been; poor whites' isolation kept them ignorant of the world beyond their towns and prevented them from forming activist groups; and poor white religion preached obedience to one's betters (16). The barriers these concepts created, which had been in place long before the Civil War, were beginning to weaken; the only barrier that still held—although its power, too, was waning—was the lower class belief in their superiority to African-Americans. In spite of Cash's conclusion that "[t]he men in the mills had been entirely removed from all direct competition with the Negro" (214), Cook notes that the upper class and factory owners guided poor white hostility toward African-Americans (16). The only way this could be achieved was through the upper-class fiction of direct poor white/black labor competition. Upper-class whites did not intend to allow the lowest of their class to be degraded by any real competition for employment in the mills, but it worked to their advantage to present this as a plausible, albeit regrettable, possibility.

Herrenvolk republicanism served to shift the blame away from privileged whites during both periods because, as Roediger notes, republicanism is grounded in an inherent distrust of the weak, and a middle-class fear of upper and lower-class collusion. Because most whites were part of the "producing classes," this distrust would naturally center on African-Americans (44). In the antebellum era, poor white workers were disadvantaged by the planters' habit of loaning out their slaves to work on other plantations, and after Emancipation, elites frequently used free black labor because it was cheaper than white labor. Upper-class whites needed to conceal both the injustice of this practice during the South's modern age and to hide the fact that it was age-old. The best way to do this was to make poor whites feel that their livelihoods were endangered

by African-Americans and not the upper class, which exploited black labor. This technique served to create the illusion that African-Americans and poor whites had more to fear from each other than from privileged whites. The power of this illusion is demonstrated by the fact that poor whites directed their rage for the epithet “white trash” at African-Americans, not upper-class whites (Cash 83).

After they had established poor white distrust of African-Americans, the second component of elite white manipulation required encouraging African-Americans’ fears of the poor white. Nearly every African-American already sensed or had experienced some form of poor white antagonism, so it required little effort to centralize the greatest threat of racism and violence within the lower class. Joel Williamson points out that “[f]rom the beginning..., no one who had any large influence on race relations was poor white, or came from a background that might be described as such” (181). And yet, when lynching became common by 1889, “[t]he tendency was for the white community to ascribe the actual lynching to boys and men of the lower class” (Williamson 126). This was the persistent belief in spite of the fact that “the major share of the responsibility...rest[ed] squarely on the shoulders of the master class” (Cash 303). Because elite authority was situated between both oppressed groups, however, the upper class had to make incongruous concessions to each. While elites laid all the blame for lynching upon lower-class whites, they also asserted that, usually, “the victim fully deserved his fate” (Williamson 126). A representative example of the elite white use of poor whites as the perpetrators of their own violence occurred after the Atlanta riots of 1906, when Williamson demonstrates that the whites in power claimed the riots were instigated and carried out by poor whites. At the same time, however, it was “the vagrant and criminal Negro” who had committed the atrocities that led to the riot (Williamson 150). The white trash, then, were responsible for the

reprehensible acts against all African-Americans, who were victimized for the sake of a few. These violent and mindless white trash were “pariahs, untouchables, soulless white flesh,” who hated all dark skin (Williamson 140). By contrast, the African-Americans’ “late masters,” the upper class, “loved them—in their places—and jealously led the lower order to hate the best of the colored people with double strength” (Williamson 150). Elite whites tried to pander to African-Americans and poor whites by telling both groups what they wanted to hear while at the same time withholding any real support or encouragement to either; poor whites acted badly, they asserted, but they had cause, and African-Americans were abused by poor whites, but they often deserved it. There is a half-truth in each of these judgments, and the subalterns had to make due with what they were given.

This scapegoating tactic can be seen in *Marrow*, as McBane’s white trash violence points to a subversive tactic that has yet to be discussed: Chesnutt’s decision to displace the greater part of the racist and violent tendencies onto McBane serves to cushion his critique of upper-class culpability, but it also highlights it in glaring ways. Using a white trash figure to promote and enforce elite white goals “shows how more privileged white Southerners... can maintain their class and racial identity by inviting men of McBane’s lower, but rising class to do their bidding” (Gorman 2). Jae H. Roe identifies McBane as the “terrorist arm” of Carteret’s and Belmont’s campaign (235). While it is a role he relishes, staying at the riot in the hope of shedding blood long after his associates have retreated, McBane is still in many and important ways a puppet for the elite, who rely on his violence and volatility to achieve their ends. Similar to blaming the poor white for lynching, the upper-class whites in *Marrow* offer McBane the opportunity to persecute African-Americans, but once the deed has been done, they are free to walk away, pretending to be shocked by the very behavior they expected and encouraged.

Chesnutt presents McBane as a stereotyped white trash figure who is fully responsible for his attitudes and actions, and yet he is still manipulated by his superiors. The hypocrisy of notions of exceptionalism is clear in his essay “What is a White Man?” which questions the arbitrary and often contradictory ways in which individual states determine a person’s race. Discussing the anti-miscegenation laws, Chesnutt writes of an African-American woman worth \$300,000. Chesnutt speculates that “[w]ith a few hundred such women in that state, possessing a fair degree of good looks, the color-line would shrivel up like a scroll in the heat of competition for their hands in marriage.” The criticism is scathing here, just as it is in *Marrow*, where class lines blur among whites in order to attempt the complete oppression of African-Americans.

This was the environment in which Chesnutt wrote *The Marrow of Tradition*. He, too, felt the tension between upper and lower-class whites, and the manipulated enmity between lower-class whites and African-Americans. Wray finds that the distinction among whites between upper and lower class places the poor white into a category of “racial minority”; Wray argues that “this comparison—however problematic it may be—bespeaks certain commonalities between oppressed whites and oppressed racial groups” (*White Trash* 5). Chesnutt, however, understood that, although there were many parallels between poor white and African-American subjugation, the fact of race stood in the way of any cooperative efforts to improve their often similar plights. The Southern constructions of poor white trash and African-American inferiority worked to place them at odds with one another, and until those myths were purged from Southern ideology, there could be little hope for the development of a united front. As long as elite whites held the privileged right to create Southern history, African-Americans and poor whites would be mired in myth and forced to remain in a stagnant culture that offered them little and then made them take it. Jim Goad argues that it is class, not race, that has always been the

major factor in discrimination and cultural inequality (103), and finds that most of the problems of working class life were not race-based (106). This reevaluation of the poor white does not aim to prove that poor whites were not, in fact, guilty of the most egregious acts of racism and violence; Melanie R. Benson points out that poor whites are trapped in a culture in which “racial privilege” is classed rather than raced, and they “struggled in often racist ways to work themselves out of the demotion inflicted upon them by elite white anxieties” (36). The fact of poor white guilt, however, should be understood in part as an effect of desperation, as elite white discrimination against the lower class pushed poor whites to the bottom of the social hierarchy and shook their faith in their one claim to value, their white skin. Poor whites sought to reject the realization that, according to the Southern concept of elite white purity, “they...shared a simple class affiliation” with African-Americans (Benson 36-7). Elite whites both enforced and denied this fact, and “[b]y forcing these two struggling and antagonistic groups into the same position of denigration, elite whites could secure their position above both” (Benson 37). Poor white guilt is indisputable, but so is elite white manipulation.

Perhaps the reason poor whites have been so easy to deceive is due to the Southern tradition of respecting and deferring to one’s perceived superiors. The antebellum Southern myth of the Cavalier first established the notion of white supremacy. This Old South legend was created in self-defense when Northern aggression reached its peak just before the Civil War. It appears that many in the North believed in the Cavalier as well, most likely because their most dominant impression of the South involved the story of the Virginia Tidewater aristocrat. Northern belief in the Old South myth may also have stemmed from a secret revulsion inspired by the ugliness of regional industrialization and a desire to see a type of nostalgic beauty represented in the South (Cash 62). Poor whites had even greater reasons to adopt this myth;

Williamson asserts that although there were few criteria upon which to differentiate among whites in the colonial era, the acquisition of land and slaves created two distinct groups (221). The have-nots became increasingly isolated, culturally and physically, and were very rapidly forced into the position of “non-participants” (Williamson 221). This effectively left lower-class whites outside of any group in the South or the nation; because they did not own land or slaves, they were denied access to elite white representations of Southernness. Indeed, Benson asserts that poor whites were classified with African-Americans and those of mixed races as something other than “true Southerners” (45).

When faced with the realization that he was so low that he could not even merit Northern hatred, the poor white tried to align his attitudes and behavior to the only group that did have value in the South, the planter. This self-preservative process of identifying with and trying to assert relevance from a superior is akin to the way “men group themselves about captains” (Cash 67), claiming a shared history and agenda and trying to legitimate their existences on the basis of a superior’s importance and merit. That the poor white so readily incorporated a fiction that worked against him demonstrates the despair that he felt at his exclusion from Southern society. Impending war with the North only strengthened poor white attachment to the idealized Southern gentleman. Rather than realize that Northern critics who found the plantation system damaging to poor whites as well as African-Americans were correct, lower-class whites believed that Emancipation would threaten their racial superiority, and, when war was imminent, the poor white looked to the elite to show him what to think and how to feel and act; Cash finds that both “[y]eoman and cracker turned to the planter, waited eagerly upon his signal...because he was their obviously indicated captain in the great common cause” (67). Poor whites who wished to

enjoy a sense of belonging had to adopt an ideology that placed them only a little higher on the social and political hierarchy than African-Americans.

After Reconstruction and into the 20th century, poor whites continued to believe that elitism was synonymous with authority. Williamson argues that poor whites who found work in the mills achieved a sense of belonging in the South, and that the mills “opened the way for the lower orders again to be integrated into an organic and very viable Southern culture” (221). But this “organic” and “viable Southern culture” still emphasized the differences between the upper and lower classes. Poor whites were still poor, they were still exploited, they still had little access to education and medicine, and they still labored under a system that insisted upon their inferior status and required them to take a servile position under the elite. Williamson aims to show that white notions of progress did nothing to enhance the possibility of African-American upward mobility, but he overemphasizes the opportunities for poor white improvement in the process. A slight and uncertain improvement in the poor whites’ earning capacity did nothing to improve their social status. Even Williamson notes that second-class white train cars in the 20th century reveal the continued segregation of poor whites from elites (177).

Elite whites, then, used both African-Americans and poor whites as scapegoats for their own abuse of each. Rather than admit, first, that the plantation system enslaved African-Americans and oppressed poor whites, and later, that the elites’ control of the Southern economy freed African-Americans only to dominate them again and continued to oppress poor whites, they reiterated both groups’ innate inferiority. Social scientists had conclusively “proven” that African-Americans were inherently less competent and intelligent than whites, but this fiction did not apply to whites by virtue of the color of their skin, so elites borrowed the antebellum Northern stereotype that all Southerners were lazy and, frequently, criminal, and applied it solely

to the lower class. Elites drew back from their pretended support of poor whites and returned to the ideas of poor white degeneracy that originated in the mid-1800s. Wray cites Daniel Hundley's *Social Relations in our Southern States* (1860), whose work "offer[s] some of the earliest and most prescient articulations of...Social Darwinism" (*Not Quite White* 63). Hundley found seven classes of Southern whites, but the most problematic of these was the poor white, who were "direct descendants of 'those paupers and convicts whom Great Britain had sent over to her faithful colony of Virginia...those indentured servants...or [those] who followed their masters, the Cavalier'" (*Not Quite White* 62). Hundley surmised that the cause "of the existence in the south of a class of lazy vagabonds known as Poor Whites" was clear: it was simply "bad blood" (*Not Quite White* 62). Similar studies include George Fitzhugh's *Sociology for the South, or The Failure of Free Society* (1854), which explains the poor whites' problems as heredity (*Not Quite White* 61). Interestingly, Fitzhugh's book had an unintended consequence when it was cited in Southern calls for secession because it concluded that a few are meant to be masters, but many are meant to be slaves, a claim the elite had used to explain the need for slavery (*Not Quite White* 61).

It was short work, then, for elites to bring the idea that lower-class whites were responsible for their own poverty into the 20th century. Indeed, the eugenics studies movement had already begun at the end of the 19th century with the preconception that poor whites were degenerate. Elite whites had simply to popularize the idea that poverty was a result of moral or intellectual failure. Duane Carr follows the tradition of blaming the poor for their own poverty from the moment when the Catholic call for charity was confronted by the Calvinist doctrine of work in the sixteenth century; Calvinism claimed that God gave blessings to those who labored, and an individual's level of favor with the Almighty could be determined by his wealth. A lack

of material possessions signaled God's displeasure (Carr 3). The New England colonists carried the belief in the causal relationship between labor and reward to the New World, and they "condemned the vast majority of the destitute as lazy and immoral" (Carr 3). Carr foreshadows Wray's assessment of Social Darwinism, which maintained that "poor people were the weak elements of society to be left alone to die out, all for the good of humanity as a whole" (4). But because elites could not wait for poor whites to simply "die out," they had to publicize lower-class depravity and incompetence.

One of the ways to disseminate the assertion of poor white culpability was through literature, and this explains why *The Marrow of Tradition* was allowed a place in elite readership. Chesnut's depiction of McBane reiterates the belief in poor white degeneracy, not only because McBane enacts stereotypical white trash behavior, but also because he continues to do so after he is wealthy and gains at least a modicum of exposure to upper-class white culture. Chesnut plays upon lower-class white inferiority as both an established fact and an instinctual response in the elite community; Carteret greets McBane "with an unconscious but quite perceptible diminution of warmth" compared to his equals (Chesnut 32). Carteret is a "sincere" man who "[i]n serious affairs desired the approval of his conscience" (Chesnut 33). It is telling that his conscience plagues him not because he is working for the cause of white supremacy, but because he is working for white supremacy with McBane. Carteret's attitude reveals the deep schism between upper and lower-class whites, even when they are united to protect themselves.

The Marrow of Tradition employs the white trash stereotype to question elite white constructions of privileged white superiority, African-American inferiority and the legend of the Black Beast Rapist, and the concept of White Southern Womanhood. In their places, Chesnut posits an alternative history that tells the truth about elite white racism and manipulation and

African-American competence, capability, and equality. The only myth Chesnutt does not refute is the myth of poor white trash. There is no evidence that points to the notion that Chesnutt believed in the stereotype—and, indeed, a number of his short stories present poor whites in a somewhat sympathetic light—but to achieve the purpose of this novel, which confronted, albeit in a slanted form, the myths created by a dominant group desperate to retain their power, Chesnutt gave elite white readers at least one last fiction to cling to while he dismantled the rest.

Chapter Three: Renaissance and Depression-Era Myth-Makers: Faulkner and Caldwell as
Reluctant Historians

In the decades before the turn of the 20th century, Southerners found themselves in a potentially hopeful place: memories of the horrors of the Civil War were fading, most of the Reconstruction efforts begun by the North in 1863 had been reversed after its end in 1877, and the South had largely returned to a social and economic state very much like the one before the war. It was true that African-Americans were now free, but it appeared that the race problem could be dealt with through the same disfranchisement practices that had always been used, such as denying freed blacks equal access to education and barring them from politics. The upper class did not need institutionalized inequality when they were the sole possessors of economic and social power. Most importantly, the tentative political system that had placed African-Americans in legislative positions during Reconstruction had been overturned, and elite whites had regained control. The Plantation myth had been battered, but it had been successfully replaced by the myth of the Lost Cause, and the South had effected the salvation of the fictions necessary to keep its identity intact.

There was one major concern for the ruling class, however: industrialization in the South appeared to be inevitable. Southern planters could not deny the fact that Southern agriculture was quickly losing its place as the dominant economic force; when the plantation was gone, what would become of the planter? Another and equally unsettling concern that stemmed from impending industrialization was the potential for poor white labor competition with African-Americans. The outcome of such a competition could place the poor white in the most desperate economic conditions he had ever faced.

This concern for the welfare of the poor white may seem an incongruous element in the nature of dominant views of the lower class—especially when we consider the way that turn-of-the-century elites condoned African-American authors' use of poor white stereotypes—but it must be remembered that the established Southern hierarchy placed any and all whites above African-Americans. Minority authors were free to construct all sorts of negative poor white characters in their fictions, but the reality of people of their own race being forced into an equal or even lower social and economic position than African-Americans was inconceivable and unforgivable—and elite whites would not have the luxury of scapegoats this time. And there was, of course, another and not quite so benevolent reason to protect poor whites: if poor whites were allowed to slip into complete abjection, the balm of the Proto-Dorian Bond would cease to soothe them, and the upper class would have to contend with a newly class-aware and angry majority.

These self-aware interests were part of the reason many elites in the South chose to embrace the prospect of industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Another and equally self-serving reason was that, although Reconstruction had ended and the privileged power structure had for the most part been salvaged, the land they reclaimed was poorer than it had ever been. Cotton prices were down, the soil that was not already exhausted required more and more expensive fertilizer, and without slaves there was not enough labor to pick it, anyway. In desperation, planters took more of the little available land from the poor whites, many of whom were already on the brink of starvation. Members of the Southern aristocracy feared industrialization's effects on the poor white, but they could not fail to see that, under the current system, poor whites would only grow more desperate, and the future of class relations thus hung

in the balance. The South was dying, and with it would go the myths that kept privileged whites firmly in their place at the top of the Southern hierarchy.

The solution seemed to come from an approach that would recall the elements of the Cavalier legend and the Lost Cause while adapting to an industrial future. This was the New South, the idea that the South could capitalize on the economic benefits of industrialization without sacrificing its traditions or upsetting its class system. Elite whites needed to convince their detractors in the North that they were committed to progress, to letting go of their aspirations for absolute power, and to adapting to an environment that embraced equality. This was an especially difficult task, for those in power were still vehemently opposed to the very concepts they now had to endorse. Even though relations between the North and South had begun to improve since the Spanish-American War, and in spite of what New South proponents may have said to their new allies, the underlying vision of the New South doctrine was a region that was so economically powerful it could return to its plantation glory, free from sanctions or interference from the north. Elite Southerners had seen the destruction of the myth of the plantation, which posited gentleman planters as the benefactors of their contented slaves, by the Civil War, and they had very nearly abandoned the Lost Cause in the aftermath of Reconstruction; they now had to utilize a myth that could redeem their heritage and protect it from Northern dissenters. The concept of a New South would do this by finally giving Southerners the economic stability and independence they needed to fully control their history, and all without forcing those in power to divulge their real interests and purpose.

The Lost Cause was not entirely deconstructed at the beginning of the 20th century, but neither did it commend itself to the needs of a South that was not primarily agricultural. Cobb finds that while the Lost Cause was still valuable to elite whites in that it provided for their

“emotional, racial, and political needs,” it was not sufficient to address the tenuous economy (*Away* 67). The New South doctrine was created to address economic questions at the same time as the three former concerns. Consequently, while the New South doctrine was touted as a progressive approach to a changing region, its constructors still held to the Lost Cause’s foundational principles—although this fact was not widely published.

These two contradictory “ideologies,” of Southern progress and stasis, became the “New South Creed,” which would provide a “blueprint not only for sustaining a distinctive identity for many southern whites but for reclaiming their lost status and autonomy as well” (*Away* 68). New South organizers claimed that it would allow the South to be industrialized like the North, but that it would stay true to Southern ideals, particularly as they related to power structures. The New South would in actuality be the elites’ conception of the Old South, but this time, it would be truly and indisputably real.

There was even hope for the poor white. By 1900, hundreds of cotton mills dotted the Southern landscape, and work had begun in the construction of a public school system. The objective of these radical changes was not so honorable, however; upper-class whites hoped that Southern factories would mitigate black-white economic competition, and their goal for public education was to train up future generations of lower-class whites in the same ideologies their parents had shared. Cobb notes that, through the public school system, elite whites intended to “domesticate” rather than liberate poor white laborers (*Redefining* 16). An example of this agenda is the North Carolina’s Women’s Association for the Betterment of Public School Houses, which sought to create “a program of social control” intent on grooming poor white youth to meet the labor obligations imposed upon them and “defined by circumstances without going so far as to make [them] discontented with [their] lot or to fill [their] minds with vain

ambition” (*Redefining* 16). Read in this century, this mission statement smacks of discrimination and condescension, but privileged whites had to stay dominant, and the New South doctrine guaranteed that the “circumstances” of poor white life—that is to say, their diminished level of economic and social autonomy and authority—would remain largely the same as it had always been. In scathing terms, Cobb charges that, in spite of the potential for social and economic uplift outlined by such organizations, the basis for this educational agenda was “moral and behavioral discipline through the inculcation of middle-class values in a group of people who had (and were given) little hope of becoming middle class” (*Redefining* 16). Elite whites were wary of the very progress they celebrated in the New South Creed, and they had to take concrete measures to ensure that poor whites would stay in their place.

The New South Creed applied the same institutionalized practices for control of Southern African-Americans as well, because industrialism threatened to offer African-Americans opportunities to improve their economic circumstances, opportunities that could not be separated from social advancement. Proponents of the New South, then, proposed the construction of schools for African-Americans as well as poor whites. African-American schools would not be academies, of course; racial feeling dictated that they would be meaner and incur fewer expenses than even lower-class white schools, and upper-class whites felt no need to disguise or hide the purpose of these educational endeavors the way they did with poor white educational reform. Rather, African-American schools would be used to enforce docility, particularly to prevent African-Americans from assaulting white women, for the legend of the Black Beast Rapist was still in full force, and white males still felt the need to protect White Southern Womanhood. African-American schools would also answer the persistent Northern accusation that whites continued to endorse African-American inferiority. And, like the schools for poor whites,

schools for African-Americans would allow elite Southerners to choose the kind of education blacks received, to control from the classroom and to ensure that African-Americans remained in their inferior and disfranchised positions. The power of privileged whites was so great that they could offer seeming advantages to their inferiors, and yet control every aspect of these offerings in a way that served to benefit only themselves.

The New South Creed of progress accomplished its purpose in advancing the South's industry and education, but these advancements brought more difficulties as well; the New South Creed was based on flawed ideology because it tried to promote the South by clinging to its old fictions, fictions that never had and never would have anything to offer the oppressed. The entire creed was founded on the hidden agenda of maintaining elite white supremacy, and it required a massive overhaul of Southern economic and academic institutions to act as a façade.

Unfortunately for privileged whites, progress—particularly in the form of mills and factories—had a number of potentially damaging consequences. W.J. Cash notes five defects that became glaringly apparent to poor whites. First, factory wages were so low that everyone in a family, excluding infants, the diseased, or those advanced in age, had to work. And even with an entire families' labor, there was no obvious economic improvement (Cash 199). Second, long hours in the factory necessarily deprived workers of the opportunity for any form of recreation and denied them the exposure to sunlight and fresh air which had previously balanced the effects of the poor whites' diet and living conditions (Cash 199). Third, working conditions in the mills were so poor that workers began to resemble a specific and alarming physical type, with sunken chests, dead-white skin, stunted bodies, “goggling dead-fish eyes,” and rickety limbs (Cash 200). Even if he had a little money in his pocket—which was rare enough—the poor white man could

not look at his sickly and malnourished family and believe that progress had done him anything other than a disservice.

There were numerous ideological flaws in the new South Creed and its subsequent industrialization as well. For one, the mill system was almost identical to the plantation system, which was exactly the way elites intended it to be. The housing, streets, food, clothing, churches, schools, and policing provided by the mills divested the poor white of his independence; more than ever before, poor white workers were under the authority of the upper class. The mill system also did nothing to diminish the white trash stereotype; in fact, it actually reinforced it, as mill workers were mocked for everything from their housing to their appearance. The poor whites' movement away from the desperation inherent in agricultural life made them vulnerable to critique in their new urban environment; because the mill towns were distinctly separated from the business and banking centers nearby, mill workers were set apart both geographically and by their living conditions, with the mill towns becoming centralized locales upon which to displace elite white derision.

In spite of the problems, there were a few important benefits that came from industrialism. As long as a factory had orders to fill, poor whites could earn regular pay and could afford to feed and clothe their families. Workers could also temporarily give their jobs over to others if they felt the need to get back to the country, and there was always a bit of downtime. Even the mill's similarity to the plantation had some value, as the new system initially guided the cotton baron and factory owner toward paternalistic obligations toward their employees; the elite authoritarian felt the old responsibility to help his workers in their daily lives and to minister to their spiritual afterlives. The poor white worker was reminded constantly, by his minister, the company doctor, and the factory owner himself, that the owner was his

benefactor and that his excessive generosity was to be appreciated. This repetition combined with the poor white habit of deference to authority to enforce traditional Southern class roles.

Nevertheless, all was not well between the poor white factory worker and his superior, as the poor white began to respond to the substandard living conditions, dangerous and unhealthy work environments, and the heavy burden of social stigma. When a number of poor whites gathered together, this uneasiness could lead to strikes and riots, albeit infrequently. The anger and frustration the workers felt when they recognized their exploitation is clearly embodied by Will Thompson, the ill-fated leader of a factory strike in Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* (1931). In spite of these workers' momentary flirtation with Populism, however, most attempts to change or improve the factory system were disorganized, short-lived, and hindered by the troubling obstacles of poor whites' race loyalty and the desire for African-American oppression. And, when life in the factory town became intolerable, poor whites could always return to the country and pick up the nearly impossible struggle for survival on wasted land right where they left off.

A small group of Southerners saw the New South Creed and its subsequent progress for the empty fictions they truly were, and by the 1930s, the Southern Renaissance was born. Southern Renaissance writers looked at their region and saw the racism, class disparities, and closed-minded, self-fulfilling ideologies that had persisted and kept the South from becoming as great as they believed it could be. During this time, enlightened Southerners turned a critical eye to "the historical raw material that went into the construction of the New South identity, attempting to understand how such a genteel, glorious past could have degenerated into such a dismal, defective present" (*Redefining* 170). The extent to which they believed in the actual glory of that past varied, but the point was that they mourned the lost potential they were certain it had once had. Southern Renaissance writers, then, sought to pinpoint the exact moment the South

had gone astray, the influences that had misguided it, and the effects of that waywardness on the future of the South and its residents. Two authors, in particular, spent the 1930s grappling with the questions of who to blame and how to indict them. William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell plumbed the Southern past in order to understand the South's failure; each man looked to the death of the agricultural economy and the ills of the industrial economy and discovered the Southern Renaissance tenet of the past's unavoidable presence in the present. Faulkner and Caldwell are often tied together and compared to one another by virtue of their thematic similarities, but one similarity, at least, is left to explore: to demonstrate the disastrous conflation of the Southern past and present, and to condemn the practices that allowed past sins to strangle the present, both Faulkner and Caldwell objectified—intentionally and unintentionally, depending on their purposes—poor whites. The poor whites in their novels are stereotyped in full, often so grossly that they overshadow the authors' aims to demonstrate the deleterious effects of a century of racism, greed, and hypocrisy upon poor whites.

History has recorded and repeated the sins of the 19th and 20th century South for so long that there can be no confusion about its legitimate guilt. What is not so clear is the factors that molded the South and opened the avenues for its transgressions. Colonials believed differences in climate and the prevalence of slave labor were the predominant factors that gave the South its distinct culture.⁵ While weather is an obvious difference and slavery was at least initially practiced in the North and South, by the end of Reconstruction there were real differences between the two regions.

⁵ See J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782), and Jack Temple Kirby's "The Visceral South" (1986).

C. Vann Woodward explores four distinct differences between North and South, each of which had a profound effect on Southern experience. The first of these is poverty. While few Americans were wealthy in the antebellum era, the South suffered from a poverty that was “emphasized by wide regional discrepancies in living standard, per capita wealth, per capita income, and the good things that money buys, such as education, health, protection, and the many luxuries that go to make up the celebrated American Standard of Living” (Woodward 17). Woodward finds this poverty to be a “distinctive” trait among Southerners (18). After the Civil War, poverty remained the dominant economic condition in the South; in 1938, in fact, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt identified the widespread poverty in the South as America’s most pressing economic problem.

The South also had an intimate knowledge of defeat. From their victory in the Revolution, Americans had enjoyed a long tradition of military and political success. But while victory can be seen as a national state of mind prior to 1861, it is nonetheless one “in which the South can participate vicariously or only in part” (Woodward 19). The Civil War exposed Southerners to the uncomfortable experience of military defeat and overwhelming shame and regret, but the South also endured “long decades of defeat in the provinces of economic, social, and political life” (Woodward 19).⁶ Fred Hobson identifies a “perverse and defiant...sense of distinction” among Southerners, who construct “a badge of honor” out of their “heritage of defeat” (12). This aspect of defeat is contrary to Woodward’s, which sees the South’s loss of the Civil War as humiliating, but both nonetheless establish the notion of Southern distinctiveness based in the concept of loss.

⁶ In the year of *Burden’s* publication (1960), the fate of America in Vietnam was largely undetermined. Woodward, however, prophetically includes the caveat that Americans have “until recently, solved every major problem they ever confronted” (19).

A third experience that distinguished South from North deals with the notion of American innocence. British colonists came to the New World to start afresh, free of the corruption and villainy of European feudalism; America, by contrast, was viewed as a kind of Utopia. For the South, however,

[t]he experience of evil and the experience of tragedy are parts of the Southern heritage that are as difficult to reconcile with the American legend of innocence and social felicity as the experiences of poverty and defeat are to reconcile with the legends of abundance and success. (Woodward 21)

Prior to the Revolution, but especially in the years before the Civil War, Southerners were roundly condemned for the attitudes that permitted slavery, but the North freely impugned them for other perceived vices as well, such as flaming tempers and open hostility.

The last divisive experience involves the unique value that many Southerners gave to place, in the form of both geography and belonging. American expansion in the years before the Civil War gave rise to a spirit of independence and adventure, as Americans moved from place to place freely and made their homes where they found them. While there was ample migration out of the South, particularly among free blacks and later emancipated slaves, many white Southerners developed close familial and regional ties that impeded their opportunities for and inclinations toward migration. The Southerners' emphasis on the importance of place in identity formation stood in direct contrast to the Northern celebration of adaptation and experience. The conventions of 20th century modern literature, in fact, bespeak the Southern affinity for one's homeland and kin (Woodward 23).

Faulkner and Caldwell frequently address each of these distinctions in their novels as the aspects of Southern culture that work against regional progress and improvement. Defeat and the loss of innocence lead their characters to adopt what W.J. Cash identified as the “Savage Ideal,” the resistance to new or outside ideas and influences and the determination to maintain a kind of belligerent stagnancy (319). Poverty placed Southerners in desperate circumstances, and their perceived immobility rooted them there; these two conditions combined to form a kind of hopelessness that prevented poor whites from attempting to overcome their situations. These experiences and their effects are nowhere more prevalent than in the Southern poor white population, and Faulkner and Caldwell demonstrate the distinctive Southern experiences through their lower-class figures in order to illuminate and negotiate the effects of those experiences in the South at-large.

Unfortunately, Faulkner and Caldwell may have been too effective in their attempts to highlight cause and effect, because many of their poor white characters demonstrate no desire for redemption, nor do readers want them to have it. Faulkner wrote to convict the modern South for falling into the same racist and discriminatory patterns it had always followed, and to show that its unwarranted and exaggerated pride and continued practice of the Savage Ideal would lead it further into disrepute and disorder than it had ever experienced. Caldwell wanted to prove that the tradition of land and labor exploitation diminished the results of whatever progress the South hoped to make. Both authors create poor white characters who experience Woodward’s four criteria for Southern distinctiveness and detail the detrimental results of those distinctions. The Snopes, Walden, and Lester clans have been mired in poverty, they have lost their innocence, they have suffered defeat, and they have no faith in or hope for the potential for improvement through mobility. Because of this, they lack the strength and knowledge required to even

recognize themselves as the victims of Southern culture. Were they to understand their predicament, however, they could do little to change it. Because they cannot express their degradation and claim their status as misused, the reader is not inclined to sympathize or to speak for them.

This is the failure of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy *The Hamlet* (1931), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1955), and Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932). There is no doubt that Faulkner proves that the South cannot move forward because it willingly chains itself to the past, or that Caldwell achieves his goal of detailing the deleterious effects of corrupt agricultural processes and absentee landlordism, and on these levels both authors represent grand achievements in the Southern literary tradition. Faulkner presents a South in chaos; his Yoknapatawpha County is a microcosm of Southern vanity and closed-mindedness, where outsiders are seen as unwelcome and threatening alien Others. The town (as the modern South) is wholly incompatible with the country (as the Southern past), and the poor white Flem's presence in Jefferson recalls the misdeeds of the antebellum and post-Reconstruction eras and sheds light on reiterations of those misdeeds in the present. Flem comes from a long line of poor white sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and his roots are decidedly rural. His family is white trash, and so, therefore, is he; even his name is a homonym for bodily detritus. In spite of the townspeople's best efforts to dislodge him, Flem's attachment to the contemporary world and the history he drags behind him invade their consciousnesses; rather than acknowledge and then dismiss him, the town sets up a resistance that initiates all-out war between the two sides, variously represented as city and country; upper-class and lower; and present and past.

Robert Penn Warren argued that it is the Bundren clan of *As I Lay Dying*, not the Snopeses, who are Faulkner's real representative poor whites. The Snopes family, Warren

asserted, were “representations of mechanized man in modern society” (qtd in Carr 82). This last assertion is true on at least one level, but Faulkner’s argument is that, first, the past is always in the present, and second, “modern society” is wholly flawed. That Warren found the Snopes family to be the model for survival through adaptation to the modern South reaffirms Faulkner’s distaste for it and its ideologies. Mill workers could just as easily replace Flem Snopes as “mechanized man” in Warren’s thesis, and the meaning would not change; mill workers were poor whites, as well. Flem Snopes is poor white because his superiors say that he is, and the myths that allow them to say it are the exact myths Faulkner condemns. Further, Duane Carr argues that Faulkner’s Snopeses are not “yeoman” because they have never owned their own land and therefore they “cannot share in the inherited values which ‘yeoman’ farmers have in common with the aristocracy” (89). Flem is locked outside the realm of the upper class, he is shunned by the middle class, and this rejection relegates him to the bottom; his status is thoroughly poor white.

But Warren has a point. Flem is not lacking in intelligence, for example; but just as the poor white McBane of Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* wastes the opportunities his newly gained wealth affords him, Flem’s competence is twisted into a kind of cunning wiliness not uncommon among the stereotyped, comic, white trash figures of the antebellum era. Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s study of George Washington Harris’s 1867 *Sut Lovingood’s Yarns* demonstrates that “[b]y showing that the poorest of the trash could ridicule and manipulate other classes, southern humorists could avoid dealing with less amusing aspects of their struggle for survival” (17). The character of Sut Lovingood, specifically, shows that “the foulness and bestiality of the subject could almost obscure any need to consider the implications of such a mode of life” (Cook 17). Flem’s level of “foulness” is a point of debate, and he is not bestial in the literal sense

(although his cousin Isaac is), but he does take advantage of his elite white superiors, and his abuse of them in town separates the reader from the circumstances he is trying to leave behind in the country. Faulkner provides glimpses of these circumstances in the form of Flem's country cousins, who follow him out of their destitution in the hopes of following their fortunate kinsman's example and becoming successful themselves.

The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion detail Flem's journey from rural poverty to urban prosperity. The details of this journey lay the groundwork for a pattern of resistance against any poor white upward mobility or social acceptance; Flem's, Ab's, and the rest of the Snopes clan's movement away from the margins and into the everyday lives of the decent and respectable citizens of Jefferson is described as an invasion, a blight on the town and a threat to the very survival of the people, as Chick Mallison shudders at the "idea of Snopeses covering Jefferson like an influx of snakes or varmints from the woods" (*Town* 112). Flem, especially, disrupts the quiet normalcy of Jefferson and offends the townspeople. Along the way, he displaces the elites of Jefferson; the grocer and landowner, the owner of the electric company, and even the bank president are forced to give up their lucrative positions and watch as Flem assumes their roles. Flem's triumph over the established order is indicative of the way past trumps present in the South, and it is the figures of the present who bear the guilt, for it is the grocer's pride, the bank president's lasciviousness, and the electric company owner's greed that make them vulnerable. These flaws are everywhere apparent in the modern South, and they are responsible for perpetuating an environment that supports racism, poor white exploitation, and discriminatory practices that privilege a few but punish the majority.

This message is unfortunately obscured by Flem's characterization. While Chesnutt used the poor white stereotype out of necessity in order to highlight the sins of the entire white race,

Faulkner applies those sins more or less exclusively to Flem and his family. Flem as the embodiment of past Southern sins is effective when we read the rest of the town as the modern South's desire to rewrite, ignore, or normalize those sins, but his literal body is too strong, too terrifying, to be simply representative. George Marion O'Donnell identifies the connections between Faulkner's personal Southern experience and his literary attempts to negotiate the circumstances of that experience in "Faulkner's Mythology" (1939). O'Donnell finds that Faulkner

is a traditional man in a modern South. All around him the anti-traditional forces are at work; and he lives among evidences of their past activity. He could not fail to be aware of them. It is not strange, then, that his novels are, primarily, a series of related myths (or aspects of a single myth) built around the conflict between traditionalism and the anti-traditional modern world in which it is immersed.

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The traditional past and the modern anti-traditional present creates "[i]n Mr. Faulkner's mythology...two kinds of characters; they are Sartorises or Snopeses, whatever the family names may be" (O'Donnell 286). That this assessment was made prior to the publication of the latter two novels in the trilogy demonstrates the power of the past/present dichotomy in Faulkner's conception of the South, and his difficulties to reconcile it. It seems that Faulkner's struggles always brought him back to the same position toward and conclusion about the modern South, and time and again Faulkner displaced his frustration onto the lower class. O'Donnell's analysis of *The Wild Palms*, for example, privileges Ab Snopes, "[who] is enabled to use a member of the Sartoris family for his own advantage because, for the first time, he can be useful to the Sartorises" (286). Significantly, this evaluation could apply to Flem, who is Ab's son, as Flem

offers his assistance to Will Varner (a Sartoris in all but name, as O'Donnell predicted) and, like Ab, uses his "low cunning as an entrepreneur" (286) to infiltrate the upper class; Flem's actions lead his wife Eula to the same fate as *The Wild Palms's* Rosa Millard, death resulting from the chaotic overturning of the social hierarchy through the introduction of selfish poor white calculation.

The irony of this is that Flem does very little to earn his status as a white trash mutineer; he commits no serious crimes, he is not violent, and he barely associates with the townspeople. John E. Basset calculates that, in *The Hamlet*, Flem "is at the center of the narrative for ten pages out of 371"; the development of Flem's character is left to his detractors, who use "second-hand" approaches to construct myths about his undesirability (139). Bassett argues that Faulkner's reliance on what amounts to hearsay in his depiction of Flem serves to "validate the myths" elite whites create (137). Because Faulkner establishes the fact that Flem's intrusion is unwanted and threatening early in *The Hamlet*, the reader does not view him outside of the elite's interpretation of him. None of the other characters can even give a reasonable explanation for their judgments of him; Flem just seems to inspire an intuitive revulsion in them. Faulkner, himself, looked at the period between the antebellum era and his own century with a similar revulsion, and it appears that his feelings overpowered his pen.

This is an unfortunate event, because Faulkner has much to say about the Southern past through Flem. Like Charles Chesnutt, Faulkner scapegoats his poor white character to demonstrate the power of Southern myth, its inaccuracies, its manipulations of the poor and minorities, and its disastrous effects on the majority. Elite whites had created so many fictions by 1930 that Faulkner combines them into one all-consuming myth that exploits the worst aspects in each of their components. In this way, he shows that each era's dominant myth has snowballed

into a rigid and dogmatic set of beliefs that leaves no room for alternative interpretations. Sadly, Faulkner himself offers no alternative interpretations and instead relies on the same poor white stereotypes of the past in a way that negates the notion of the poor white (and minorities and the entire modern South) as victim. Flem's oppressed status and its implications are lost in his depiction as the aggressor, and those who suffer most at the hand of Southern myths end up becoming the ones who enact them and are blamed for their injustices.

It is important to understand the claims Faulkner makes at the core of his characterization of Flem. There are three distinct criticisms of the South's past and its tradition of constructing myths that Faulkner carefully places in the texts: first, the survival of myths depends on word of mouth indoctrination and manipulation of fact, either through the assertion of selective details or outright falsehoods. In order to acquire and retain adherents, myths must be told and retold, reinforced to prevent speculation and combat disbelief. Second, myths frequently promote undeserving authorities and maintain their dominance. And third, myths often encourage the very undesirable attitudes and actions among the groups they disparage. Each of these critiques is personified by Flem as the Southern past and as poor white victim. This is where the problem lies: Flem is characterized by the townspeople in such a limited way that he cannot be both victim and victimizer, yet Faulkner tries to backtrack against his own text to make him so. Flem is a member of an oppressed and marginalized group, but Faulkner takes him outside of that group, rendering him the landowning husband of an upper-class woman, but giving him none of the prestige associated with that vaulted status; Flem as the past has to demonstrate the three sins of Southern myth, and his guilt renders him irredeemable as a poor white.

Faulkner's reasons for this tactic are unclear. Certainly he did not have to use the poor white as the vessel of undesirability in the way Chesnut did. It is possible, therefore, that

Faulkner had incorporated into his consciousness at least one of the myths he tries so hard to condemn. O'Donnell speculates that Faulkner's presentation of Flem and his poor white family is the necessary result of the author's own conflicted psychology: Faulkner was immersed in and respected "traditional values of conduct," and his feelings for his characters are determined by how closely they subscribe to these values (294). In short, O'Donnell claims that Faulkner sees his Snopes characters through the eyes of a Sartoris (295). The literary product of this psychology is "essentially myth, but around the conflict of two different worlds, to one of which Mr. Faulkner belongs as an artist, though he is of physical necessity a citizen of the other" (O'Donnell 294). That poor whites are not innocent has been conclusively proven, but their victimhood is just as certain. Perhaps Faulkner purposely uses the poor white stereotype in an ironic attempt to highlight its pervasiveness by demonstrating that he himself was not immune to Southern myth. Regardless of whether Flem's characterization is a testament to Faulkner's skill or an indication of his own unintentional bias, it is Flem and poor whites who suffer most.

Faulkner wastes no time before he identifies the past's dominant role in the present. The first place marker in *The Hamlet* is Frenchman's Bend, a once-thriving plantation just outside of Jefferson. The modern South has rendered it into homesteads under the direction of Will Varner, who as "the chief man" has replaced the antebellum Frenchman (*Hamlet* 5). Varner could represent a successful evolution from Southern past to present, but even though the Frenchman's "dream and his pride [are] now dust with the lost dust of his anonymous bones," he still holds sway over Jefferson because "his legend" lives on through "the stubborn tale of the money he buried somewhere about the place when Grant overran the country on his way to Vicksburg" (*Hamlet* 4). This legend is a word of mouth assertion of the past's relevance in the present. Faulkner's first critique of Southern myth is found in the novel's opening pages, for it is through

the story of the Frenchman's buried riches that Flem manipulates most of Jefferson. Because he knows that the townspeople have been indoctrinated in the fiction of the hidden treasure, he formulates a complicated plan that benefits him and makes fools of everyone else. Flem buys the Frenchman Place from Will Varner, pretends to secretly find the Frenchman's gold, and then sits back and waits to profit.

Faulkner uses the Frenchman Place to demonstrate the way one myth leads to others, and the way those myths serve to benefit their creators. The legend of lost gold has circulated long before Flem's arrival, but he subtly reinforces it and gives it new power when he pretends to believe it himself. He lets Ratliff, Bookwright, and Armstid find him digging on the property, and he plants money there so that they will find it. When they do, their greed overwhelms them, and they do not notice that the money is new. Flem's trickery reinforces the notion that myths work through manipulation; Flem knows that there is no gold on the property, but he needs others to believe that there is. The subterfuge the poor white Flem uses is then inverted by the town's counter-construction of Flem as an inherently undeserving and degenerate figure. Bassett notes that the Snopes trilogy details "the use of oral fictions for personal or social reasons" (140) which arise because the residents of Jefferson espouse the doctrine of elite white supremacy; when the poor white Flem outsmarts Will Varner, their faith in the notion of privilege is shaken, and they must create a legend of Snopes in order to restore an unnatural order they have always taken for granted (141).

This incident can be compared to any number of Southern myths, from the Cavalier legend to the myth of the benevolent slave system to the myth of poor white trash. Faulkner uncovers the truth behind myth construction: it does not have to have any factual basis, and it does not even require the belief of those who endorse it. If an idea is uttered long enough, it

collects believers. African slaves, for example, were not inferior to their white masters, but this fiction circulated for so long that by the 19th century, scientists had “proven” it and used it to oppress African-Americans. It took less than a century for the assertion of white supremacy to become a truth for which hundreds of thousands of Americans were willing to fight and die.

Faulkner’s second critique, that myths often serve to promote the unworthy to positions of authority and maintain them there, can also be seen in Flem’s perpetuation of the legend of the Frenchman’s gold. Of the three men whom Flem tricks into buying the Frenchman Place, only one is intelligent and insightful. V.K. Ratliff is capable of being a leading figure in the town. Bookwright and Armstid are less so; Armstid, in fact, is a poor white. Flem’s deception gives him dominance over the three men and sets Bookwright and Armstid up as Ratliff’s equals. Coupled with his greed, Ratliff’s desire to best Flem forces him into an association with his intellectual and moral inferiors. Ratliff’s fate becomes Will Varner’s as well, because Flem requires the Frenchman Place as a bribe for marrying Will’s pregnant daughter Eula. Varner has no choice but to accept Flem’s terms in order to protect his family’s name and reputation, and Flem takes advantage of Will’s pride; Eula’s illegitimate pregnancy is the only circumstance that forces him to hand his daughter over to his inferior. Flem is not easy to fool, in spite of Will’s assumption about his stupidity; although he has no real desire to marry Eula or raise another man’s child, he has plans for Eula’s dowry long before he asks for it, and he calculates the benefits of the union and knows it will work to his advantage. As Will’s son-in-law, Flem can further disrupt Jefferson’s social hierarchy and co-opt a portion of elite white power. Flem’s inheritance of the Frenchman Place constitutes a kind of theft from the past, as he takes an old tale, reinvigorates it, and uses it to promote himself and his agenda. Flem’s actions mirror the way Southern myths specifically answer the needs of those who seek power but are otherwise

helpless to attain it. Flem is the intellectual superior of every resident of the town, but he is virtually powerless until he takes the Frenchman Place; through its legend, he gains a foothold into the privileged Jeffersonian power structure and eventually works his way to its top.

Flem's marriage to Eula highlights another critique of Southern myths. Because he has no qualms about wedding a woman who would have been considered impure at that time to achieve his ends, Flem demonstrates the way Southern myths condone and even encourage the actions and habits they deem inappropriate and undesirable. In respectable Southern society in the early 20th century, white women were expected to be pure. While elite Southern males provided a home and security, females were seen as the moral centers of those homes, and they were upheld as the models of southern piety and virtue. Eula's fornication and conception of an illegitimate child, therefore, are the ultimate insults to that era's Southern code of womanhood. Flem, who marries Eula in spite of her transgression, in essence offers his approval of her illicit sexuality. In this way, the legend of the Frenchman's gold leads Flem to condone both Eula's behavior and Will's, because it is Will's pride that leads him to require such a cheap price for his cheapened daughter. Although none of the townspeople are fooled by the hasty marriage and subsequent year-long honeymoon, Eula's status as wife negates the town's otherwise assured censure and ostracism, and it revokes Eula's daughter Linda's designation of the pejorative "bastard".

Southern myths have always worked in this way. The myth of African-American inferiority and the benevolent plantation system allowed elite Southern whites to abuse African-Americans first by making them slaves and then by using cruel tactics to keep them so—and all of this was accomplished with the tacit acceptance of the Southern white population. Myths later supported African-American disfranchisement and poor white stigmas. Flem as the

representative of the South's mythic past seems to serve as a cover for deviance and degradation as well.

Because African-Americans and poor whites were so frequently and so severely damaged by the Southern myths, they worked to combat their denigration in a number of ways; poor whites faithfully held to the claim of white supremacy in order to deflect some of the shame and desperation of their circumstances, and African-Americans developed a great oral tradition that served to counter their lowly status. But because each group was trapped outside of the boundaries of privilege, they could do nothing to wholly reverse the dominant assertions of the elite white South. Even the poor white, who did his best to adopt the myths of the hegemony, as often as not found himself outside of the protection and consolation he hoped those myths could provide.

Sensitive and insightful, William Faulkner understood that the modern South, which purported to be the model of progress and achievement, was merely an industrialized and polished version of the Old. The same elite power structure handed down the same restrictions to an oppressed majority forced to live by a code that threatened them socially and economically. The New South Creed had successfully given birth to a society identical to its progenitor, as all of the hateful practices had carried over and regenerated into a polished but tired construction with monstrous implications. Faulkner realized that this had been possible due to the myths the South made about itself and its past. This evaluation of the South's condition in the modern era should have led him to a sympathetic regard for the poor white in the same way that it created a deep sympathy and outrage for the plight of Southern African-Americans. Faulkner frequently

sheds light on the oppressive circumstances of African-American life in his novels,⁷ but he does not give the poor white Flem Snopes the same consideration; instead, he requires that Flem embody all of the South's ills, modern or otherwise.

Not all of Faulkner's poor white characters bear the heavy burden the author places on Flem. Cook finds that Faulkner's treatment of poor whites often served to "associate rather than dissociate them from the rest of humanity in his works" (62). Cook makes a good point, as Faulkner's critiques are often directed at all of Southern humanity. This assertion, however, does not explain Faulkner's continued insistence on the lines of class delineation that separate his white characters. I would conversely assert that in rare cases—*Sanctuary*'s Lee Godwin and Ruby, for example—Faulkner's poor whites are actually dissociated from the rest of humanity by virtue of their morality. But this occurs infrequently enough to make Faulkner's characterization of lower-class whites more than a little uneven; indeed, Bassett identifies Faulkner's poor whites as the primary target for critique: "[t]hat Snopesism turns out to be a universal human trait does not contradict its peculiar definition in terms of social class at a certain time" (137). At the end of the Snopes trilogy, for example, Faulkner has carried the entire class of elite whites through the havoc that Flem wreaks relatively unscathed. With the exception of Houston, who is a member of the privileged class but isolates himself to the extent that he barely participates in society, all of the elites in *The Hamlet* are still safe and secure in *The Mansion*. Flem, however, is murdered by another poor white, a narrative decision Faulkner made at least twice, as the former poor white Thomas Sutpen is murdered by Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Interestingly, the way for Flem's murder is paved by his stepdaughter Linda; as a product of both the upper and lower classes, Linda represents the struggle between the two. She cannot, however, carry the

⁷ See *Intruder in the Dust*; *Go Down, Moses*; and *Light in August*.

burden of this duality, and she abandons her father and the South altogether. Flem's death at the hands of another poor white brings all of his success and achievement to a halt, and it places him back into the rigid lower class structure he tried so hard to escape. Both the poor white and the Southern past may find a way to dominance, but they bring only disorder, and eventually they will be put down again. Flem may be able to move into the bank president's mansion, but he cannot stay there.

Faulkner's use of the poor white stereotype as representative of the Southern past creates a confusing web of conflicting claims. Is it what Flem represents or what he literally is that makes him unsuitable for modern Southern life? Given his embodiment of the three critiques of the Southern mythic past, and Faulkner's decision to let him enter the elite sphere for a brief time, one would conclude that it is the former. But critical readings will always almost unanimously assert that it is the latter. The failure here is not on the part of the scholars but on the part of Faulkner himself; this is due to his own "ambivalence about both the Old South legend and the New South identity," which "permeated both his personal and literary world" (137). As Cobb points out, Faulkner's belief in the glory of the Old South, and his faith in its customs and traditions, created a set of conflicting notions: he mourns the loss of a grand past, but he realizes that its grandness is largely contrived, and yet his need to believe in it is so great that he cannot dismiss his longing to identify with it. Cobb asserts that Faulkner needed the "position and respectability" of the Southern Cavalier (*Away* 138). It hardly mattered that the Southern Cavalier was a manipulated construction used to enforce white supremacy, so long as its associations with gentility stood firm. Belief in the South of the past as both a grand society and a colossal failure necessarily forces Faulkner into the position of apologist and critic, and he simply cannot be both at once. O'Donnell reaches the same conclusion, asserting that Faulkner's

personal conflicts are transferred to his texts. Faulkner's "failures" as a novelist stem from this philosophical complexity: As long as he "can sustain his inherent tradition, he is enabled to project the central conflict in terms of myth. However, as a Sartoris artist in a Snopes world, he is constantly subject to opposition that tends to force him...into [a] kind of reactionary formalization of tradition" (292). Flem, then, becomes a kind of avatar for the author himself, complete with mismatched identities and conflicting purposes. This duality is impossible to maintain, and Flem's characterization collapses under its weight until the only aspect of his character that remains is his poor whiteness. It is through this aspect that we recognize he is cursed, and it is also why we agree to his punishment.

Sylvia Jenkins Cook focuses on Flem's purpose as a bridge between the Old and New South. She finds that, at the time of *The Hamlet's* publication, Faulkner reintroduced a species of poor white who had long been unsuitable for the South's sentimentalist writers and who would be absolutely ignored by the Marxists, "the confidence man" (51). The literary purpose of this character is to invade a society and illuminate its flaws. Texts use the confidence man in order to focus on "the loss of an ethical center...[and] a decay of purpose" that is frequently the result of the mingling of previously separated social and economic classes (Cook 51). Flem's evolution from his "predecessors" (Cook 51) reaffirms the notion of his representativeness; however, the close ties Flem has with the elites of Jefferson reveal that he is the harbinger of corruption, and whatever misdeeds the gentry enact are in large part due to his influence. He encourages Ratliff's greed, for example, in the same way that *Marrow's* McBane leads Carteret into regrettable acts of violence. The legend of the Frenchman's gold is widespread and well-known throughout Jefferson and the surrounding areas, but it is only when Flem arrives that the legend is put to devious use. Rather than shedding light on both upper and lower-class white depravity, as Cook

claims, Flem serves to set the classes at odds. The battle between classes clearly mirrors Faulkner's internal struggle, particularly as it was based in his own desire to believe in a glorious Old South, and Bassett points out that a great deal of Faulkner's work represents an endeavor to return to the past (145). Even though that past was "fantasy," Faulkner allows his characters to reflect and obsess upon it, to hold to fictive constructions of bygone glory because their conceptions of self required it (Bassett 145). Because he clung to a flawed perception, Faulkner could never reconcile the chaotic collision of Southern mythic past and the reality of the Southern present.

Although he is torn, Faulkner purports to have enacted a solution to the Sartoris/Snopce conflict, as, in spite of the fact that "*The Mansion* is a revision of and an elegy for a personal and a fictional past, ...by the end prosperity, moral order, and peace are re-established" (Bassett 149). This is only possible because Faulkner restores the traditional patterns of order to Jefferson by the end of the trilogy. The elite power structure has returned, and the poor whites have been killed or banished. The hopeful prospect of the modern South is only imaginable because Flem and his kind, figures who never belonged and must never again be accepted, have been removed from Jefferson. Indeed, Carr finds that Faulkner sees "the lower class as either invaders to be opposed or comic figures to be dismissed out of hand" and charges that Faulkner "is thinking in stereotypes, and his art suffers" (92). But Faulkner's use of the poor white stereotype damages more than his art; in the final analysis, Flem's characterization reaffirms the myth of poor white trash and sends his readers—and poor whites themselves—back into the very Southern past he wants to condemn.

II: Caldwell

Erskine Caldwell approached his poor whites with a type of hesitancy not found in Faulkner, but his lower-class creations are just as damnable—if not more so. The poor whites in his works are so debased that they have become animalistic. Indeed, this was Caldwell's point: years of deprivation will necessarily return man to his natural state. The tragedy of this, however, is lost among the deeds of such grotesque figures. They are not to be pitied, and not even Caldwell's heavy-handed assault upon the upper class who put them into such dire straits can make of them anything more than sometimes-comic horrors. While Caldwell wants to remind his readers of poor whites' victimhood, he instead encourages derision and disgust. Carr identifies Caldwell's duality by noting that his critique of the production systems that oppressed poor whites was so strong that it led Donald Davidson to call him a "Southerner who turns state's evidence," while at the same time finding that Caldwell "could rival Longstreet's condescending portrayals of disadvantaged whites as savage buffoons" (93). *Tobacco Road's* Jeeter Lester is one such buffoon, and his savagery does more to alienate the reader from the problem of the poor white than any other novel of this decade.

Jeeter's problem is that he is hungry. So hungry, in fact, that he is willing to prostitute his thirteen year old daughter Pearl and his harelip daughter Ellie May, steal from his neighbors, and assault any member of his family—including his elderly and infirm mother—for a bag of turnips. Jeeter has been brought so low by so much poverty that he has no hope in the American capitalist system. It has abandoned him entirely, so that when he sees Lov Bensey's bag of turnips, he does not even remember that food can be obtained with money: "Jeeter had long before come to the conclusion that the only possible way a quantity of food could be attained was by theft" (Caldwell 5). This revelation is important, and it comes early in the novel because Caldwell's purpose is to highlight the corruption of an economic system that excludes the poor and then

gives them no means other than treachery to survive. Jeeter's memory is rotted by starvation and desperation, and he no longer belongs in the society that neglects him. Unfortunately, Caldwell's assessment of Jeeter's memory can too easily be read as ironic, as his subsequent misdeeds are so heinous they negate reader sympathy. Jeeter may be a tragic figure for a brief time, but all too soon he is wholly antagonistic.

Caldwell focuses on the turnips to demonstrate the hardships of tenant farming on merciless land, and the way that poverty as a social and mental condition moves from one generation to the next. Jeeter laments the loss of last year's turnips, which were destroyed by worms just before they were ready to harvest (Caldwell 10). Even when a poor white tries to provide for himself, Caldwell asserts, the land is so harsh that his efforts are frequently thwarted. Jeeter's son Dude inherits his father's deprivation and degradation, and he lashes out at Jeeter in desperation: "You sit around here and cuss all the time about not having nothing to eat, and no turnips—why don't you go somewheres and steal yourself something?" (Caldwell 15). Dude has no sympathy for his father because he is starving, too; Caldwell creates enmity within the poor white family in order to show that they do not have the luxury of caring for others because they can barely care for themselves. Again, however, Dude's solution to the problem places him outside of the law and makes him a less-than-sympathetic character.

Caldwell is very clear about his stance on the economic and social circumstances that have led the poor white to such a lowly state. Indeed, "Caldwell's purpose, according to his own testimony, was to call attention to his subjects' desperate living conditions" (Carr 93). Caldwell makes his case through Jeeter's voice and his own abrupt and dogmatic interruptions within the narrative. Jeeter declares that farming is "in my blood...I did it for near about fifty years, and my Pa and his Pa before him was the same kind of man...The land has got a powerful hold on me"

(Caldwell 16). Jeeter's statement reveals two things: first, that he has not always been as shiftless as he now appears to be; and second, Jeeter's condition has been passed down to him and will pass through him to his son. The economic plight of the poor white is centuries old; Jeeter could not end it, and neither will Dude. Jeeter explains his situation with a kind of hopeless bafflement:

“I worked all my life for Captain John. I worked harder than any four niggers in the fields; then the first thing I knowed, he came down here one morning and says he can't be letting me be getting no more rations and snuff at the store... I can't make no money, because there ain't nobody wanting work done. Nobody is taking on share-croppers, neither. Ain't no kind of work I can do for hire. I can't even raise me a crop of my own, because I ain't got no mule in the first place, and besides that, won't nobody let me have seed-cotton and guano on credit.”

(Caldwell 15-16)

Jeeter understands the vicious cycle of poverty: to make money, he has to have money. But there is no money to be had or made because he has been abandoned by his employer. Jeeter knows that he does not bear responsibility for his own poverty, an acknowledgement that flies in the face of sociological studies that blame the poor for their condition: “I ain't had nothing to do with it. It ain't my fault that Captain John shut down on giving us rations and snuff. It's his fault” (Caldwell 15). Still, Jeeter is blamed by his own family, who have turned on each other in their want.

Caldwell criticizes corrupt credit systems through the Augusta bankers, “the sharpest people [Jeeter] had ever had anything to do with” (Caldwell 112). They agree to give Jeeter a loan so that he can plant crops, but they insist upon telling him how to farm, and they hound him constantly for the interest on the loan, which he can never pay and which only adds to his debt.

After the crops have been harvested, Jeeter has paid three hundred dollars on a two hundred dollar loan (Caldwell 115). At the end of the season, tired and in debt, Jeeter spars with the creditors: “You rich folks in Augusta is just bleeding us poor people to death. You don’t work none, but you get all the money us farmers make” (Caldwell 115). Jeeter knows he is being swindled, but he is powerless to stop it; his inferior status renders him vulnerable to the repercussions of having to rely on the upper class for aid. The Augusta bankers listen to Jeeter’s harangue, then they laugh and go back to their comfortable homes in town.

Caldwell goes even further in this critique by inserting his own view of the poor white problem: when there is no money to be made from cotton, Captain John gives up farming and situates himself in town, leaving his tenants to fend for themselves without equipment, which he sold. John considers teaching the sharecroppers to use “newer and economical methods of modern agriculture...an impossible task,” and so he simply leaves them there to starve (Caldwell 62). Caldwell charges that the Lesters, and hundreds of sharecroppers like them, are victims of the land holder’s greed and carelessness; had John fulfilled his obligation to his employees, the families would have been able to “raise crops for food, and crops to be sold at a profit. Co-operative and corporate farming would have saved them all” (62-63). This critique is heavy-handed and disruptive; we get the sense that Caldwell is trying to make up for something, to lead us to a conclusion that he cannot bear out in the narrative. But Jeeter has already given voice to Caldwell’s assertions. Why, then, would the author belabor the point by overemphasizing a claim that the reader can easily identify?

The answer is that Caldwell’s assertions of unfairness and injustice are not so easy for us to discern because his characters are so grotesque, so comic, and so obviously depraved that they elicit only derision and disgust. The members of the Lester family are not objects of sympathy

because they are barely human. It is true that poverty has made them this way, but Caldwell strips them of all humility. They are ugly, immoral, and ignorant, and we begin to believe that they deserve their shame, and that they of all people must stay on Tobacco Road until they die. Caldwell does not convince us that they have any value or purpose, save perhaps as alien Others that make us feel superior by comparison.

Caldwell makes the same mistake as James Agee; that the two men have a similar purpose and both fail to accomplish it demonstrates the power of the Southern myth of poor white trash. In his 1941 study of three Alabama farm families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee intends to provide a realistic portrayal of poor white life. Like Caldwell, Agee rejects the notion that lower-class whites are poor because they want to be or because they are too incompetent to improve their situations. Unfortunately, Agee's exaggerated depictions of the poor whites' beauty and divinity is just as unrealistic as Caldwell's overemphasized ugliness and humility. The two men go to opposite extremes to make their cases, but both exaggerate so grossly that they lose all credibility. Agee, at least, adapted his technique to try to change elite views of poor white life; the difficulty for him is that this endeavor forced him to create an unbelievable aesthetic of poverty. In spite of his best efforts to romanticize the poor whites' attitudes and conditions, he cannot overcome their squalor and ignorance. Because he tries to replace one portrait with another, he effects no change in elite ideology. The poor whites Agee describes are filthy, they are barely able or not at all able to read, and there is no evidence that they possess any of the poetic simplicity that Agee attributes to them.

In the forward to *Praise*, Walker Evans, who worked with Agee and took the moving photographs that accompany the work, identifies one of Agee's primary difficulties: "I think he felt he was elaborately masked, but what you saw right away...was a faint rubbing of Harvard

and Exeter, a hint of family gentility, and a trace of romantic idealism” (ix). Evans defends his colleague’s sincerity and asserts the tenant families’ acceptance of and interest in his project, and Agee himself identifies his subjects in the preface as “an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family” (7). He also rejects the idea that his work is sentimental or romantic fluff; as problematic as the notion of “truth” can be, he still aims for it, and, foregoing the use of sociological rhetoric or literary flourish, he intends to record “without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands” (11).

As a largely voiceless class, poor whites had no way to relate their own experiences, and Agee is genuinely concerned about their plight. He shares with Caldwell a desire to promote awareness of and enlist aid for the lower class. However, as an elite outsider who spent less than a month with the Woods, Ricketts, and Gudger families, Agee cannot possibly analyze and describe their isolated economic, social, and emotional conditions in any credible way. Without admitting this inhibition, Agee instinctively knows that his work will fail to convince his readers:

these I will write of are human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads; and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of still others more alien; and that they are now being looked into by still others [who will read his book] almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what they are doing. (13)

Agee fears that his words cannot fulfill his needs, and he wishes that he could present his readers with the tangible elements of their lives (13). In his frustration, he laments that if he could

present privileged whites with the body parts of the poor whites, he could more fully convey his message and give them a clearer understanding of the brutality of poverty.

Agee's naïveté shows through in this wish, because it unintentionally signals a kind of condescending voyeurism; Agee desires literally to dismantle the poor whites and present them to his elite audience. Cook finds that Agee's study requires him to commit a "ruthless violation of the homes and most intimate possessions of the poor" (151) that he purports to pity, and his elite status gives him this right. Although he certainly does not intend to exploit his subjects, Agee appears dangerously similar to a type of carnival caller, urging the readers to step closer and gawk at the pathetic remnants of figures who were never whole in the first place. His social superiority gives him the right to display the wasted and dismembered pieces; despite his wishes to the contrary, the text then becomes a kind of freak show that has the power to draw readers in, but there are moments when his efforts at sympathy cannot engage his readers beyond the level of perverse curiosity.

This was never Agee's intention, of course. He displays great insight when he ties the poor white to the rest of humanity by demonstrating that one of the causes of poor white suffering is the frailty and failure inherent in the human condition, a plight that all people share; and he looks further into the poor whites' disadvantaged circumstances and attributes them to the specific inadequacies of their particular birthplace and station, an economic position that negates the possibilities of mobility and progress. It is obvious that he is genuinely touched by his subjects, and he laments the fact that they "live in a steady shame and insult of discomforts, insecurities, and inferiorities, piecing these together into whatever semblance of comfortable living they can, and the whole of it is a stark nakedness of makeshifts and the lack of means" (210).

But it is this same nakedness that makes them vulnerable to Agee's aesthetics, for at the exact moment he comes closest to earning his readers' sympathy, he alienates them with poetic reverence. This is never clearer than in his description of the poor whites' homes. After providing specific and minute details that, in spite of his assertion that he will avoid a "dissection into science," have the feel of a scientific report, Agee rhapsodizes on the poetic implications of their second-hand furniture and pathetic attempts at decoration. Agee describes the scraps of paper, pages torn from outdated calendars, and ripped magazine ads that cover the Gudgers' wall. The Woods family tapes pictures of well-dressed upper-class children to their wall in an ironic and pathetic effort to combat the shabbiness of their environment. Of these junk-covered dilapidated structures, Agee says "[i]t is my belief that such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary 'beauty'" (202). It is impossible to agree when Agee argues that "the partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom IS importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem" (204). Tragic, yes. But there is nothing poetic about Evans's photo of the Ricketts' chimney; in it, a cardboard scrap scrawled with the words "PLEAS! Be QUITE" is nailed over the mantel (197). We are moved, but it is by a decidedly unpoetic shame, for their extreme ignorance.

Agee repeatedly insists that his subjects deserve reverence, and yet, his depictions of them—the real depictions, not the sentimentalized rhapsodies—frequently invoke animal imagery. While Caldwell implies that the poor white has been reduced to an animalistic existence, Agee literalizes this by portraying the tenants as beasts, particularly mules. The mule "is used in the main and most hopeless work, because he is an immediate symbol of this work, and because by transference he is the farmer himself" (Agee 216). Describing the poor whites' clothing, Agee notes the similarities between overalls and harnesses: "the swift, simple, and

inevitably supine gestures of dressing and of undressing, which, as is less true of any other garment, are those of harnessing and unharnessing the shoulders of a tired and hard-used animal” (266). Agee may try to insist upon the sacrosanct essence of the poor white, but he places them among beasts when he describes their psychology: the people possess “[n]o reason nor glimmer of reason to regard anything in terms other than those of need and use, with all things viewed ‘in plain and powerful terms of need, hope, fear, chance, and function’” (314).

Agee’s intent is to demonstrate the ways in which poverty strips all joy and wonder from daily existence, and to elicit sympathy for those who are bereft. Yet, how can we be convinced of the humanity of something that seems so much less than human?

Jack Temple Kirby argues that Agee and Evans “were not trying to evoke sympathy or even to portray ‘accurately’ in the documentary sense of their age, their subjects” (61). In contrast, Sylvia Jenkins Cook finds that Agee allows the poor whites an opportunity for inclusion, “to make them witness to the squalor and joy, the shame and dignity of all human life and to restore to them qualities conveniently lost in the crusades to improve their condition” (155). A careful consideration of *Praise* places the reader in the middle of this dialogue; Agee at least purports to offer accuracy, but his efforts fail to return to the poor whites the dignity they have lost. At the beginning of the work, Agee records the town’s reactions to the names Woods, Gudger, and Ricketts. Their responses are wholly negative: “Fred Ricketts? Why, that dirty son-of-a-bitch, he brags that he hasn’t bought his family a bar of soap in five year”; “Ricketts? They’re a bad lot...The children are a bad problem in school”; “Why, Ivy Prichert was one of the worst whores in this whole part of the country; only one that was worse was her own mother”; “None of these people has any sense, nor any initiative” (Agee 79). Agee wholeheartedly tries to refute these claims, but he fails to offer a substantial refutation to the townspeople’s claims, and

in the end, we return to the dominant perception of the poor white stereotype. Agee proves far less credible than the dominant poor white construction, and we believe the privileged authority who tells us that Agee's subjects are "about the lowest trash you can find" (79). Seventy-three years ago, the residents of an Alabama town could not see through a stereotype, and the man who would enlighten them failed. Unfortunately, the stereotype exists today.

Unlike Agee, Caldwell does not need to rely on the outside analyses of the Lester family's neighbors to perpetuate the poor white stereotype, for the characters themselves make it clear that they are the "lowest trash" to be found. Not one of the Lesters has any redeeming qualities, although this was presumably not Caldwell's intent. Critics have tried to read *Tobacco Road* for the message that Caldwell hoped to give, and some have nearly succeeded; Shields McIlwaine, for example, argues that "Caldwell endowed some of his human creations with a nobility in the natural setting" (qtd in Kirby 54). McIlwaine saw that "Jeeter Lester's obsession with farming represents an eternally high human value" (qtd in Kirby 54). But Jeeter's "obsession" does not compel him to action; Caldwell notes that "Jeeter made a false start somewhere nearly every day" (77). He has intended to get Ellie May's harelip corrected for fifteen years, so long that she has despaired of him ever fulfilling his promise (Caldwell 15). Jeeter lets chicken roost on his ruined car, and even after the chickens are gone, he makes no attempt to clean off their feces (Caldwell 15). The lines between Jeeter and his animals are blurred, offering a clear vision of the way he sees himself. There is a distinct break between what McIlwaine identifies as Jeeter's "eternally high human value," which comes directly from Jeeter's stated intentions, and his real value, which is assessed by Dude: "He tells more lies than any man I ever heard. . . . He's that lazy he won't get up off the ground sometimes when he stumbles" (Caldwell 37). It is impossible to elicit sympathy for a man whose own son calls him

“the laziest son of a bitch I ever seen” (Caldwell 37-38). Dude’s statement echoes the evaluation of the real-life Fred Ricketts in *Praise*. When Jeeter announces his plans to raise a crop—again demonstrating McIlwaine’s assertion—his wife Ada gives the reader an accurate portrait of her husband’s intentions: he makes the same claim each season, but he has done no farming for close to a decade. Ada includes all of the men in the community in her critique, charging that “[n]one of you is going to do nothing, except talk” (Caldwell 58). Jeeter is the worst, however, as Ada accuses him of being too lazy to even beg as the other men do (Caldwell 59). While Caldwell gives the reader a long list of extenuating circumstances to justify Jeeter’s apathy and hopelessness, they are largely ineffective in light of his apparent and thoroughly documented laziness and hypocrisy.

Caldwell heaps further insult upon the poor white, going beyond his disinclination to work, and setting him up as a lascivious deviant. Jeeter is sexually perverse and watches his son copulate with Sister Bessie Rice, a local preacher and former “hussy” (Caldwell 106), and he admits that he has fathered numerous children outside of his marriage (Caldwell 54). Caldwell created a similar type in *God’s Little Acre*, as Ty Ty Walden openly lusts for his daughter-in-law and spies on his own daughter as she seduces an African-American albino. Jeeter enjoys a kind of morbid flirtation with Sister Bessie, a true grotesque who has no nose, only holes in her face that remind Dude of “looking down the end of a double-barrel shotgun” (Caldwell 45). Jeeter asks Bessie to pray for him, but he feels no real regret for his transgressions; the religious faith he so aggressively professes is made up of a list of things he wants God to do for him, and at the top of this list is great quantities of snuff.

Although his slothfulness and sexual deviance are bad enough, the most damning aspect of Jeeter’s character is his cruelty to Mother Lester. Caldwell’s characters call for sympathy, but

the reader resists because the Lesters and Waldens are so depraved they do not seem human, and “there is no inner complexity of generous motivation in Caldwell’s people: poverty, ignorance, and isolation set up a dehumanizing barrier between them and the reader” (Cook 66). The greatest obstacle to reader sympathy is Jeeter’s abuse of his mother, who is not just malnourished like the rest of the family; she is literally starving because Jeeter will not let her have any of the family’s meager rations. As the novel opens, the Lesters have just finished a paltry supper of fatback, but because there had been so little, “the old grandmother had been shoved out of the kitchen when she tried to come inside” (Caldwell 6). Even though there is no food, she pathetically continues to light a fire in the stove each evening in the hopes that she will get something to eat. To quell her hunger pains, she wants snuff, but Jeeter withholds that from her as well; she once found a hidden jar of it, but “Jeeter had knocked her down several times about doing that, and he had said he would kill her if he ever caught her stealing snuff again” (Caldwell 37), a threat that is full of irony given Jeeter’s attitude about theft when it will benefit himself. Mother Lester knows that she is unwanted and that “[i]f she had gone to the thicket and had not returned, no one would have known for several days that she was dead” (Caldwell 26-27).

The grandmother’s plight is the only one in the novel that has the power to evoke genuine sympathy, but that sympathy gives way to overpowering shock and horror at the appalling circumstances of her death. Sister Bessie coerces Dude into marriage by offering to let him drive her new automobile; Dude is mainly interested in blowing the horn. All of the Lesters want to ride in it, but after Jeeter insults her, Sister Bessie refuses to take him with her and Dude. The two have a physical altercation, and in his desperation to blow the car horn, Dude hastily backs the vehicle away from them, running over Mother Lester in the process (Caldwell 164). The only response this incident solicits is Ada’s: “Is she dead yet?” (Caldwell 165). Dude and Bessie drive

away, and the rest of the family leave the battered woman face-down in the yard. Caldwell's description of her injuries runs from tragic to a macabre comedy; "[b]oth of the left wheels had run over her, one of them across her back and the other on her head" (156). Ada describes her face as "mashed-up" (Caldwell 156). The reader is disgusted but perversely entertained by the image of the poor white body inscribed with the marks. Mother Lester had wanted to ride in the automobile, but no one would let her; the closest she gets to it is when it hits her.

Andrew Silver argues that, while Caldwell fails to engage his readers' sympathy or persuade them of the need for poor white economic and social uplift, he comes nearest to success through the death of Mother Lester. Silver concedes the elements of the Southern comic tradition identified by Louis Rubin, who noted that "Caldwell had a genuine talent for a certain low-life humor" (qtd in Silver 51), but asserts that Mother Lester's death "[signals] the end of traditional Southern humor in the text" (55). The previous scenes of violence resemble slapstick antics, with physical altercations that never result in any real damage to the characters, but when Mother Lester is run over, "for the first time in the narrative, Caldwell allows the reader to experience a character's pain" (Silver 56). The effect of this scene, according to Silver, is unlike "the guiltless pleasure produced by...comic violence, [and] the reader is a witness now guilty with memory of pleasurable comic violence" (56).

The problem with Silver's assessment is that it places too great an emphasis on this scene; a few pages of pathos does not clear the reader's memory of the myriad behaviors exhibited by the Lester family in the previous chapters. Indeed, in spite of his assertions, Silver admits that "Caldwell's remarkably inelastic, de-animated and stubbornly absent-minded characters are, from the first, emptied of their humanity" (53). Mother Lester's death does not

serve as a climax of conscience for the rest of the family—or for Caldwell’s readers, who are immediately reminded of Jeeter’s heartlessness in the moments after the tragedy.

For a while, Mother Lester is forgotten. It is only when Jeeter and Lov Bensey go outside after completing an agreement in which Jeeter will give Ellie May to Lov in exchange for the runaway Pearl that the men remember her, and Jeeter reaches the epitome of callousness. Jeeter assesses his mother’s injuries and declares that “she ain’t stiff yet, but I don’t reckon she’ll live. You help me tote her out in the field and I’ll dig a ditch to put her in” (Caldwell 172). Jeeter, who is so fastidious about the details of his own burial, digs a hole in the ground for his mother’s grave while she is forced to watch. He digs until he remembers to tell Ellie May to bring him a pair of Lov’s overalls, and he leaves Mother Lester lying on the ground. Jeeter’s treatment of his mother demonstrates Carr’s thesis that Caldwell’s intention to create sympathetic poor whites is “defeated by [his] bent for depicting his subjects as animalistic idiots” (96). Caldwell no doubt wanted his readers to understand the need for an economic change among the South’s poorest whites, but the lesson readers learn from their introduction to the Lesters is the exact opposite; rather than being persuaded for reform, readers are convinced “that one might as well leave these creatures where they are, for no amount of reform could ever get them to behave like human beings” (Carr 96). Rather than feel pity for Jeeter, we are relieved when he is killed by a house fire that offers no redemption, but much-needed eradication.

Cook believes that the incongruity of Caldwell’s aim and his methods came from the author’s conflicting feelings about poor whites, and she asserts that Caldwell chose to offend his readers through his bestial depictions due to his lack of conviction about their potential for redemption; his “fury was dissipated” because he worried “that his subjects might already be beyond redemption and fit only for ironic and recriminating display” (158). Ashley Craig

Lancaster finds that Caldwell's close association with the eugenics movement may have been the cause of this doubt. Caldwell's father Ira produced a study of poor whites that is markedly different than Agee's. In "The Bunglers," Ira Caldwell "explores the physical, 'mental,' and 'moral' disintegration of poor whites" (Lancaster 81). And while Lancaster claims that "[e]ven though Ira and his son clearly connect the Bunglers and the Lesters to the eugenic definition of inferiority, they do not completely blame either family for its downfall" (82), Caldwell's doubt can be found on every page of *Tobacco Road*.

Caldwell's anxiety belies the assertion that Carr notes earlier in this chapter, that Caldwell himself stated his objective "was to call attention to his subjects' desperate living conditions." The rest of Carr's note reveals the effect of Caldwell's uncertainty about his subjects: "A great deal of his vast audience, however, seems to have read him...to laugh at stereotyped 'poor white trash'" (93). Kirby points out that many Southern critics were offended by Caldwell's characters, although this reaction had more to do with elite white concerns about Northern interpretations of Southern society. Kirby notes that the Vanderbilt Agrarians, particularly John Donald Wade, felt that Caldwell had done a disservice to the South's reputation. Wade wrote that "Mr. Caldwell has apparently persuaded himself and many others...in New York, that Jeeter Lester and his kind are fairly typical of twenty million Southern countrymen" (qtd in Kirby 75). Wade charged that "Caldwell was a rank panderer who had sold out his own people for money and the acclaim of perverse voyeurs and misguided northern liberals" (qtd in Kirby 57). It is obvious that Caldwell missed the mark and actually led readers and critics alike away from his thesis; Kirby finds that Caldwell's classification as realist "may well mean that from the thirties through the sixties, readers assumed that Caldwell's contemporary South was actual" (55).

Caldwell's incompatible beliefs and critics' and readers' responses aside, *Tobacco Road* offers no incentives to pity or sympathy. Jeeter, Dude, and the rest of the Lester clan are parasites that Southerners refuse to claim. Caldwell dwells far too long upon the baseness of his subjects and provides no hints that it can or should ever be ameliorated. We reject the Lesters so thoroughly that we begin to question whether anyone but the poor whites themselves deserves blame; regardless of how they came to resemble rabid animals, we insist upon their destruction. Reading *Tobacco Road* is an exercise in the ideological incorporation of the poor white stereotype because Caldwell inexplicably relies on the dominant myth of poor white trash to defend the lower class.

Confronting and refuting a stereotype is a complicated and problematic undertaking. Both Faulkner and Caldwell begin the process of dismantling the myth of poor white trash, but each author becomes mired in the complexities of presentation: for Faulkner, the difficulty lay in requiring the poor white figure to represent conflicting Southern ideologies; Caldwell's trouble is that he takes white trash for granted in his attempts at defense. Neither man is able to convincingly demonstrate the lie inherent in the stereotype; worse, their works serve to solidify the class biases upon which that stereotype is built. In spite of their aims, Faulkner and Caldwell present poor white bodies to be feared and hated, and we must wait long decades before the myth of poor white trash is tackled with any success.

Chapter Four: Facing the Stereotype: James Dickey and Harry Crews Battle the White Trash Inside

The comic and bestial poor white of the 1930s had a rarely exposed dangerous side, but by the 1970s unsettling depictions of crackers and factory rats had given way to the overtly terrifying hillbilly. While the cracker represented the possibility of social and economic upheaval, the hillbilly posed an additional threat, this time to the Southern corporeal body. As his fictional tendencies to violence expanded, so did his potential victims, and this was due in large part to the changing economic climate. In the 1970s, the Southern economy began to stabilize, and the burgeoning middle class established a solid place in the social hierarchy. While a working middle class is an important component of any capitalist economy, it was not particularly ideologically beneficial to privileged whites due to its uncomfortably close proximity to both the upper and lower classes. The rise of the middle class in the South had begun as early as the 1900s, and it had shaky but definite roots in the lower class. Perhaps not a majority—but nevertheless a sizable portion—of middle-class Southerners had once been poor whites themselves; if not, they were certainly almost all just a few generations removed. The American Dream of affluence and social prestige, the middle class believed, was well within reach, and not since the days of the Cotton Snob had such an unwanted group tried to infiltrate the privileged caste. Upper-class whites needed to reinforce the barriers of their own exceptional positions, but the middle class was growing and advancing so rapidly that there was no myth that would contain it.

The Civil Rights Movement had irreparably damaged the elite assertion of African-American inferiority, so elites could not fall back on their traditional race-baiting techniques to distract the middle class and thus slow their mobility. Racism was by no means extinguished in

the South, but economic progress had diminished the assertive power of black-white job competition; far fewer African-Americans than whites had achieved middle-class status, but the middle class was not homogenous. Both African-Americans and whites were becoming upwardly mobile, and their shared advancements served to calm some of the tensions between them. In addition, Southern African-Americans had benefited from the literary and social repercussions of the Harlem Renaissance, and during the 1960s and 1970s, they had begun to rewrite their history and firmly establish their authority to relate their experience. The neo-slave narratives of the 1970s, for example, cultivated a Southern audience, while the antebellum slave narratives had only been allowed to reach readers in the North and abroad; Southern African-Americans in the 20th century demanded the right to voice their grievances and to condemn those who oppressed them, even those in their own midst.

The poor white, then, again offered a convenient site for the negotiation of elite white privilege. For myriad reasons—not the least of which was the still-powerful impulse to racial loyalty and unity—poor whites as a class had yet to attempt a reconstruction of their history. The myth of poor white trash had largely remained unchallenged, in spite of its reevaluation in some forms of popular culture.⁸ For all intents and purposes, the stereotype of poor white trash was just as much a part of Southern ideology as it had always been. Elite whites adapted the poor white scapegoat to fit the needs of the times, to create a wider divide between themselves and the middle class, whose forward momentum belied the myth of elite white supremacy. If even a few of those in the lower class had managed to work their way up to the middle class, what was to prevent them from rising further? And how would elite whites justify their own privilege and authority if its origins were not mystical and organic?

⁸ Kirby's analysis of *The Waltons*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and 1970s film.

The answer was to return to a tactic that elites had long employed, that of fostering disunity among their perceived inferiors. Elite whites were especially adept at creating disharmony among other classes and races. In previous eras, this had taken the form of the Proto-Dorian Bond, the assertion that whiteness was always superior to blackness regardless of material circumstances. The Proto-Dorian Bond had served to assuage poor white bitterness that resulted from vast economic disparities between upper and lower-class white existence; it shifted poor white anger from oppressive elites to African-Americans. In this way, poor whites and African-Americans were placed at odds instead of joining forces to fight against their economic and political oppression.

Elites had also promoted African-American hostility toward poor whites by insisting that it was lower-class whites who were responsible for the worst offences against blacks. Riots and lynching were primarily blamed upon poor whites; elites could make a show of disapproval, but, like *The Marrow of Tradition*'s Major Carteret, they could effectively wash their hands of the crimes by asserting the antagonism was wholly found among the lower class.

This time the threat to elite white purity came from middle-class whites, men and women who had begun to better their economic circumstances and who had come to view themselves as deserving of their prosperity. They understood that their work and determination had brought them up from poverty; it was only a matter of time before their efforts took them to the top.

The burgeoning recognition of the middle classes' potential had to be stopped, and the myth of poor white trash could accomplish it. There was no way to economically suppress the middle class because it was too vast and because it afforded the South a much-needed prosperity. Further, privileged whites could not publicly condemn the middle class because it was a direct result of the New South Creed, a doctrine which elites had supported at the turn of the century.

The Creed was to have allowed the upper class to remain dominant in spite of industrial progress, but it had also created vast numbers of people who would expect their growing financial power to give them political power as well. Encouraging the middle class to take part in poor white stereotyping would allow elites to shift attention from themselves; it would force the middle class to focus on poor white suppression instead of upward mobility; and it would give elites a powerful bargaining chip against the middle class when the need arose. All of this could be accomplished without ever having to admit their true agenda: keeping the middle class out of their privileged sphere.

The myth of poor white trash offered a simple way to accomplish this agenda: drawing close to the middle class against the lower class, elites subtly insinuated that the gap between those on the bottom and those in the middle was much smaller than that between the middle and upper. Middle-class whites should cease their own attempts for upward mobility and instead concentrate on the threat of poor white mobility. In truth, they asserted, the middle class would never rise any higher until they confronted the poor white problem. Through no fault of their own, most of the middle class were still too close to poor whites, who both hated them and aspired to be like them. Poor whites tainted the achievements of the middle class and hindered their progress. Elite whites were willing to acknowledge that there were social and cultural differences between middle and lower-class whites, but those differences were not so pronounced that middle-class whites could rest easy in their positions. The middle class could valiantly attempt to reject its association with the lower class, but it was decidedly vulnerable to poor white influence. Middle-class whites, then, could inadvertently regress and lapse into poor white attitudes and behavior at any time; great vigilance was required to suppress the white trash man inside the middle-class figure.

The preferred poor white stereotype used to taunt the middle class was the Southern hillbilly, arguably the most vile and dangerous iteration of the myth of the poor white. Hillbillies were shrouded in mystery and wholly isolated from Southern society, and elite whites could construct them in any way they wanted with no danger of outrage or rebuttal. The hillbilly was descended from the antebellum Southern mountaineer, who had been treated by local colorists in the 1860s; Sylvia Jenkins Cook traces a shift from the focus that local colorists placed on the mountaineers' "picturesque poverty, sturdy independence, and quaint custom," which led to enthralling descriptions of "distilling, fights, feuds, and romances," to later depictions concentrating on the "misery, filth, and starvation" in the region (12). The mountaineer of the 1890s was just as desperate as the poor white on the plantation, but he lacked the "dogged apathy" (Cook 12) of his farming counterpart, and his stubbornness and pride, combined with his isolation, made him unpredictable and therefore dangerous. The mountaineer had made moonshine and nursed a hatred for African-Americans that was purportedly greater than the average poor white until about 1900, when he joined the work force in the mills. Nearly seventy years later, the mountaineer appeared on the literary scene with a vengeance, and this time his fierce pride and frenzy was a terrible force directed at outsiders, specifically the middle-class white, with whom he shared a close connection to poor white trash.

Elite whites walked a fine line between reassuring the middle class that they were superior to poor whites and yet reminding them that they were dangerously close to them. This complex set of assertions is nowhere more clear than in James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970), which places four middle-class white Southern men in the mountains of Georgia. The novel sets up familiar dichotomies of urban/rural, city/country, and civilization/barbarity, but what is interesting is that these dichotomies are presented through the four Atlantans themselves. Dickey

uses Ed Gentry, Lewis Medlock, Bobby Trippe, and Drew Ballinger to demonstrate the ways in which middle-class Southerners confronted the poor white sensibilities within themselves. Middle-class awareness of the white trash stereotype, and their confusion about the level to which it may have been applied to them, forced them to acknowledge the divisions in their own psyche, and also the conflicting conceptions of the postmodern South. They grappled with the questions of Southern identity as both an internal construct and a larger ideological entity. Was the South of the 1970s predominantly a holdover of Southern myth construction, an entirely new region, or a mixture of the two? Was the contemporary Southern man a civilized and enlightened suburbanite, or an untamed monster?

Dickey answers the latter question by demonstrating that the faces of both the modern Southerner and the barbarian are interchangeable masks that can be drawn on or put off according to Southerners' needs, and at various times he celebrates each. For part of the novel, the rugged characteristics of the hillbilly are adopted by Ed; utilizing the brutality of the poor white within is his only means of survival. This feral competence is undone, however, by the true hillbillies, who negate any possibility for reevaluation of the poor white stereotype. And when the men finally escape the mountain, they leave their newfound courage and strength and gratefully reenter a Southern society that forces them to suppress these attributes and affirm their superiority over the mountain men and their way of life.

Dickey himself was no fan of the Southern poor white, but the novel at times veers so far into lauding the independent and violent spirit of the stereotype that it is clear that he had some doubt about the extent to which that spirit was inappropriate or unnecessary. In fact, Ed, the narrator and the men's ultimate salvation, is never more alive on the page than when he is waging war with the landscape and its inhabitants. Ed, aptly surnamed Gentry, represents the

middle-class status quo: good—but not great—job, comfortable home in the suburbs, wife and son. He is relatively happy, and his life is comfortable if not a little boring. When the novel opens, he has never considered the possibility that within him lies dormant a raging beast that will shortly reveal itself. Ed's fear of the mountains and the mountain men quickly gives way to exhilaration when he discovers that he alone possesses the tools to overcome the land and the men who mean him harm. Unfortunately, Dickey probes the positive aspects of independence and capability just long enough to twist them into menace and deviance. Ed quickly embraces his power, and Dickey just as quickly snatches it away. There is no place for such attributes in a postmodern South that has dismissed all totalizing narratives save one, the myth of poor white trash. Through *Deliverance*, middle-class white Southerners were introduced to their insidious doppelgangers, and given a terrifying warning to reject it outright.

Ed is coerced into taking the canoe trip by Lewis, who is ostensibly the most competent of the four travelers. Lewis is obsessed with the survivalist lifestyle, and he is certain that he can control every circumstance. Lewis initially serves as a model for the successful merger of the civilized and the barbaric; he has achieved prosperity in civilized society, but he is also physically imposing and a skilled archer. Lewis almost hopefully anticipates the moment that Southern civilization collapses and he is forced to rely on “gut-survival” (Dickey 46): “Life is so fucked-up now, and so complicated, that I wouldn't mind if it came down, right quick, to the bare survival of who was ready to survive” (Dickey 41). Lewis quickly reveals himself to be too tolerant of the mountain folk and too easily impressed by their simplicity. He recounts an earlier adventure when his traveling companion Shad Mackey broke his leg and was separated from Lewis in the woods; a mountaineer and his son assisted them, and Lewis has accepted hillbillies on their own terms since then. In fact, Lewis lauds the very aspects of the poor white lifestyle

that middle-class whites are supposed to reject; citing the mountaineer's "values," Lewis argues that it is exactly the "superstition and blood-shed and murder and liquor" which forge his spirit (Dickey 46). Even further, Lewis claims that "I admire it, and I admire the men that it makes, and that make it, and if you don't, why fuck you" (Dickey 46).

Lewis wholeheartedly supports the hillbilly's rights, and he denies the notion that they are threatening or dangerous, in spite of their questionable lifestyles, asserting that, regardless of the fact that each of them is related to at least one person incarcerated for murder, that they are "awfully clannish," that they resist progress, and that they are determined to live as they choose in spite of the needs of the individual or society, the mountain men are still "good people" (Dickey 43). Lewis believes that the hillbillies only want their privacy, and that there is no danger for the middle-class whites who venture into their territory. Lewis makes a fatal error by allowing himself to empathize with his inferiors; it is this type of reaction to the poor white that privileged whites wanted to prevent. Lower and middle-class collusion had to be avoided in order for elites to maintain their power. Lewis fails to recognize this, and his misjudgment nearly costs him and his friends their lives.

Ed, on the other hand, does not even want to go into the hills; he is coerced by Lewis, who fascinates him, and he regrets letting his admiration for his friend obscure his judgment. Ed quickly realizes that he and his friends have no business in the country, and he is alarmed before they even reach the river. Ed notes that, as they travel outside the city and into the country, "[t]he change was not gradual; you could have stopped the car and got out at the exact point where suburbia ended and the red-neck South began" (Dickey 37). This jarring distinction between city and country reflects both the middle-class kinship to poor whites, and also its disconcerting implications: any decent middle-class Southerner is susceptible to losing his way and finding

himself among the lowest of the low. And while this association brought unwelcome influence and deleterious social consequences to upper-class whites who associated with poor whites in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, close ties between the middle class and poor whites in the postmodern era leads to bodily injury and death. McBane, Flem Snopes, and the Lester family are obnoxious and unwanted invaders, but Dickey's hillbillies are murderous ruffians. Elite whites had to intensify the myth of the poor white in order to confront and suppress any potential alliance between the middle and lower class.

Unlike Lewis, who is unfit to judge poor whites in a manner acceptable to the privileged, Ed espouses his belief in the white trash stereotype. In the town of Oree, Ed surmises that “[n]obody worth a damn could ever come from such a place” (Dickey 51). Ed rejects Lewis's claim that there is anything of merit in the poor white before he even encounters one. Ed is the middle-class mouthpiece of elite white discrimination because his proscription turns a blind eye to the potential for value in the poor white community. Ed is comfortable dealing in stereotypes, and he is aware of this; he wryly notes that the first poor white he encounters “looked like a hillbilly in some badly cast movie, a character actor too much in character to be believed” (Dickey 51). Ed frankly admits that the poor white stereotype is outrageous, but it is so prevalent a part of his ideology that he finds it amusing and, in spite of his claim to the contrary, wholly believable. Ed's preconceptions are so powerful that they are easy to bear out; he sees what elite society has told him to see, and he judges accordingly.

Ed makes a grave mistake, however, one that he pays for dearly: rather than giving credence to the upper-class call for vigilance against the poor white, he determines right away that they are “inconsequential” (Dickey 51). Because he does not recognize the potential dangers of white trash, he does not guard himself against them. The men have barely gotten onto the

Cahulawassee River before Ed and his canoeing partner Bobby are waylaid by a pair of hillbillies. Ed is forced to watch as Bobby is sodomized, and he is about to suffer a similar fate until Lewis kills one of the hillbilly-rapists with an expertly placed arrow (Dickey 100-102). Instantly, the men's excursion shifts from a laid-back diversion into a frantic struggle for survival. The novel undergoes a transformation as well, as Dickey layers the theme of the bifurcated Southern man on top of his initial exploration of conflicting constructions of the South.

After Lewis kills one of the hillbillies, the men carry his body inland and bury it in a marsh. For a moment, the city South triumphs over the country South, literally hiding it out of sight. Ed notes that the arrow Lewis used to kill the hillbilly is "civilized and expert" (Dickey 116), a middle-class object that pierces the poor white body and allows the suburban men to eradicate all traces of its existence. The hillbilly's body will soon be impossible to find because the river is going to be dammed and the whole valley will be flooded; progress and civilization will win another victory over barbarity, and Ed says that "[t]hey might as well let the water in on it...this stuff is no good to anybody" (Dickey 117).

Keen Butterworth asserts that the damming of the river demonstrates modern man's triumph over natural man; this dominance is necessary because the two types of men are not necessarily separate creatures: "[t]he dam is a symbol of man's abstractions...as an architectural structure, it is like man's laws, his mores, his religions, his arts, which he uses to subdue and control the wild and primitive vitality in himself" (70). Butterworth finds that, while suppression is imperative, it is not entirely desirable; the rising waters of the dam will create a lake and tame the river's chaotic flow, which is necessary for progress, but typically "the shaping forms of civilization do not so much create order as they effect a monotonous peace" (70). The structural

barriers of the dam operate in much the same way as social norms imposed on a community; while they allow for “progress,” they destroy all “instinct and passion” (Butterworth 70). As a middle-class man, Ed has subconsciously repressed or dammed all his instincts and passion. He is still thoroughly convinced of the superiority of his way of life, and he watches with a kind of satisfaction as the hillbilly’s body sinks down in the “general sloppiness and uselessness of the woods” (Dickey 117). Even in the midst of such danger, Ed still insists upon viewing the world through his stereotyped perceptions, and he wants the hills and the poor whites to be entirely submerged and forgotten.

His attitude begins to change, however, as the men make their way down the river. When Drew is killed by the remaining hillbilly, their canoes tip in the rapids, and the men realize that they are being hunted, Ed begins to embrace the very qualities he had earlier derided. This is out of necessity, of course, but Ed finds himself enjoying the transformation. When he falls out of the canoe, he says “I felt *myself* [emphasis mine] fading out into the unbelievable violence and brutality of the river, joining it. This is not such a bad way to go, I thought” (Dickey 124). Ed’s immersion in the river is a form of baptism into the poor white mountaineer’s psyche; he knows that he is not supposed to be there, but once he falls into the wildness, he realizes it is not such a terrible place to be. The fusion of civilized man and untamed nature continues as Ed learns to navigate the current: “I got on my back and poured with the river, sliding over the stones like a creature I had always contained but never released” (Dickey 124). The middle-class Southern white is plagued by a social and ideological version of Original Sin; the character he presents to the world hides an animalistic and natural inner consciousness. Ed has spent his entire life suppressing the beast, but he exhumes it when he becomes a part of the natural world, moving over and with the river like a serpent.

It is important to note that Ed does not come to this through his own volition, but rather through circumstances beyond his control; had Ed stayed within his comfortable suburban surroundings and away from the hills, he would never have needed to uncover his dormant feral side. Before they reach the river, Lewis tries to convince Ed that there is “something important in the hills” (Dickey 39). Ed’s retort serves as a type of creed that illuminates his feelings about his place and position in contrast to the hillbilly lifestyle: “I don’t mind going down a few rapids with you, and drinking a little whiskey by a campfire. But I don’t give a fiddler’s fuck about those hills” (Dickey 39). Lewis understands the necessity of primal instincts and their importance for survival, and he chides Ed for his derision: “So we’re lesser men, Ed. I’m sorry, but we are” (Dickey 45).

Lewis turns the notion of elite white superiority on its head and celebrates the lower class as the true bearers of the privileged concepts of honor and heroism, and he finds that he and Ed and the rest of the cultured South have lost or perhaps never possessed the qualities he sees in the poor white; competence, independence, and self-determination are the privileged rights of the mountain people, and they are qualities that have been driven out of the repressive urban South. Butterworth also identifies Lewis’s potentially subversive position vis-à-vis the modern status quo: Lewis cares more about his specific needs than the needs of the community; he tries to cultivate an economic autonomy; he is concerned with “external (physical) reality”; and he is capable of myopic focus to serve his own ends, specifically as it relates to his own self-preservation (71). Lewis’s conception of himself as an individual outside of the machine of progress, and his attempts to co-opt the qualities he sees as distinctly lower-class, renders him useless to upper-class affirmations of authority. Because he is too easily impressed by the hillbilly code and too quick to judge his own code as inferior, he therefore cannot serve as the

model for the negotiation of the poor white within the postmodern Southern man. This responsibility falls to Ed, who, in spite of his earlier dismissal of the hills as unimportant, has remained wary enough to recognize the shift from urban to rural within himself, and to at least endeavor to switch back once he escapes the hills.

Lewis's leg is badly broken when the canoes capsize, rendering the most competent man in the group impotent to save himself or his two companions. Bobby is incapable of rescuing them because his assault has broken him. Ed, then, is the men's only hope, and he knows he will have to confront the hillbilly if they are to escape. Ironically, confronting the hillbilly means that he will first have to confront the qualities he shares with his would-be murderer; only by bringing his own violence and ruthlessness to the fore will he triumph over both the hillbilly himself and the hillbilly within himself. Ed has to completely suppress his ingrained civility, and this creates a divide between him and his traveling companions, who are not able to penetrate their docile urban psychologies or accurately evaluate the brutality of the poor white psychology. Ed has to take on the worst of the poor whites' stereotypical characteristics, and he knows that this will of necessity alienate him from Lewis and Bobby: "I could feel it set us apart. Even in the dark the separation was obvious" (Dickey 136). Lewis has by this time come to realize his assessment of the mountain man is erroneous; he knows that the only way the men will make it out of the hills alive is if Ed kills the remaining hillbilly, and he advises Ed "don't have any mercy" (Dickey 136). Ed has a last moment of doubt, fearful of the effects of his loss of humanity and his ability to follow through with the plan, but he knows he has no choice. The middle-class man cannot pity the lower class if he is to triumph over him and protect himself.

The instant that Ed separates himself from his companions, he loses his middle-class façade. Ed becomes a poor white in his natural element, not a middle-class man dangerously out

of place. He climbs the sheer face of the gorge and positions himself above Lewis and Bobby; he is now their physical and psychological superior: "I was standing in the most entire aloneness I that I had ever been given...My heart expanded with joy at the thought of where I was and what I was doing" (Dickey 137). Leaving his fellow travelers at the bottom of the gorge, injured and scared, Ed is reduced to the elemental components of battle and survival, and he relishes the opportunity to test his mettle. He climbs through the night, clinging to the rock and lifting himself by instinct. When he finally sleeps, his first waking words are reminiscences of the middle class life that fell away from him in the river, "some words, and they seemed to make sense, but were out of place" (Dickey 146). Ed wakes up as the man he was, but there is no place for that man in the wilderness, and he quickly banishes the businessman, husband, and father to the city; he relinquishes the civilized man, promising that "when I get to the top the first thing I'll do will be not to think of Martha and Dean again, until I see them" (Dickey 149). Ed did not choose to place himself in such a position, but he knows that his survival requires at least a temporary abdication of his conformist, middle-class psyche.

Ed's relationship to the land, and his newfound status as a man of the land, gives him an intimate connection to the natural world. Without the obstructions of streets and sidewalks, Ed takes the elements into himself; as he climbs, he discovers that he is "moving with the most intimate motions of my body, motions I had never dared use with Martha, or with any other human woman...a kind of enormous moon-blazing sexuality lifted me" (Dickey 151). In the city, Ed is sexually repressed. He is offended, for instance, by a client's request for an advertisement that he feels borders on pornography (Dickey 21). His sexuality in the hills, however, is boiled down to its fundamentals, and he feels virile and manly. His climbing efforts reveal a potency he did not know he had, and he describes his relationship to the rock in a variety of sexual

illustrations; one minute he discovers he must “make love to the cliff” and the next, he has to “fuck it for an extra inch or two in the moonlight” (Dickey 151). Ed is the dominant sexual aggressor, and he finds that “[i]f I was discreet, I could offer it a kick or two, even, and get away with it” (Dickey 151). Ed’s abuse of the land mirrors the hillbilly’s assault on Bobby, as both men relish the exertion of their physical and sexual power over an unwilling partner. Ed’s emergence at the top of the gorge is a demonstration of his masculine potency; he, alone, achieves the climax.

The concept of the divided Southerner is clearly represented in Ed’s adoption of poor white characteristics as he climbs out of the gorge. The middle and lower-class aspects of his identity, the components that make up what he is forced or what he chooses to allow in his everyday life and what lies under the surface of his moral and conventional persona, are incompatible, and yet they nevertheless exist in the same consciousness. Ed is both respectable and trash, but paradoxically, he must be one or the other. There can be no reconciliation between the dueling sides, because each exists only in opposition to the other; Ed is the model Western man only because he is not the bestial brute of the hills, and his middle-class status is only important because it distinguishes him from the lower-class hillbilly trash. But when he engages in a life or death battle with the hillbilly, he has to literally become the hillbilly himself. Indeed, Ed acknowledges his connection to his enemy and to the enemy within himself when he notes that “I had thought so long and hard about him that to this day I still believe I felt, in the moonlight, our minds fuse” (Dickey 154). This fusion comprises both Ed’s connection to the hillbilly and his acknowledgement of the hillbilly within himself.

This twinning of the middle and lower class, of Ed and the hillbilly, is further demonstrated by their shared wounds. When Ed shoots an arrow into the hillbilly’s neck, he falls

out of the tree in which he was hiding and is pierced by an arrow as well (Dickey 164-65). The two men's injuries are like skewed mirrors and are the culmination of their melding.

Significantly, Ed's arrow wound is on his left side. Terry Thompson finds that Lewis's map of the Cahulawassee traces the river's trajectory in a "left-to-right and downward-flowing stretch" which recalls the ancient association of the left side of the body with evil; "the whole left half of the body was considered unclean, was, in fact, the side of the Devil" (45). This is the side that Ed pierces when he falls, just after he shoots the hillbilly. The wound to Ed's left side represents both the Devil who "lurked—quite literally—just behind a person's left shoulder; from there, he constantly observed human behavior to detect a sin or transgression or moment of weakness" (Thompson 45), and Ed's connection to the hillbilly, the embodiment of his left-Devil. Ed has to track his mortally wounded victim, and he does this "on my knees, bleeding wherever I looked for his blood. Once I had to go back and try to pick up the trail again, for I could not tell which was my blood and which was his" (Dickey 167). This blood mingling is far more intimate than Bobby's overtly sexual experience with the hillbilly who sodomized him, for it is a mixing of crucial life forces. Ed and the hillbilly he kills have become so alike in his mind that even the prospect of his near rape by the hillbilly is more curious than terrifying: had he not been rescued, he thinks, he and the hillbilly "would have made a kind of love, painful and terrifying to me, in some dreadful way pleasurable to him, but we would have been together in the flesh, there on the floor of the woods, and it was strange to think of it" (Dickey 154). Rather than outrage or fury, Ed is morbidly fascinated by his would-be rapist: "Who was he?" he asks himself (Dickey 154). The other side of this question is just as important, as Ed, sitting in a tree and preparing to become a murderer, must ask himself "Who am I?"

The answer to his unspoken question is complex. Ed the middle-class worker is a cerebral construct who ventures too far outside of his social stratum and enacts his own psychological break. Caught in an impossible situation and with no skills to protect himself, he is too disadvantaged to survive. The only way to even the odds is to call up the visceral lower-class Ed, which is surprisingly easy to do. The latter version is not a construct but rather an organic psyche that devours all middle-class notions of living. The uncivilized Southern man Ed unleashes has the potential to get him out of the hills, but this primitive is also dangerous and unpredictable. The barbarian in the hills is the “left” side, which requires modern man’s rejection because it represents the portion of ourselves that we are terrified to acknowledge. This side of man must be denied if we are to hold to the Enlightenment doctrine of logic and order; it must be interpreted as a malicious outside force so that we can pretend it is not a part of us. At moments when this other man pushes for release, “we turn him out, or push him back deep into the recesses of our psyches, where we will not have to face his reality close at hand” (Thompson 69). In the mountains, the middle-class Ed is a victim, while the lower-class Ed is a victor. The trouble here is that to become the victor, to survive and to return to his comfortable middle-class life, Ed the poor white has to become a murderer. And after he has murdered the hillbilly, he will once and for all have to overcome the lower-class characteristics that have served him so well in the wilderness—if he can—because their destructive power breeds psychological and social chaos.

One of the first decidedly Southern characteristics was an intense individualism: forming an existence out of unforgiving land fostered a deep sense of autonomy, a kind of independence resistant to all but the most vital of imposed regulations or outside authority. Ted Ownby asserts that 19th and 20th century Southern codes of honor demanded self-assertiveness, aggressiveness,

and competitiveness, and the Southern man adopted a kind of belligerent swagger meant to prove his worth (13). As the South marched forward, however, and progress brought industry and commercialism, the importance of honor and individualism began to wane; industrial capitalism requires strict adherence to conformity in both time and conduct. While most Southerners expressed their approval of their material and social conditions, an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and even boredom ran through many middle-class minds, and they began to long for alternatives to their white collar existences. The code of conduct required by the environments of work and home, and the responsibilities of family and social improvement, became oppressive, and Southerners yearned—secretly, of course—for a respite from the stress and obligation of their contemporary world. Lewis Medlock is a prime example of this phenomenon; he gleefully predicts that “the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over” (Dickey 40). Lewis longs to return to the days of the primal Southern man because he knows he has lost his independence and his individualism. Cobb identifies Lewis’s problem when he finds that, during the 1970s, some Southerners “began to identify themselves as ‘redneck,’ a term historically synonymous with rural, lower-class whites who were aggressively ignorant, uncouth, and lawless and showed no particular ambition to be otherwise” (*Away* 226). For these Southerners, the term “redneck” lost its connection to dishonor and became “a fierce and even admirable resistance to American mass society’s insistence on conformity” (*Away* 226). It should be noted here that when these middle-class Southerners called themselves rednecks, it was understood that they were not identifying with poor white trash, and that, at this time, “to call oneself a redneck is not so much to *be* a redneck by birth or occupational fate, but rather to identify with an anti-bourgeois attitude and lifestyle” (qtd in *Away* 227).

The desire to rise out of the middle class mixed with the longing to walk away from it all created a tense atmosphere for many Southern middle-class whites. Most either pretended to be rednecks, like Lewis, or dismissed rednecks altogether, like Ed. For elite whites, Ed's choice was the preferred attitude toward the poor white, and while Dickey offers the reader a momentary glimpse of the middle-class white's capacity for courage and heroism, he does not intend to create a pretty picture. Ed's actions toward survival open his eyes to humankind's capacity for violence, but they also create in him an exultant acknowledgement of his triumph over barbarism. It is exactly the necessity of confronting the natural world that is problematic, however, for Ed's real victory is over not just the mountain environment but also over the mountain man within himself. Ed's assimilation into hillbilly culture is a multi-layered warning: the middle class must avoid all contact with the lower class; poor whites are merciless and brutal; abstract qualities such as bravery and strength cannot be attributed to poor whites because in them they become violence and ruthlessness; and the middle-class individual must vigilantly guard himself from exposing the poor white that lies beneath. Each of these themes serves to make Ed's actions in the woods things of horror, and to make Ed himself an unstable and unreliable member of his class. Although he returns to the suburbs, he is forever tainted by his fusing with the poor white, and Dickey demonstrates that this union is more traumatic than Ed's devolution to murder.

Ed's foray into his white trash persona is so dangerous because it fosters mutually exclusive and opposing characteristics in the middle-class consciousness. The middle-class man written into the wilderness of low or no class reveals that social and behavioral norms can only exist within the culture that created them, for those codes were constructed specifically to ensure the survival of that culture. Ed, then, is forced to assimilate a contrasting set of values that, while

beneficial in the short run, ultimately dissociate him from the society to which he belongs. When Ed finds his victim's body, for example, he is exhilarated by his power and maddened by bloodshed; he tells himself "you can do what you want to; nothing is too terrible. I can cut off the genitals he was going to use on me. Or I can cut off his head, looking straight into his open eyes. Or I can eat him" (Dickey 170). This Ed is a far cry from the man who worried that his belief in mercy might hinder his ability to kill his enemy (Dickey 130). The Ed who embraces his white trash side realizes that "I can do anything I have a wish to do" (Dickey 170). Rather than a celebration of the bygone Southern man's independent spirit as embodied in the last of the primal men, Ed's attitude is a condemnation of the hillbilly's lack of discipline and restraint. Ed does not consider his ability to forge a life out of unforgiving land, after all; his first impulse is to cannibalism. These two notions are wholly incompatible and isolate Ed from the self he wishes to be, and from his companions; Ed is so excited by the recent bloodshed that he fantasizes about more violence: he stands above his companions, and "my craziness increased when I touched [the hillbilly's gun]. I sighted down the barrel and put the bead right in the middle of Bobby's chest. Do it, the dead man said. Do it; he's right there" (Dickey 171). As long as Ed embraces the hillbilly mentality, he is a danger to his civilized companions. So infectious is the poor white's depravity that Ed is nearly contaminated simply by touching one of his possessions. The shock of this realization brings Ed out of his frenzy, but he is afraid to put his finger on the trigger again because he knows that "it had been close; very close" (Dickey 172).

Ed has to subdue the violent and barbaric impulses that continue to grow stronger the longer he is exposed to the mountain's influence. His return to his former self is gradual, and he has to force himself to let go of his bow, the murder weapon, because "I wanted very much to have it with me for the rest of my life" (Dickey 173). When he does relinquish it, he intends it to

be final, and he releases all evidence of his flirtation with his inferior side into the river, where it will be forever buried, along with the bodies of the two hillbillies and his friend Drew, by the coming flood. When Ed sinks the hillbilly's body in the water, his reversal is complete. Ed is speaking of both his temporary poor white assimilation and the hillbilly himself when he declares that the body of his enemy has "gone so completely into the river that he seemed never to have had anything to do with it, or it with him. He had never been in the world at all. I dipped my hand in the stream and left his blood with him" (Dickey 181). This time the river serves to cleanse Ed, to wash away the unnecessary and unwanted evidence of his white trash madness. Still, Ed is tempted by the thought of remaining in the hills, as he finally understands Lewis's longing for freedom and escape from his constrictive middle-class environs: "I was dreading going back to men and their questions and systems; I had been dreading it without knowing it" (Dickey 193). Ed's fleeting experience as the conquering primal man is so enticing that he is subconsciously loath to give it up. Indeed, when the hillbilly dies, Ed notes that "[h]is brain and mine unlocked and fell apart, and in a way I was sorry to see it go" (Dickey 169). Ed's temporary enacting of poor white behavior is similar to blackface minstrelsy in that both allow an actor to play out his suppressed desires without admitting to those desires. His secret wish to remain in the hills serves as another warning against the poor white: his immoral lifestyle is so tempting that it must be flatly rejected unless the middle class wishes to be destroyed by wickedness.

When the men reach civilization, they tell the authorities a carefully crafted lie to explain Drew's death, and they do not mention the two hillbillies at all. They cannot risk the possibility of retaliation by the hillbilly's families, and Ed specifically needs to cover up his part in the deaths, not only because his claim of self-defense would be difficult to substantiate, but also

because he cannot return to the suburbs with any evidence of his schizophrenic consciousness. He cannot belong to both worlds, and he cannot risk revealing how close he came to a permanent break with his moral center. Ronald Shmitt reads *Deliverance* through Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, which Dickey cited as an influence for the novel (9). Shmitt finds that the novel produces an "unresolved and unresolvable tension between the seductive myth of the heroic quest-romance to the cleansing and enlightening initiation of the wilderness, and modern man's irreversibly civilized and mechanized state of alienation from the wilderness" (9). This analysis applies to Ed because, in an inversion of Campbell, Dickey creates impossible barriers between the hero and the quest; Ed must keep his bravery and heroism to himself, for it has been obtained outside of the "scepter of dominion, or the book of the law" (Shmitt 11). As Ed prepares to go home, the sheriff gives him Dickey's warning to all middle-class whites: "Don't ever do anything like this again. Don't come back up here" (Dickey 224). The outsider's vulnerability and weakness are not the primary reason Ed must heed this warning, for he has already escaped, and he avoided rape and death at the hands of his would-be tormentors. The problem is that Ed so competently handled the danger and shifted seamlessly from prey to predator. The sheriff calls Ed a "damned fucking ape," with admiration (Dickey 225), which echoes the hillbilly's assessment of the hirsute Ed as a "fuckin' ape" (Dickey 98) and hints at Ed's latent machismo. There is far less danger in what hillbillies might do to Ed if he returns than in what Ed might do to himself. Before he drives away from "the Country of Nine-Fingered People and Prepare to Meet Thy God, into the Drive-ins and Motels and Home of the Whopper," Ed drinks from the river, forever taking it into himself (Dickey 227). Although the river is now harmless, having cleansed Ed of the blood and filth of his adventure, Ed's impulse to drink from it does not offer a hopeful prospect for his successful reentry to civilization.

The day after Ed returns home, he goes back to work, steeping himself in the normalcy and conformity he had almost forgotten. Ed knows that if he is going to bury the white trash elements within him, he must throw himself back into his status quo suburban life, “as if I had never left it” (Dickey 232). The strictures and expectations of middle-class life will not allow for the actions or attitudes of the poor white lifestyle, and Ed wholeheartedly embraces his office, the freeway, and modern technology. For all of his efforts, however, the untamed hillbilly lives, and he admits that “[t]he river underlies, in one way or another, everything I do” (Dickey 234). Ed still finds it difficult to put the wild man to rest, and he tests the limits of propriety by contemplating an affair and by acknowledging that “I could feel [the river]—I can feel it—on different places on my body. It pleases me in some curious way that the river does not exist, and that I have it” (Dickey 234). He can only be content with the river within him because the river is gone, because he can never return to it and because he can control its psychological presence.

A portion of *Deliverance* can be read as a celebration of the indomitable will to survive. The desire to achieve and to triumph is clearly one of Ed’s greatest attributes, and his experiences in the hills allow him to find his competence and capability and to assert his dominance over a worthy opponent. In this light, Ed’s ability to overcome the harsh obstacles and lead his friends to safety is laudable. The problem with this view of the novel is that it does not take into account the chapters that bookend the river section, and that it does not read the novel through the lens of class and the poor white stereotype. Ed’s actions are the fruits of his assimilation of white trash culture; alone in the woods he becomes a savage, and there is no honor in his zest for killing, especially when it culminates in the desire to kill his civilized, middle-class friends. Ed can hear the hillbilly tempting him to pull the trigger on Bobby when he sees his companions in the gorge; the melding of their minds nearly causes him to enact his own

banishment from his former life. Because Ed's deeds stem from a rotten psyche, they cannot be praised. One of the greatest tragedies, Dickey seems to say, is not Bobby's rape or Drew's murder, but the fact that the men brought these horrors upon themselves by entering a damned space. Shmitt continues the juxtaposition of Campbell and Dickey when he asserts that the heroic quest can only begin once civilization has spread so far that "the monsters or tyrants which dwell beyond the village's outskirts and prohibit the community's growth [has been] 'cleared away'" (337). In *Deliverance*, however, the "monsters or tyrants" have already been banished to the extent that they pose no real threat. The battle has not been between man and nature, but rather between man and himself. Ed's savagery is doubly offensive, then, because it never needed to be revealed or utilized.

Ed develops his own character early in the novel, when he describes his philosophy to Lewis:

"If those people in the hills, the ones with the folk songs and dulcimers, came out of the hills and led us all toward a new heaven and a new earth, it would not make a particle of difference to me. I am a get-through-the-day man. I don't think I was ever anything else. I am not a great art director. I am not a great archer. I am mainly interested in sliding...Sliding is living antifriction. Or, no, sliding is living *by* antifriction. It is finding a modest thing you can do, and then greasing that thing. On both sides. It is grooving with comfort...What you do is get done what you ought to be doing." (Dickey 39-40)

Ed's statement is wholly in keeping with elite whites' desires for middle-class ideology. If middle-class whites are content to "slide," the threat of their desires or efforts at upward mobility will never come to fruition. Ed represents the acceptable and appropriate middle-class identity.

The problem for middle-class whites intent on moving up the economic, political, and social hierarchy was the fear that there were just as many Lewises in the middle class as there were Eds, men who would assert that “[t]here’s nothing you can do as vice-president of Emerson-Gentry that’s going to make a difference at all when the water starts to foam up. Then, it’s not going to be what your title says you do, but what you end up doing. You know: *doing*” (Dickey 40). Just as elite whites feared a middle class invasion, so too would middle-class whites agonize over the poor white in their midst. The greatest impediment to achievement would be to discover poor white attitudes and beliefs lurking behind the middle-class façade. This fear explains why Ed does not go back to Atlanta a heroic conqueror, but rather as a haunted figure whose successful reintegration is doubtful.

Like his predecessors Faulkner and Caldwell, James Dickey takes advantage of national bias against the poor white. Although each of the authors utilized the poor white stereotype with a different agenda, their depictions of trash fulfill strikingly similar purposes; all three versions of the poor white are meant to inspire the reader’s disgust and derision, and to prove the notion that poor whites are an entirely different species. The causes of poor white dysfunction vary in each author’s work, but the effect is always to highlight their defectiveness as a class. Flem Snopes is murdered, Jeeter and Ada Lester are consumed by fire, and the hillbillies are submerged in an angry river, and this, the authors tell us, is how it should be. Rather than making forward strides for the poor white, and regardless of their purported intentions or the efforts of a few sympathetic critics, the poor white figure always collapses under the weight of the myth of white trash.

Matt Wray notes that, although the origin of the epithet ‘white trash’ is rooted in the African-American community, “it was literate, middle-class and elite whites who invested its

meaning with social power, granting it the powers of social stigma and prejudice” (*Not Quite White* 43). This tradition of stereotyping the poor white has outlasted any other American stigmatization, and it has been rewritten time and again in the process of Southern myth-making. The poor white’s outsider status and social and economic vulnerability made him a scapegoat in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, through the Southern Renaissance, and on into the modern South. A direct line can be traced from Faulkner and Caldwell to James Dickey.

II. Crews

But *Deliverance* is not the end of the history of the poor white in 1970s Southern literature, because, at the end of the decade, a long-awaited phenomenon occurred: the poor white began to speak for himself, to write of his own experiences with a genuine authority that had been absent in Southern literature up to this point. But this seeming progress came with a potentially destructive caveat: when the most disadvantaged and stereotyped white class began to assert a place in Southern historiography, it struggled to silence the subconscious doubt about its own value. At times the poor white voice seemed to sound directly from privileged mouths as it struggled to break from the Southern myths that had made up its reputation and forced it to the margins of society. Without achieving mastery over fears about their own worth, poor whites seemed destined to reaffirm the stereotype that had brought them so low instead of creating a history of their own that would blast into oblivion the lies of poor white trash.

Poor white doubt is the crux of Harry Crews’s 1978 *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, in which the author tells the story of his hardscrabble existence in southern Georgia. Crews aims to accurately describe the events that shaped him and the circumstances that colored the experiences of his poor white community. His approach is decidedly sympathetic, but he does not romanticize the land or its inhabitants. Crews reveals the depravity and criminality

within the poor white community, but he attributes them to poverty far more successfully than Caldwell. Crews identifies the impossible struggle of poor white life before he provides the anecdotal evidence of their dysfunction:

The world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it. It was a world in which survival depended on raw courage, a courage born of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives.
(44)

Crews refuses to use his poor whites to justify or explain the poor white stereotype; instead, he straightforwardly recounts the poor white experience from a more or less neutral position.

Rejecting the notion of the poor white as an alien Other that requires analysis and necessitates confrontation, Crews insists that poor whites do not need justification or evaluation. His goal is to view poor whites on their own terms and through a factual exploration of their lives. In this way, he avoids the potential for unflattering comparisons between the upper and lower classes. Crews, in fact, seems largely unconcerned with upper-class whites; his characters must devote all of their time and energy to survival, and they are so isolated from privileged society that they have developed a necessary myopia that precludes any real inquiry into the causes of their situation and status. Crews asserts that the poor white lives in a perpetual darkness, and that while “we live in a discoverable world, most of what we discover is an unfathomable mystery that we can name—even defend against—but never understand” (69). In spite of this myopic and isolated and potentially hopeless existence, Crews illuminates the poor white’s great capacity for love and loyalty, and he also proves that they are, after all, just as much a part of humanity as any other group, including elites.

Crews's method of demonstrating this fact, however, unfortunately recalls Faulkner's attempt to connect poor and elite whites through the unattractive and undesirable characteristics the two groups share. This technique is only minimally effective because it does nothing to diminish the white trash stereotype. Crews's boyhood fascination with the Sears-Roebuck catalogue is a prime example. Initially, he is attracted to the catalogue, better known as a "Wish Book" due to the inability of poor whites to purchase any of its advertised items, because it offers a glimpse of a fantasy world unlike anything he has ever known. The models, for instance, are physically whole; in contrast, the majority of the people in Crews's community "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" (58). The people Crews knows carry the marks of poverty and hard luck all over their bodies. The models, however,

had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were never bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces of the people around me. (Crews 58)

Crews's description of the wounded farmers he knows echoes Dickey's construction of the poor white South as "the Country of Nine-Fingered People." So enthralling are the beautiful and intact models in the catalogue that most poor whites eschew its valuable function in their outhouses and choose to use rough corn cobs instead (Crews 58).

But while his adolescent introduction to the world beyond his poverty-stricken community at first seems harmless, the stuff of young imaginations, two disturbing themes come to the fore. The first is that perusing the glossy ads sets up a dichotomy between what is real in Crews's life, and what is perceived to be its preferred alternative. There is nothing of beauty in the worn out and damaged bodies of the lower class, and this fosters the notion that poor white bodies are necessarily inferior to the strong, healthy bodies of the upper class. This visual distinction is absorbed into the poor white consciousness as evidence of lower-class dysfunction; the poor white body itself is abnormal and casts aspersions upon lower-class culture. Wray cites the hookworm campaigns of the early 1900s as an example of the way in which poor whites were singled out as dirty and unsanitary. Wray finds that the goal of the hookworm crusade was to enlighten society-at-large of the preventative measures against and treatment for the debilitating illness, and to better the lives of the Southern poor white, one of the groups most plagued by the worm: "to improve the physical health of the southern poor whites was to return them to useful labor, opening the door for moral uplift, economic rebirth, and civic renewal throughout the entire region" (*Not Quite White* 118). Unfortunately, rather than illuminating the poverty and inaccessibility of medical care and hygienic and sanitary improvements in poor white locales, Wray finds that elite whites often used the prevalence of hookworms among the lower class as a way to bolster the myth of elite white supremacy; because the doctors and scientists at the head of the crusade could potentially identify "poor white trash [as] partially refigured...pure white Americans," privileged whites countered that the hookworm marked poor whites "as a laboring group whose abilities and attitudes made them suitable not for middle class occupations, but for the industrial and agricultural jobs of the New South" (*Not Quite White* 97). This view rehashed the antebellum idea that poor whites were culpable for their condition, and

reaffirmed the idea that poor whites were to blame for their own ills, health problems which cyclically made them poor. Rather than understanding disease as a result of diminished economic circumstances, elites viewed hookworms as an effect of poor whites' volitionally unsanitary or immoral lifestyles (*Not Quite White* 104). Many decades later, the myth of poor white dirt and degeneracy still resonated in the lower-class community, as Crews's boyhood suspicion that his community is tainted and inferior creates severe self-doubt and leads him to make unflattering comparisons between his community and his social and economic superiors. The legacy of the hookworm campaign's manipulation by elite whites, which ensured that "dirt, disease, and the southern poor white were thus firmly linked in the national imagination" (*Not Quite White* 114), had a profound regional effect. Over time, poor whites themselves were indoctrinated into the notion of their undesirable physicality, and Crews has so thoroughly incorporated this connection between poor white culture and culpability that he sees his community as grotesque and indefensible.

The second troubling aspect of his interest in the Sears catalogue is that it searches for indications of class equality but finds no suitable examples. Crews is so dogged by insecurity that when he briefly considers becoming a preacher, he practices with a sermon of condemnation to his mother and brother: "We all of us made out of dirt," he claims (70), calling up a marker of waste or refuse rather than an organic symbolism. Crews's sermon registers the Christian belief of man's creation by God, but this poor white version makes no claims to creation in God's image; man, instead, is a product of dirt and spit, a two-fold detritus that renders him grotesque. Patricia Yaeger asserts that "[t]he grotesque operates as a stain or wound testifying to the unsymbolized traumas of everyday history, to events that are never registered in the world and yet leave a mark" on the poor white body (236). What is interesting about *A Childhood* is that

Crews thoroughly documents the traumas that Yaeger sees as largely unspoken, and yet he still cannot reject the notion that those traumas are somehow deserved by those who bear them. This concept began in the middle class, whose “fixation on dirt gave moral significance and cultural legitimacy to a social hierarchy based on a division of labor that placed some in close contact with dirt and positioned others out of dirt’s way” (*Not Quite White* 112). Crews instinctively associates his connection to dirt and grotesque bodies as affirmation of and justification for his inferior status. He was himself only a child when his poor white body was inscribed with the marks of trauma; a fall into a boiling vat intended for hog scalding literally peels his skin away and forces him to witness his “own butchering” (Crews 122). This occurrence is loosely interpreted as an appropriate punishment for the poor white body, as “the grotesque is a figure that represents the body’s social contamination and becomes itself a contaminant” (Yaeger 235). Indeed, the conclusion of Crews’s sermon is that “you were doomed forever... you could not, you must not, count on the Grace of God. It probably would not come to you because you were too sorry” (Crews 70-71). Before he reaches adulthood, Crews has learned to hate his poor white body, to reject the concept of human divinity or the prospect of salvation, and to recognize as deserved the wounds that make him grotesque.

In a frustrated attempt to negotiate his status and its opposite as it is presented on the glossy pages of the *Wish Book*, Crews cannot find a common ground between his ugliness and the models’ perfection. Rather than try to see himself as whole or valuable, to see elite whites’ privileged characteristics in himself, he instead reduces the figures on the pages to a level that he knows; deciding that the glossy images on the page are “a lie,” Crews tells himself that the models’ clothing conceals their inevitable marks of trauma, “scars...swellings and boils” that he is certain are there “because there was no other way to live in the world” (58). He further insists

that the models are all members of the same community, and that there were “hard feelings, trouble between them off and on, violence, and hate between them as well as love” (58). While this knowledge is potentially freeing, it is useless to the poor white because marks that can be hidden simply reiterate the upper-class standards that place poor whites at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Crews never approaches this comparison from the viewpoint of the shared attributes or admirable qualities of the two groups, and this prevents him from claiming those attributes as part of his identity. And while Crews recognizes the imperfections that the perfect people in the catalogue undoubtedly have, those imperfections originate in his own concept of himself. Further, the blemishes he imagines are transferred onto flawless bodies that bear no hints of the traumatic wounds that Crews suspects they possess, wounds that he and his community publicly and perpetually bear. It is this perception of wholeness that is most problematic when viewed against the disfigured poor white body. Crews cannot hide his scars, and they serve to mark him as unfit.

Crews’s adolescent psychology reveals the way the myth of poor white trash was incorporated by lower-class whites. The ignorant, dirty poor white was so firmly situated in Southern ideology that even those who were most damaged by it nonetheless incorporated it as an integral part of their identities. This indoctrination becomes even more powerful when Crews’s mother moves her two sons out of rural Bacon County to Jacksonville, Florida. Although the family escapes Crews’s abusive and tyrannical stepfather, they encounter another type of oppression in town; as poor whites, they have no national or regional space where they are accepted or valued. Crews notes that the only place his family can live is in the Springfield Section of Jacksonville, “where all of us from Bacon County went, when we had to go, when our people and our place could no longer sustain us” (137). The rural whites harbor conflicting

feelings about the civilization and progress of urban life: on one hand, they long for the physical comforts and technological advances that are denied them in the country, and “[t]hey loved things the way only the poor can” (Crews 137); on the other hand, they resist the close quarters and regimentation of the factory town, which made them feel like “animals in a pen” (Crews 138). Although they believe that city life is “no way for a man to live,” their poverty forces them out of the country; they have little choice but to move to the Springfield Section of Jacksonville because their desperation drives them there, forcing them “to fill the houses and offer themselves up to the factories” (Crews 138). Caught in a cycle of destitution and desperation, the poor white is not free to choose where he resides or how he makes a living, and the myth of poor white trash ensures that, even if he had a choice, there is nowhere he will be accepted.

Crews as poor white in the city has profound social and political implications. Matthew Guinn coins the term “grit émigré” to describe Southerners who, like Crews, are thrown into urban environments and “embody the outsider perspective that colors [their] fiction as they attempt to situate themselves in a changing cultural landscape” (14). Guinn identifies the “anxiety of separation and dislocation” (14) the poor white necessarily experiences when he moves out of or is forced to leave his familiar—if disfranchised and despised—community. The author’s encounter with a fellow Bacon Countian in a butcher shop is a testament to the futility of poor white attempts to assimilate or overcome dominant elite white culture. The unnamed man slowly forces a butcher knife into his chest, and the young Crews is the only one who witnesses the scene to its conclusion. Crews tries various tactics to convince the man to stop his slow suicide, but none of them have any affect. Crews’s assertion that self-murder is illegal carries no weight because the poor white knows his status renders him unfit for aid from the law; his suggestion that the man return to Bacon County reveals that poverty and its corresponding

despondency and brutality have effectively banished him from his home (Crews 150). The man tells Crews that “the knife feels good” (151), which powerfully elucidates the poor man’s self-hatred; his life is not worth living because he himself is worthless. Crews is helpless to dissuade the man, and—even as young as he is—a part of him even accepts the man’s decision:

I knew it was hopeless. I could not have said it then, but I knew in my bones that he was caught in a life where the only thing left to do was what he was doing. He had told himself a story he believed, or somebody else had told it to him, a story in which the next thing that happened—the only thing that *could* happen—was the knife. (151)

Crews subconsciously understands that the man’s decision to end his life is the only free choice he has left to make. The reader is led to believe that the man made the appropriate decision because he dies by his own hand rather than at the end of a sickly and wasted poor white life.

This scene is not without a moment of resistance, however. Crews notes that the man reaches the conclusion to commit suicide based on “a story,” a fictive construction that he had either adopted or had been given to him (151). This imaginary tale is the myth of poor white trash, and even though Crews himself has heard and espouses the myth, a part of him struggles to reject it. Guinn sees Crews as a trailblazer, a Southern poor white author whose refusal to write according to traditional Southern literary and social conventions is both groundbreaking and vitally necessary. Guinn finds that both Crews and Dorothy Alison, whom I will discuss in Chapter Five, “reveal the fallacies of Southern cultural mythology...by writing from outside the dominant ideology that has presented a narrow slice of Southern culture as representative” (5). Crews’s novels, in fact, are “created from personal experience...[and supplant] the traditional myths of a leisurely, aristocratic, and pastoral civilization with unflinching depictions of the

brutal poverty at the bottom levels of culture” (Guinn 3). This deconstruction goes even further by attempting to rewrite the myth of poor white trash, and Crews valiantly and doggedly makes his case for the inclusion of the lower class in traditional notions of Southern society.

The incident in the butcher shop exemplifies Crews’s struggle to illuminate the intrinsic yet denied humanity of lower-class whites: as the suicidal man falls to his knees, he “turned his face, the *whitest* face I’ll ever see, toward me” (151, emphasis mine). In *White Trash*, Wray argues that the epithet “white trash” calls upon the privileged and raced term “white,” while at the same time joining it to “trash,” a pejorative marker used to indicate “economic waste” (8). “White trash,” then, utilizes race as a way to “explain class,” but Wray asserts that this is a futile effort because Americans historically view poverty as a problem among minorities rather than whites (8). In *Not Quite White*, Wray goes further and asserts that we must deconstruct the term to understand its oppositional connotations, the dichotomy it exposes “between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt” (2). Because the two markers are antithetical, “white trash” signifies “a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other” (*Not Quite White* 2). White trash threatens the established view of a society because it represents a collision between markers that must forever be separate (*Not Quite White* 2).

Sylvia Jenkins Cook also concludes that

the very conception ‘poor white’ is an oxymoron. It insists on the irreconcilable nature of its two parts; the unnaturalness of their yoking assumes a world view in which to be white is to be assured of a satisfactory share of personal resources.

When whites are discovered deprived of these—as was most dramatically the case

in the South—they take on the status of freaks, to be reviled, cursed, pitied, accepted, or mocked. (185)

Both Wray and Cook demonstrate the main thrust of Crews's focus on the suicidal man's extreme whiteness: the emphasis on his color highlights the deep schism between Southern ideology and reality. The man's whiteness thrusts him into the midst of privileged (i.e. white) society, but his economic status overshadows his claim to inclusion in that society. Crews shatters the myth of white supremacy by presenting a man whose skin is pure but which offers him nothing. Wray is correct in surmising that, while "white" connotes status and privilege, "poor" trumps it and inevitably leads to associations with "trash."

If this were the end of the scene, Crews would have created a powerful condemnation of the Southern myths of elite white supremacy and poor white trash by showing the contradictory ways in which the privileged value whiteness. Poor whites themselves are obvious symbols of the hypocrisy of the notion of whiteness as elite and exceptional. But once again, class draws a deep divide between categories of whiteness, and Crews succumbs to his own misgivings about poor whites as a deserving group. The whitest face Crews ever sees may be a poor white's, but that whiteness only becomes apparent as he hemorrhages (Crews 151). The poor man's bloodshed is important here, as it hearkens back to the myth that poor whites were biologically inferior because they possessed tainted blood. Antebellum upper-class whites cited "bad blood" as the cause of poor white poverty (*Not Quite White* 18), and eugenics-era scientists theorized that "degenerative germ plasm"...carried unwanted social traits such as pauperism, laziness, promiscuity, and licentiousness, inbreeding, restlessness...and delinquency" (*Not Quite White* 71). The most dangerous aspect of these fictions was that they could be applied before the fact and without discretion, and this is clearly the case with the suicidal man in the butcher shop; we

know nothing about him except that he is a poor white, but we only recognize his whiteness after he is drained of his necessarily defected blood.

The work of Harry Crews goes a long way in the struggle for poor white representative authority, as he sought to create a literary body of work that resisted the notion of inherent inferiority and instead posited the poor white as a victim of his place and station. Guinn celebrates Crews for his attempts to rewrite the Southern myth of elite white gentility and exceptionalism and to demonstrate the effects of that myth on the poor white; Crews endeavors to reject the notion of innate lower class limitations and instead identifies the factors that obstruct poor white achievement: Crews tells of an agricultural life that uncovers the “class issues at the foundation of the pastoral,” for it presents a land that is anything but bountiful and bucolic (Guinn 13). By reevaluating the causal relationships between poor whites and the Southern landscape and economy, Crews offers a new paradigm for understanding of lower-class culture; this model casts serious doubts upon the Southern myth of poor white trash.

But this novel approach to Southern historiography is not without its drawbacks. Guinn finds that life in a difficult land renders Crews’s poor whites “more dehumanized than self-actualized” (12). This is problematic because it necessarily accepts the poor white figure as hopeless at best and depraved at worst. Even an approving critic must note that “[i]n Crews’s experience, an intimate relationship with the earth engenders brutality” and works to “strip humanity of its dignity” (Guinn 8). Crews intentionally destroys the aesthetic of poverty attempted by James Agee in *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, which I discussed in Chapter Three. Agee tries and fails to assert a beauty inherent in destitution; Crews counters that there is nothing poetic in deprivation. This, then, is the major obstacle for poor white representation: no

matter the approach or the intentions behind it, the poor white must always return to the problem of brutality and indignity.

Crews's sadness is palpable as he explains his tenuous situation between wholly incompatible and yet inexplicably bound worlds. As a poor white, he has incorporated all of the insecurity and instability that his early life engenders, but his experiences in the Marine Corps and academia have afforded him a level of confidence and security that he is afraid to embrace. Caught between two worlds, Crews is not certain he belongs in either, and to choose one means to relinquish the other. Carr identifies this duality when he asserts that Crews's "devastating portraits of 'poor whites' seems...to be not so much condescension as self-loathing" (137). This self-loathing began in his rural boyhood, but it follows Crews everywhere he goes and makes him a perpetual outsider. Of his academic life, Crews says that "[f]or half of my life I have been in the university, but never of it. Never *of* anywhere, really. Except the place I left, and that of necessity only in memory" (25). It is impossible to belong in both elite and lower-class society, and Crews mourns the way this mutual exclusivity tears him in two. At the end of the novel, he returns to Bacon County after a three-year stint in the military. As he works in the dirt of a tobacco field, his placelessness overpowers him: "I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would forever be impossible to leave them completely. Wherever I might go in the world, they would go with me" (182). Unfortunately, the myth of poor white trash is still so dominant that, at the end of the novel, we cannot know if the poor white past that Crews carries with him will lead to uplift or destruction.

Chapter Five: Twenty-First Century Trash: Confronting the Stereotype

A study of the Southern myth of the poor white trash from its beginnings in the antebellum era to its continued influence through the 1970s offers very little indication that it can ever be erased or rewritten in the national mind. Indeed, as other stereotypes began to wane, the myth of poor white trash seemed to grow stronger, gathering the force of those stereotypes that fell out of fashion. Seeking always to define themselves through opposition to an inferior Other, elite whites clung tightly to the myth of lower-class inferiority as racism and misogyny became—at least publicly—taboo. Poor whites had witnessed the Civil Rights Movement and Third Wave Feminism, but the poor white stereotype had become for them a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, and when they did confront it, as in Crews's *A Childhood*, the results were mixed.

A subtle shift began to occur in the late 1970s and 1980s, as popular culture mined the poor white myth on television and the radio. Popular series of the 1960s and 1970s such as *The Waltons*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *The Andy Griffith Show* spoke to an American public shaken by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the changing landscape engendered by the struggle for black equality. These shows were popular because they offered viewers a stable and wholesome alternative to the confusion and angst of reality. The changing attitudes toward poor whites is evidenced by the fact that two of the three series, *Waltons* and *Griffith*, were set in the South and presented the region as the nation's moral center. *Hillbillies* signaled a step forward for the poor white in that the displaced Clampetts brought their simplistic morality to their urban environments. The welcome reception of these television serials indicates a positive shift in the national imaginary. Unfortunately, this trend was short lived. Kirby notes that *Hillbillies* and *Griffith*, two of the most popular television series of the 1960s, “were exceptions

to the prevailing genre and, in effect, maintained a reference while the devilish imagery ran its course” (137). By the end of the 1970s, many shows that presented positive poor white figures had gone off the air, only to be replaced by series that featured comic or depraved poor whites.

Cobb’s assessment of the poor white in the 1970s is more positive, as he finds that popular culture consumers seemed ready to accept the “redneck” as he was portrayed on film by actors such as Burt Reynolds and in the handful of movies detailing the life of down-home sheriff Buford Pusser. *Time Magazine* fostered an interest in the “Good Ole Boy” who possessed “a strain of innate wisdom, an instinct about people and an unwavering loyalty that makes him the one friend you would turn to” (*Redefining* 84). Once viewed as a ruffian or buffoon, the redneck of the 1970s “now emerged as a hero who had resisted the corrupting influences of mainstream society” (*Redefining* 84).

A closer look at 1970s pop culture poor whites, however, reveals a more complex relationship between middle- and upper-class consumer and poor white trash. The Walton family, for example, is meant to represent national morality, not to illuminate or insert values into poor white culture. Kirby points out that the series “created a national reference whose very Southernness began to evaporate” (146), and one that never maintained poor white associations in the first place.

Upper-class whites accepted the tight-knit Walton clan, and later the good ol’ boys of the *Dukes of Hazzard*, for two important reasons. In the case of *The Waltons*, elite whites drew a distinct line between the family’s attributes and any troubling notions of class. The Waltons were poor, yes, but because the show took place during the Depression, their poverty signified a national position. *Dukes*, significantly, stripped a minority of the poor whites of Hazzard of their white trash characteristics to make them palatable for a national audience, but the two title

characters, Bo and Luke Duke, serve as contrasts to the genuine trash, who are variously depicted as humorous or dangerous. The Duke cousins answered the growing national awareness of or curiosity about poor whites that Cobb identifies as a trend during the 1970s, but the other poor whites in the series reminded viewers of the dangers of accepting the lower class on anything other than a conditional basis.

In spite of this tenuous position, in the 1980s, poor whites received at least a modicum of acceptance, as country music grew in popularity. Musicians such as Hank Williams, Jr. sang about the competence and virtue of the poor white. Bocephus's "Country Boy Can Survive" (1982) celebrates the rugged redneck in all his glory, and even asserts that the rural lifestyle is to be preferred. Williams spoke to a generation of lower-class whites and assured them of their inherent value, perhaps even supremacy, at least in terms of survival in a hostile world. When his music entered the mainstream, however, it was immediately co-opted by privileged whites, particularly in the South, who manipulated it to their advantage. Sporting brand new designer boots and cowboy hats, elite whites laid claim to the notion of rural dignity and strength, but they maintained a distance from rural whites themselves. They set their own good ol' boy standards, and poor whites were left out of the equation. Kirby cites the popular prime time drama *Dallas* as an example of elite white theft and co-optation from the poor white; the series followed a wealthy Texas family tied to their land and to each other. But while the Ewings had rural roots, they were by no means economically or culturally related to the lower class. The attempt to assert a down-home aesthetic into pampered and pedigreed elites proved too tricky to accomplish and led to unflattering associations, however, and Kirby notes that the figure of the gentleman planter led to a rehashing of the traditional planter-tyrant, or "lord of the lash": "The Old South model whipped weeping slaves across cotton fields...The New South version relishes corporate

and human relations manipulations. Neither has scruples or compassion” (164). The endeavor to fuse rural characteristics with privileged psychologies was largely a failure; in the case of elite claims of country sentiments, class and the myth of the poor white worked against the hegemony, as down-home values and elitism repelled one another in the national mind. By stealing classed attributes while rejecting the class, J.R. Ewing disserved not just the lower class but the entire South and “helped revive Dixie demonology and nincompoedom in a sorry aftermath to the ambivalent progress of the mid-1970s” (Kirby 164).

This demonization of the South has not been entirely unproductive, however, as it comes full circle to the state of national relations during the colonial and Revolutionary periods, when all Southerners were seen as a more or less homogenous category. Coupled with the remnants of good feeling toward the lower-class white in the 1970s and 1980s, a reunion of Southern classes opened the door for poor white self-representation. As Southerners grew more open to class and status inquiries and politicians and advocates for the lower class pushed for the eradication of poverty in the 1990s, poor white authors finally came into their own. At last it appeared that the nation was ready to give witness to the poor white experience, and authors such as Dorothy Allison came forward with their own, legitimated, version of poor white testimony. Lower-class writers sought to accurately relate the limitations imposed by class and economics, and to assert their rightful place in Southern society and culture.

Allison, in particular, probed the repercussions of discrimination and alienation. In her short story collection *Trash* (1988), Allison confronts the notion of poor white nobility that reached its peak in the 1970s: while fully aware of the myth of honest poverty, Allison did not see herself or her relations in the commercialized versions on television or in literature. Every attempt at reconciling what she was fed and the reality of what she lived was a failure, and she

instead locates her family among the “bad poor”: “We were men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes” (vii). This introduction immediately signals a new approach to the poor white stereotype; rather than confront the dominant myth of trash with another, equally fictionalized, myth, Allison identifies and concedes to many of the characteristics that the elite construction entails. Her subjects are not beautiful, as Agee would have us believe; but neither are they terrible, as in the works of Caldwell or Dickey. The poor white depictions in these works led Allison to “put [them] down in rage... to refuse the [myths] that had so confounded me” (ix). She is particularly outraged by what she calls “Taylor Caldwell stories,” which present poor whites “as if they were brain-damaged, or morally insufficient, or just damn stupid” (ix). That her family clearly resembles those poor whites in the “Taylor Caldwell stories,” representations she intends to refute, seems at first paradoxical. However, she asserts a causal relationship between poor white behavior and attitudes and “the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow oddly deserved” (vii). The greatest shaping factor of poor white life is destitution, which allows for the construction of the elite myth of white trash and pollutes poor white notions of identity and self-representation; poor whites are born into a vacuum which convinces them that they cannot escape their material circumstances and that they are unworthy because of it. In this light, poor white drunkenness, violence, and promiscuity—which Allison frankly admits are part of poor white life—are clearly seen as products of poverty and discrimination. The myth of poor white trash creates a stereotype that, like many others, has some basis in fact; but the entire myth must be rejected because it falsely lays the blame for that stereotype on the poor whites themselves.

In her initial efforts to confront the poor white stereotype, Allison tried to reclaim the epithet “white trash,” but by 2002, she realized the futility of the effort, and she now resists the designation because its history is too problematic and bound up with elite fictions of the poor. Choosing to split the phrase, Allison elides the racial component of the slur and focuses on the universal implications of the term “trash.” For Allison, the word “trash” is important because it signifies a group that benefits from it as well as a group that is hurt by it (xvi). This tactic emphasizes the class issues at the root of the pejorative marker, and frees Allison from distracting issues of race. It is not inferior whiteness—or even blackness, as elite whites have contended for over a century—that forces Allison and her family to the margins, but the inescapable economic hierarchy. Allison struggles against her classed position and all of the social, economic, and political limitations it is meant to enforce. Testifying to this struggle and its origins provides a way to reject the myth of poor white inferiority and culpability. Allison’s testimony also creates an alternative depiction of poor white life, one that resists the implications of the trash stereotype. As evidenced by *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Allison “wrote to release indignation and refuse humiliation, to admit fault and to glorify the people I loved who were never celebrated” (xii). *Bastard* achieves this goal by offering poor whites in all of their shame, and yet insisting upon their humanity.

The novel’s protagonist is a young girl born into a hardscrabble existence in the modern South. Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright is the illegitimate daughter of a poor, teenaged, white trash mother, and her status in the community is fixed just as firmly by the family surname on her birth certificate as the “Illegitimate” stamp underneath it. Both Bone’s name and status conspire against her to create almost insurmountable odds; no matter what Bone does, she will always be white trash. As a Southerner herself, Allison understands the Southern community’s fixation on

family history and its limitless influences on the construction of identity. One of the most important conflicts in the novel is Bone's desire to define herself and create a place for herself independent of her status as a member of a white trash family in a white trash community. Bone's natural adolescent struggle to define herself is made even more difficult when she discovers that any independent identity she forms must necessarily conform to the long-established identities of class. In short, Bone's ability to forge an identity is inescapably tied to her family's poverty and hunger and will serve to create in her a corresponding poverty and hunger. Bone's story is undeniably the story of the poor white at-large, and Allison's treatment of her signals both an important shift in the way poor whites saw themselves, and the resistance they began to feel toward the white trash stereotype.

In a 1994 interview, the author explained the importance of the motif of hunger in both the novel and poor white life: "being poor in this country is about being constantly hungry, because the thing that you get, the emotional sustenance you get is never enough, so that hunger becomes a way of life, that longing for something never had" (Megan 75).

The hunger in the novel represents the poor white's dissatisfying social and economic condition, the forces of elite white discrimination and poor white self-loathing, the white trash myth as both an isolating and unifying construction, and the need for reevaluation of the stereotype from within and outside of the disfranchised group. Through each of these issues, Allison foregrounds the material conditions of poverty, and the circumstances of class that arise from economic disadvantage.

Allison's focus on the heretofore relatively dismissed and long overdue issue of class signals a new approach to poor white representation; as Carr notes, "class—now that race and gender are being addressed—will be the next enlivening issue in the consideration of southern

letters” (142). It seems a fitting act of retribution that poor white authors should lead the way in this new line of inquiry, both because their voices have been largely suppressed, and because the lower class has the most to gain from a new understanding of the shaping forces and oppressive limitations of economic inequality. In order to maintain a rigid focus on the class bias at the heart of the myth of poor white trash, *Bastard* largely eschews gender issues and racial conflict.

But because the poor white stereotype has been so prevalent in the Southern and national mind that no author has yet successfully countered it, and because little has been accomplished in the war on poverty even at this late date, we must begin with dubious questions about the novel’s potential to rewrite the Southern myth of poor white inferiority. How far can Allison, a poor white herself, push the limits of a myth that is taken for granted? If *Bastard Out of Carolina* is representative of the first step in the evolution of Southern literature, does it merely make the argument that class-based ideologies must be brought into the light for examination, that poverty and hunger must be addressed and that those who suffer from them must be heard? Or does the novel go further, offering a new method for understanding the dominant social hierarchy in Southern literature? A close reading of the text reveals that it does all of this and more; using the motifs of poverty and hunger, Allison calls for a reevaluation of established ideological and social constructs in the South by posing at least one method of negotiating those motifs within the individual Southern identity. Bone’s successful progression from conventional and therefore anonymous poor and hungry white trash to fully-realized individual can be seen as a call for resistance to previous patterns of thought and as a model for rejecting the limitations inherent in those thought patterns. Bone’s achievements do not go so far as to suggest that the long-held practices of discrimination and subjugation espoused by Southern communities due to the system of class can be completely obliterated, but they do show that members of the poor white

community can reject and therefore limit the effect of those external forces as they pertain to individual and internal constructs of identity. Though she labors under the burden of class distinction, Bone is able to create an identity that, for all of its limitation, is wholly her own, and while that identity does not completely free itself from her white trash background, it is not limited to it.

One of the most important aspects of identity in the novel is hunger. Each of the characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is hungry, and sometimes this hunger is literal; more often than not, however, the hunger is emotional. Bone's mother Anney is desperate for "someone strong to love her like she loved her girls" (Allison 10). Bone's stepfather Daddy Glen Waddell wants his middle-class father's love and respect. Bone's longing for the love of her family is so strong that she refuses to tell anyone that Daddy Glen is molesting her. These unfulfilled needs are responsible for many of the mistakes the characters make: Anney's choice to stay with an abusive husband, Daddy Glen's violence, and the abnegation of help and continued sexual violations that result from Bone's refusal to publicly accuse her mother's husband.

At the center of each of these needs is a recognition of class. Glen's marriage a poor white woman reiterates elite fears of poor white association; his family rejects him because his union with Anney taints him. Though his wife does not share her brothers' proclivities to violence or drunkenness, when Glen marries Anney, he has to "marry the whole Boatwright legend" (Allison 13). While his passionate love for Anney mitigates the sting of his family's banishment for a time, he soon resents the poor white contamination, particularly as it is represented through Bone, a bastard child. Anney's poor white insecurity leads her to a hasty marriage and a quiet acceptance of Glen's violence. And Bone, the product of shame and a victim of lower class instability, is so desperate for love that she follows her mother's example

and remains silent about Glen's abuse, a fear that she somehow deserves this violation dogging her through much of the novel. As the novel unfolds, the hint becomes stronger that these tragic missteps could be avoided if each of the character's needs were met, if their poverty was not so great and their feelings of worth were not so small. Instead, Glen cannot impress his father, so he becomes a terrifying despot in his own home, substituting his wife and stepdaughter's fear of him for his father's respect. Anney exposes her daughter to abuse because to object is to lose her husband. And Bone sacrifices herself to Daddy Glen in order to keep her family intact, in spite of the fact that this family is destroying her.

Bone's hunger is so great that for the majority of the novel it is the crux of her identity. Even her nickname is indicative of lack. At birth, she is "no bigger than a knucklebone," an important physical descriptor that signifies Bone's diminished prospects for sustenance of any form (Allison 2). Bone is born to an unwed teenager who cannot give her a solid home life or economic stability, and into a family with a lackluster reputation. Bone's family is deemed white trash by the community, a distinction they appear to cultivate. Even before she is old enough to realize her status in the community, Bone is at a disadvantage because her mother buys into the stereotype that her bastard daughter is not good enough. Anney resists the "Illegitimate" stamp on Bone's birth certificate and tries many times to have it removed. Bone knows that her mother's attempts to change her birth certificate indicate that she herself is somehow lacking, and she must struggle against this her entire life. Bone's extended family is also somehow not good enough; her uncles are hard-drinking, violent men who mistreat their wives and regularly spend time in jail. Their reputations color the community's opinion of Bone. "Oh, you're a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure," Granny tells Bone one afternoon, inscribing all of the frustration and guilt of poor white life onto the child's body (Allison 21). Bone is labeled

before she can fully grasp what that label means, and Granny gives Bone a glimpse of the judgment she will suffer at the hands of the outside community; in Greenville, the name “Boatwright” is synonymous with “trash.” Bone is born into a family that has always been white trash, and her generation of Boatwrights will not outlive the tarnish on her family’s reputation, whether they deserve it or not. This assessment is problematic for Bone and impedes her ability to form an independent identity. She is and always will be a Boatwright—but she does not yet know how one becomes a Boatwright, or what one does as a Boatwright. Questions such as these plague all members of the poor white community.

As she tries to answer these impossible questions, Bone realizes that there are two representations of the Boatwright clan. The first is Bone’s safe community of aunts, uncles, and cousins, people who protect and care for each other in spite of their opposition to the world; the second is the outside community’s opinion of the Boatwrights, of the community’s disapproval of the way the Boatwrights live. Bone’s recognition of this duality recalls the growing schism between poor white trash and simple country folk that first appeared in the 1970s, and foreshadows Allison’s attempt to replace the dominant Southern myth with a less polarizing and far more flattering depiction of the lower class, one that asserts inherent value and rejects proscribed attitudes. Bone must find a way to reconcile this dichotomy before she can apply it to herself. It is imperative that she resolves these conflicting impressions in order to situate herself between them. This is an important task that all poor whites will have to undertake, Allison asserts, as there is an overlooked middle ground wherein *being* poor white is incompatible with the stereotype of *acting* poor white.

Allison devotes only a few paragraphs to Bone’s literal hunger, but it is important for two reasons: first, it offers a bleak look at poverty in the South; and second, it demonstrates that

poverty and hunger, just like reputation and class, are inherited conditions. Bone's literal hunger is just as painful as her desire for emotional fulfillment. "Hunger makes you restless...When I got hungry my hands would not stay still," she says, revealing the frustration and agitation that comes from growing up poor in the South (Allison 71). Bone's physical hunger in the novel can be compared to Anney's memories of childhood hunger, when she pretends to eat delicious and filling meals instead of the scraps her parents were able to provide. The connection between past and present poverty signifies a major obstacle for the liberation from oppression in lower class families; though Anney wants to provide for her children, she is just as powerless as her parents had been to give adequate sustenance. Although Anney tries to protect her daughters, her poverty is too powerful to resist. "I was never gonna have my kids know what it was like. Never was gonna have them hungry or cold or scared," she rages against Glen (Allison 73). Even when Anney desperately resorts to prostitution—an inversion of the stereotype of white trash promiscuity, this time based in economics—her ability to provide for her children is limited. She can fill their stomachs for a time, but the hunger always returns. And because Bone's hunger deprives her mother of choices, she remains unfulfilled: "the [food Anney provides] stuffed me but didn't satisfy. Once I started eating I could not get full" (Allison 78). This hunger is another inherited part of Bone's identity; she is the owner of the current grumbling belly in a long line of empty stomachs.

But Bone must suffer more and greater hunger than her need for physical nourishment, and as she progresses from childhood to adolescence, her hunger takes on a new shape. As a little girl she is isolated within her family community, and her hunger is exclusive to her adolescent needs: food, shelter, and love. As her eyes begin to open to the world outside of her family, she experiences a new type of hunger that is directly linked to her identity as poor white;

Bone now wants to step outside of the white trash boundary and see herself as an equal to her peers. She needs acceptance and understanding from the outside community. Prior to this stage in her growth, Bone lacked both the ability and the inclination to resist her limitations. Despite her mother's assertions to the contrary, Bone says that she and her sister Reese "knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were" (Allison 82). Her awareness of her class supersedes traditional notions of white supremacy. Cash's *Proctor-Dorian Bond* is decimated when Bone sees an African-American girl in her Aunt Alma's apartment complex; Bone wants to talk to her, but she figures that "her mama had probably told her all about what to expect from trash like us" (Allison 86). Bone resigns herself to the fact that she will be judged, and she never even considers that this is unfair.

In her pre-teen years, however, she reevaluates her station and is no longer resigned to it. Now she wants to belong to the larger community, to be judged and esteemed on her own merits. Everywhere she turns, however, she finds her way blocked. Allison describes in explicit detail the moment that Bone is made aware of the implications of her status in the community. When she is caught taking candy from the counter at Woolworth's and forced to confess to the store manager, her eyes are opened to the ways in which the town wrongly judges her. The store manager looks down at both Bone and Anney, barely containing his laughter (Allison 96). Bone is unaccustomed to being the brunt of jokes, although Anney has dealt with it many times. To be white trash is to be maliciously made fun of and laughed at, as Anney discovered years before while trying to amend Bone's birth certificate. Just as Bone inherits her mother's status as a joke in the community, she also inherits her mother's resentment of it. Bone senses her mother's hatred for the manager and his condescending manner, and it fuels her own disgust; her interaction with the manager creates a new and more public hunger, exacerbated by shame. This

new hunger is “raw and terrible, a shaking down deep inside me, as if my rage used up everything I had ever eaten” (Allison 98). The desire to be taken seriously is symptomatic of Bone’s hunger for status and acceptance, and, rather than leading to frustration or anxiety, as her previous hunger does, this new hunger makes her fiercely angry.

Bone nurses this anger during her limited interaction with Daddy Glen’s family and her friendship with Shannon Pearl. Not only does Bone suffer because she is white trash; she also suffers because Glen violates the boundaries that separate him from white trash society. Bone and her sister are forced to visit the Waddells at family gatherings, despite the fact that they know they are not wanted. The two girls are isolated from the rest of the children—literally placed outside the house in the backyard—as they are not good enough to associate with Waddell stock. Even though Bone hates them for their elitist snobbery, she still longs for their privilege. She takes account of their possessions and their social status, “wanting it all” and forcing herself to stay quiet and controlled because she cannot “speak around the hunger in [her] throat” (Allison 102). No member of the Waddell family would be treated the way she is treated at Woolworth’s, and she longs to enjoy their reputation and the respect it affords.

Bone’s hunger for the Waddells’ life includes but goes beyond a desire for the material, and in the albino Shannon Pearl, Bone finds a girl who has the same hunger for acceptance as she; both girls are outcasts and victims of prejudice and hate. Bone is attracted to Shannon’s anger, and the two girls cling to each other in mutual understanding. But Bone’s feelings for Shannon are complicated; she lashes out at Shannon even while she “love[s] her stubborn pride, the righteous rage she turned on her tormentors” (Allison 200). Bone is sympathetic to Shannon’s pain in a way that she is not to her own, and for a time, the girls’ friendship transcends class boundaries. But her connection to Shannon can only go so far because Shannon

is not white trash, and she reminds Bone of this during a fight: “you trash. You nothing but trash. Your mama’s trash, and your grandma, and your whole dirty family” (Allison 171). Shannon’s outburst reveals the pervasive influence of the white trash stereotype; she is young, but she is already well-versed in the language of class discrimination. Class distinction hinders Bone’s potential for friendship with Shannon because it is a constant reminder that the two girls are not equals. In fact, Shannon, whose condition arguably makes her more of an outcast than Bone, seems to take it for granted that she is superior to Bone. No matter how hard Bone tries to act as if she belongs in Shannon’s world, her status as poor white trash precedes her, and not even Shannon Pearl—her only friend and the most intimate relation she has outside of her family—can forgive her for it. Shannon, to whom Bone should be able to look for sympathy and understanding, does not miss an opportunity to remind Bone of her place.

It is at this point in the novel that Allison frankly confronts the poor white attitudes and behaviors that have worked to support the myth of poor white trash, as Bone searches helplessly for a way to assuage her rage and frustration. She resents Shannon’s accusation, but instead of finding a healthy and appropriate way to mitigate her anger, Bone enacts the exact behaviors that foreground the stereotype. This is not a condemnation of Bone or the poor white community, but rather a powerful demonstration of the self-fulfilling prophecies inherent in the elite myth of lower class white inferiority. Bone’s reaction to being called white trash is pure fury, but when she tries to release that fury—which she must do if she is to survive—the only avenues open to her dictate stereotypical behavior.

Although Bone’s first reaction to Shannon’s verbal assault is with violence, she begins to see that her anger is fruitless. At Shannon’s funeral, and after she and Shannon have parted on bad terms, Bone realizes that her “hardheaded anger was gone” (Allison 203). This shift in her

psychology continues after she and her cousin Grey break into Woolworth's. Bone initially hopes to vent her anger and frustration over her treatment there by exacting her revenge on the store manager who humiliated her. She concocts an elaborate plan and relishes the thought of the destruction she will wreak. Once inside the store, however, she realizes her mistake; she cannot assuage her anger by hurting others. This recognition is the culmination of an idea that began after Shannon's death, but finally it sinks in: internal anger cannot be dealt with externally, and, while stereotypical poor white behavior may seem to be the only option, it is wholly self-destructive. She looks at all the merchandise inside the store's cases, "trying to think what it was that I really wanted, who I really wanted to hurt. My eyes ached, and my palms were raw and stinging. I felt like I was going to cry...and I felt something hard and mean push up the back of my throat" (Allison 225). Breaking into Woolworth's does not alleviate Bone's anger; if anything, it makes it worse because it reveals the futility of stereotypical behavior to confront stereotypes. Although she derives pleasure from ensuring that the store will be looted, her anger remains.

Allison deliberately lets Bone's anger build while she explores inappropriate avenues to alleviate it. Bone is angry because she is hungry, but the need to quell her anger creates another type of hunger, a furious desire for peace that will eradicate the pangs of rage. Bone's first attempts to sate her violent passions are useless, because hurting others does nothing to end her own suffering; in fact, it actually increases her own pain. Bone realizes that reacting to her situation with anger and violence firmly locates her inside the white trash tradition. When Bone breaks into Woolworth's, when she assaults Shannon Pearl, she *is* white trash, and even though she has very little self-determination, she is responsible for the misstep. Allison's frank evaluation of the uncomfortable truths behind the white trash stereotype illuminates the

limitations imposed by exoteric notions of class. When Bone finally recognizes her plight, she can begin to seek out new modes of behavior. Her new awareness demonstrates that Bone is beginning to establish her own identity, to throw off the fetters of white trash expected behavior, and to resist the idea that she is somehow tainted because she is a Boatwright. Indeed, by refusing to resort to violence to work through her frustration, she has already moved outside of the boundaries of her social status. A Boatwright may be expected to lash out under pressure, but Bone is more than just a Boatwright, just as twenty-first century poor whites are more than a list of expected attitudes and behaviors.

Once Bone realizes that she is not trapped by her anger, her family's reputation, or the community's emphasis on history and tradition, she is free to search for appropriate methods of filling her hunger. Jillian Sandell in "Telling Stories of 'Queer White Trash': Race Class and Sexuality in the Work of Dorothy Allison," notes that "[a]lthough Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* engages with the issue of impoverished whites, it does not, for example, alleviate class oppression, or even necessarily challenge the status quo" (212). That the novel does not offer a solution to the inherent problems of the class system is undisputable, but Allison certainly "challenge[s] the status quo" by allowing Bone to find her salvation within her family community. Although Bone's family is rough, brutalized by poverty and despair, and although they are criticized, hated, and feared by the outside community, they love and take care of each other with fierce loyalty. Allison acknowledges the white trash stereotype and even allows for its legitimacy, as she demonstrates when Bone realizes that "it wasn't God who made us like this... We'd gotten ourselves messed up on our own" (306). The Boatwright family thinks, looks, and acts in strict adherence to the white trash stereotype, and Allison does not argue for a reevaluation of their characterization. In this regard, Sandell is correct.

What Allison does argue, however, is that there are redemptive qualities within the white trash community. Although her stepfather abuses her and her mother abandons her, Bone's extended family rally to protect her, and Bone's Aunt Raylene becomes the most important figure in her life. Allison demonstrates that although the white trash community is ostracized, it is capable of bearing its own burdens and ensuring its survival. Even Sandell acknowledges that "while many stories about white trash have, until now, participated in a scapegoating function—displacing the ills of society *onto* white trash—by writing from the perspective of queer white trash Allison challenges this stereotype" (224). Indeed, it is only within her own community that Bone finds solace from the perils of the outside community as they are primarily represented by her abuse at the hands of the middle-class Glen. Allison attempts to prove that even though the outside community sees no value in white trash society, that society is not as morally deficient as the stereotype would suggest. Poverty influences almost every aspect of an individual's life, and it frequently breeds malevolence. However, poverty and wickedness are not mutually exclusive, particularly in the community's interactions with one another; Bone's family has more than earned its white trash status, but it has not earned every element of that stereotype, the limits of which exclude benevolence and the capacity for selfless love.

Bone's family meets and yet transcends their stereotypical characterization; they foster a strong sense of peace and solidarity, even as they struggle against poverty, oppression, and misguided anger. Bone's aunts and uncles may cheat, fight, and steal, but their children are safe inside the admittedly tenuous family group. Bone says that in contrast to her home with Glen, "it was alive over at the aunts' houses, warm, always humming with voices and laughter and children running around" (Allison 80). Bone responds to this frenzied joy; it is only with her

extended family, surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins who can be counted on to protect and support her, that Bone can eventually find herself.

With the help of her extended family, and particularly with the assistance of Aunt Raylene, Bone is ultimately able to throw off the last vestiges of her anger. In Aunt Raylene, Bone finds the mother figure she so desperately needs. Aunt Raylene can sense Bone's anger, and she wants to protect her from it. "You better think hard, Ruth Anne," she cautions her niece, "about what you want and who you're mad at. You better think hard" (Allison 263). Aunt Raylene is an experienced, adult woman from Bone's community of white trash women, and she has great wisdom to impart. After a brief struggle, Bone accepts her counsel. When Aunt Raylene tells Bone "I'll get you home and safe," Bone is assured of the stability she always wanted; "don't let me go," she inwardly begs, knowing that she is finally on the road to healing (Allison 298).

By observing Aunt Raylene, Bone finally has an acceptable model on which to form her own identity. Aunt Raylene is a Boatwright and therefore white trash, but she fully understands the factual and fictive components of the elite myth of lower class inferiority and has cultivated only the attributes of poor white life that enforce her own agency. Aunt Raylene's house on the river is a safe haven for Bone. Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon's essay "'Born on the Wrong Side of the Porch': Violating Traditions in *Bastard Out of Carolina*" is a study of the ways in which the front porch in the South is a place of safety and comfort, "traditionally a site for emotional healing—a place to sit in peace, collect oneself, and to escape tensions from within the home" (140). Donlon finds that Bone's safest moments are spent on the porches of her Granny's and aunts' houses, and that the final porch in the novel at Aunt Raylene's "safely situates Bone on the threshold of her emerging identity, positioning her to embrace and to affirm her own

transgressiveness and ready to face the world on her own terms. Repositioned for survival, Bone's future seems not only bearable but hopeful" (142). With Aunt Raylene's sanctuary, Allison creates a space that does not subvert the boundaries of the white trash stereotype, but that instead offers a new and better way of operating inside those boundaries. Aunt Raylene shows Bone by example that being a member of a white trash community does not have to mean blindly adopting all of its conventions.

In "Sorrow's Child," Randall Kenan defines white trash thusly: "liquored-up, malevolent, unemployed, undereducated, country-music-loving, oversexed, foul-tempered men; and long-suffering, quickly aging, overly fertile, too-young marrying, hardheaded women" (815). Allison's Boatwright family certainly meets these criteria. But the family goes beyond the stereotype in their capabilities for love and loyalty; they are at their greatest when they demonstrate their solidarity. Allison spins a narrative of white trash culture, but she refuses to place absolute limits on that culture. Her depictions of the Boatwright family do not go so far as to romanticize poverty and hunger, but they do show that there is something beyond them. Allison celebrates Bone's potential as she, with the help of her family, discovers that her family and status are much more than simply objects of derision, that she—like all white trash society—is endowed with possibility, and she stares defiantly back at the oppressive world outside her family community and thinks "[w]e're smarter than you think we are" (Allison 217). Without denying that her family has in one sense cultivated their reputation, she begins to feel "powerful and proud of all of us, all the Boatwrights who had ever gone to jail, fought back when they hadn't a chance, and still held on to their pride" (Allison 217).

Bone is not the only victim of abuse in the novel; the entire Boatwright family, and those who choose to associate with them, are marked for injustice and oppression by the circumstances

of class. Allison leads the reader to a reevaluation of class status and Southern stereotypes by revealing the tragic consequences of static and oppressive boundaries that often are caused by and result in poverty and oppression. Kenan finds that “[n]ot only does the heart break during [the] final scenes, but the mind expands to understand in a dark new way why the abused make the hard choices they often do; to understand a bit more the strange logic of the heart in the face of such unbelievable cruelty” (816). Allison forces the reader to take another look at the white trash stereotype and refuses to allow those who are marked by it to be simply shrugged off and forced into marginality. What the white trash community needs, she asserts, is to be understood and encouraged, because they, like the poor little girl-heroine of the novel, are more than they at first appear to be. Bone Boatwright looks to the future, and she does not despair.

Guinn finds that poor white authors such as Dorothy Allison “demonstrate that...free will is a product of class status beyond their own... Their late arrival to the southern literary consciousness represents a latter-day renaissance, another outpouring of art from another nexus between cultures” (xiii). At the forefront of this outpouring is *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which represents texts that come from the bottom of the social and political hierarchy and “call the validity of an entire culture into question” (Kenan 30). For its attempts to inject poor white experience into elite Southern historiography, its fearless concession of genuinely undesirable poor white behavior, its determination to ascribe value to the lower class in spite of that behavior, and its relentless condemnation of the class circumstances that make all of these efforts necessary, *Bastard Out of Carolina* signals a new and important approach to the study and reevaluation of poor white trash.

II *Bloodroot*

At the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, while there are still disheartening disparities between the rich and the poor, Amy Greene has published a novel about poor white struggle, and, surprisingly, class factors little in the narrative. Instead, Greene focuses on issues with which all readers can identify: love and loss, abuse and kindness, rage and despair. The novel follows three generations of an eastern Tennessee family as they struggle to exist, not as poor whites, but as human beings. Greene's text asserts its universal relevance as a study of the human condition because it resists the idea that poor whites have something to prove or that, at the core, they are fundamentally different from anyone else. Byrdie Lamb, her granddaughter Myra Odom, and her twin great-grandchildren Johnny and Laura are beset by many obstacles, but their poverty is not bound to any kind of class awareness. Their location in the Appalachian Mountains is important, but not because it functions as a gateway to an undesirable region, and the characters themselves do not serve as mythoclasts or harbingers of changing ideologies. Instead, Greene weaves a narrative that relates the heartbreaking repercussions of cruelty and abuse present in all social and economic circumstances, and, like Dorothy Allison, offers a loving portrait of family solidarity and the peace of hearth and home.

Greene lets the characters speak for themselves, and there is scant vitriol in their testimonies. They recognize the hardness of their lives, but they also assert the sanctity of human life and the healing powers of love. These are poor whites on a larger scale, and their troubles span all classes. Because the characters are not categorized or defined by their lower-class status and do not exclusively enact poor white stereotypical behavior, *Bloodroot* offers an inversion of Faulkner's method of associating poor whites with those in other classes by their undesirable characteristics. Instead, Greene finds commonality between the poor and the privileged in their shared needs for love and stability. Maternal bonds and women's knowledge plays a large part in

these associations, as Byrdie, Myra, and later Laura all attempt to protect their children from the harsh realities of a life they do not see in terms of class.

Melanie Benson argues that obliviousness to class stems from the fact that for almost a century poor whites were forced to define themselves outside of class positions if they were to assert any form of worth. The myth of white supremacy was amenable to this effort because

[t]he imaginative return to an order that inherently privileged whiteness could help mitigate the power of class over the poor white by replacing it with an illusion of ‘natural’ value. For poor whites, money per se is often denied importance in favor of the commodities of education and culture that often provided the only distinction between indigent whites and blacks. (Benson 48)

The attempt to transgress economic boundaries in the search for value was destined to fail, however, as the strictures of capitalism exclusively privileged wealth over any abstract qualities with which the poor white could identify.

The hopelessness of this aim is demonstrated in Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man* (1926), as the poor whites in the novel differentiate poverty from baseness as the true marker of trash. Ellen Chesser, the protagonist, has her shoes stolen by “some o’ nary trash” (Roberts 17); theft is an action poor whites use to discern respectable poverty from trash. Later, when her first love Jonas Prather confesses that he has impregnated another woman, he calls the girl “dirty trash” (Roberts 162), using the term to signify a filthy body and loose morals. Jonas himself knows that what he has done cuts him off from Ellen and the respectable poor white community; when he reflects on his behavior, he thinks, “Jonas Prather, you’re a stinken o’ nary fool, a low-down damned-to-the-devil white trash” (Roberts 164).

Roberts's poor whites recognize the conditions of their environment that the elites use to make all-consuming judgments about the lower class. This is made clear in the prevalence of lice among the poor. Less an indication of negligent hygiene than a consequence of living on the land, Ellen and her friends accept lice as an unwanted but unavoidable part of their lives. When Ellen attends a party, there are lice in the hostess's house, but the guests call them "spiders" to protect the feelings of both the hostess and the party-goers, any of whom could have carried the lice in with them (125). The upper class do not make such distinctions; when Mrs. Hep Bodine, the wife of the landowner for whom Ellen's father sharecrops, insults Ellen and runs her off the Bodine's private land, Ellen lashes out at the tomatoes in a nearby garden: "You sting my skin. You think I'm trash. You lied, you lied, you lied!" (Roberts 31). Still, when Ellen sees herself through Mrs. Bodine's eyes, she can feel the lice crawling all over her body, and the kindness of her friends is no comfort (Roberts 38-39). Carr finds that esoteric distinctions allow Ellen to "[seek] some elevation of status by mentally separating herself from those people she calls 'trash,'" but he also notes that "at the same time she is made by others to feel that she cannot escape that label herself" (70). Indeed, when Ellen rejects the advances of Joe Trent, her social superior, he lashes out: "What I want with you, Louse Patch?" (Roberts 71). As she does with Mrs. Bodine, Ellen incorporates Joe's assessment into her identity, and finds herself sorely lacking (Roberts 74).

As hard as she tries to resist the dominant interpretation of herself, and as diligently as she works to rewrite the notions of trash, Ellen is powerless to negotiate the dichotomy because the desperate poverty in which she exists traps her; no matter how many alternate markers of value the poor white constructs, as Benson notes, material conditions foreground any claims of worth. Ellen is constricted by the circumstances of class inscribed onto her physical body and her

psychology, and Carr asserts that “it is this entrapment in self, so well portrayed by Roberts in both content and style, that is the tragedy of the poor of all races” (74). At the end of the novel, an adult Ellen takes her numerous sickly children and follows her adulterous husband to another temporary tenant farm, too tired and apathetic to struggle with her identity; she is tired, in fact, of life itself (Roberts 355).

The rigid restrictions of class imposed upon the poor white in *The Time of Man* stand in opposition to the sentimental rhapsodies of poor white life in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Neither of these works clearly outlines a practical pattern of resistance to the poor white stereotype. In fact, Gavin Jones finds that “defining the poor as a powerless mass” in which individual agency has collapsed, as both Roberts and Agee do, albeit in dissimilar ways, allows little room for countering affirmation by the victimized group itself, and “dangers emerge from any reduction of the poor to islands of despair and isolation, unable to surmount environmental forces and disconnected from the working class as a whole” (17). Paradoxically, a willingness to concede the failures of poor white culture or admit the real, if shaky and by no means overarching, undesirable elements of lower class behavior and ideology, as Allison does, may also prove fatal to the poor white, because “[t]o say that the poor possess a self-perpetuating culture is to imply that poverty is not fundamentally a product of economic and political forces, thus making the poor seem morally culpable for their financial status” (16). This stance brings us back to the beginning, when poor whites were blamed for their material circumstances and easily set apart from productive society.

Perhaps, then, the answer is to wipe the slate clean and begin the process of poor white representation anew. Freed from the necessity of minimizing the ugliness and exaggerating the beauty of poor white life, Southern literature can begin to reevaluate the poor white as a figure in

between the hyperboles. While the poor white author's first instinct may justifiably be to cling to the wholesome and meritorious depictions of the lower class in sympathetic treatments and utterly reject the unflattering ones, this is a misstep that, while perhaps necessary in the evolution of poor white literature, will ultimately result in another myth that cannot replace the existing stereotype of poor white trash.

As with the overly sentimental literary depictions of poor whites, attempts to celebrate the poor white by privileging the white trash stereotype have done little to weaken its hold on mainstream ideology. During the brief period in the 1970s when ambivalence toward lower class whites was the dominant cultural feeling, films such as *Walking Tall* (1972) presented poor, rural whites in a more flattering light. Kirby finds the film's resonance stemmed from "the national outrage over crime, the inadequacy of the law enforcement and penal systems, and impatience with liberal Supreme Court interpretations designed to protect the rights of the accused" (151). Buford Pusser, both a real man and a fictional gauge of the nation's feelings, leapt off the screen in a fury of righteous justice, wresting control of his community from the thugs and establishing law and order. Pusser enacts great violence, a privileged component of the white trash stereotype, but because he is not a bigot, "Southern violence was redefined, and Cash's *Savage Ideal*, thriving still, was not quite so solidly based upon the Proto-Dorian Bond of white supremacy" (Kirby 151). Had Hollywood continued this line of films, it is possible that the stereotype would have been dramatically altered, but this did not occur, and it is difficult to speculate the potential progress that was never achieved.

In the 1990s, the celebration of the poor white experienced a revival, as self-professed rednecks such as comedian Jeff Foxworthy glorified stereotypical white trash behavior and opened the way for myriad comedians, actors, and country musicians. Foxworthy, Bill Engvall,

Larry the Cable Guy, and Gretchen Wilson proudly wear the white trash moniker, and their success has forced the poor white fully into the mainstream. These entertainers purport to represent accurate portrayals of white trash life, and they are unapologetic about their unattractiveness; in fact, they revel in their undesirable attitudes and behaviors and gleefully offend elite sensibilities.

Their success is undeniable, as millions of poor whites flock to their sketch shows, movies, and concerts, willing to pay large sums of money to hear someone who “made it” tell them that they are valuable and that their transgressions are laudable. But it is exactly this monetary component that makes these entertainers’ efforts suspect. Foxworthy’s “You Might Be a Redneck” sketch has netted millions of dollars and spun into a brand of books, clothing, collectibles, and even a television show. Larry the Cable Guy and Engvall let go of Foxworthy’s coattails and created their own brands. Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” shot to the top of the billboard charts and earned several country music awards and a headlining concert tour. That these artists commodify the white trash stereotype hints at an element of calculation; poor whites now have the opportunity to celebrate themselves and their culture, but this relief is not cheap. And the entertainers always move away from their poor white communities—or build secluded fortresses meant to keep the rabble out—as soon as they begin to prosper. These (former) poor whites are able to transcend class boundaries, and their lucrative careers cast doubt on their ability to represent the very people with whom they claim alliance.

Another problem with celebrating the white trash stereotype is identified by Annalee Newitz, who notes that “preemptive self-hatred can confirm one’s sense of superiority. White supremacy and nihilism are mutually determining, contradictory, aspects of white identity...No one can insult you if you’ve insulted yourself first; and no one can threaten you with extinction if

you've asked for it already" (*White Trash* 147). This assessment echoes the self-loathing we see in Crews, an ingrained hatred of the very characteristics poor whites today are attempting to incorporate into their identities. Wilson's most popular song, for example, boasts "I'm a redneck woman/ I ain't no high class broad/ I'm just a product of my raisin'/ I say 'Hey ya'll' and 'Yee-haw.'" Her catchphrases are absurd and laughable, but the most disturbing aspect of this song is that it is wholly class aware. Wilson knows that her behaviors are transgressive, and that they relegate her to a low status, but rather than confront this head-on, she pitifully tries to assert that she does not want to be part of upper-class society. Her boast ends up seeming more like a schoolyard self-defense mechanism than an enlightened evaluation of her status. The irony, of course, is that, unlike her target audience, this redneck woman has the financial means to become a "high class broad."

It is also problematic that the primary avenue through which white trash commendation is achieved is comedy. Foxworthy and his troupe yuk it up for their adoring fans with jokes such as "If you own a home that is mobile and five cars that aren't...you might be a redneck." Foxworthy's audience laughs, but so do elites. White trash offers an endless supply of humor, but more often than not, that humor comes at the poor white's expense. Jokes about trailers, incest, and half-wits serve to bolster the stereotype, not justify those who labor under it. Non-threatening comic poor whites have no agency, and they demonstrate that the condition of poverty breeds a class of people who should never have any. The bumbling idiot jokester is barely human, and fit only to entertain us with his ridiculous behavior. Larry the Cable Guy, the poster boy for the comic poor white, keeps his act in front of the camera, from comedy shows to movies to late-night talk shows, wearing his cut-off shirt and trucker hat and using an

exaggerated drawl as he relates his hillbilly exploits, but, like Foxworthy and Wilson, this persona does not make it to the bank.

Mainstream culture hungrily devours poor white trash in the entertainment industry, and the abundance of poor whites on TV continues to grow, as evidenced by CMT reality series like *Pimp My Truck* and *My Big Redneck Wedding*. The latter series, hosted by Tom Arnold, former husband of Roseanne Barr, who herself found fame in the 1990s as the matriarch of the (Northern) white trash Connor family on *Roseanne*, follows engaged couples as they plan their weddings. The series is short on class and long on camouflage, hay bales, and taxidermied varmints, and Arnold delivers one carefully crafted redneck joke after another. The laughter is always at the couple's expense.

Perhaps the worst effect of glorifying the stereotype is that it rewards undesirable behavior. The poor white consumer's role models privilege the very behavior that elites identify as proof of the stereotype's legitimacy. This same phenomenon occurs in urban culture as well, with gangster rappers rhapsodizing about drugs and violence and objectifying women. Both the white trash celebrant and the gangster rapper present a deviant culture as normative or privileged, and the underprivileged, who lack positive representation, uphold them as examples to be emulated. Instead of providing an outlet for outrage and helplessness, these figures perpetuate the exact ideologies that harm the lower class and minorities.

These problematic representations make *Bloodroot* an important text. Greene's characters are not deranged, and neither are they comic. They are simply human beings, and they represent the best and the worst of American society. Greene deftly explores the effects of poverty on her Appalachians, but in spite of their destitution, she does not allow them to enact stereotypical behavior. Rather, she shows the ways in which poverty psychologically damages the individual

and limits possibilities for personal growth or achievement. There are very few stereotypical poor whites in the novel, and those who do appear stand in stark contrast to the majority of the lower-class characters because they are wholly responsible for their behaviors.

Myra Lamb is raised by her grandmother Byrdie on Bloodroot Mountain after the death of her parents, Kenny and Clio Mayes. Kenny is white trash in the stereotypical sense, as Byrdie reveals that “I reckon nary one of them has ever set foot in a church house, but they sure do spend plenty of time in the jailhouse. About every week you’ll see one of their names in the paper, picked up for drunk driving or writing bad checks or shoplifting...they was lazy, too” (53-54). This assessment, the only critique of poor whites in the novel, is similar to Ellen Chesser’s in *The Time of Man*, as both women go beyond class conditions to evaluate poor whites. Byrdie emphasizes the Mayes’s behavior because it is oppositional to the expected behavior in her poor white community. The family has a bad reputation because they are deviant, and Byrdie does not even hint that this is acceptable or justified. Kenny’s death before the novel opens fortunately renders him silent, and he does not contaminate Greene’s presentation of moral lower-class whiteness.

The only other mention of class also comes from Byrdie, this time as a scathing critique of the most privileged family in town, the Cochrans. As a young woman, Byrdie works as a housekeeper for Barbara Cochran, who “put on airs” and “talked to me real sweet, the same way she spoke to her little house dog” (Greene 36). Barbara’s husband Bucky is a prominent dairy farmer, and the Cochrans are “the richest people I knowed” (Greene 36). Their status as farmers does not bind them to the lower class because Bucky was born into a wealthy family and chose his occupation. The Cochrans are viewed as intruders, a twist on Faulkner’s Snopes invaders, not because of their economic superiority, but because they are calculating and

condescending. Byrdie acknowledges that money creates status, but she asserts that it does not necessarily produce “class” as a characteristic. In fact, it is the Cochrans who are the undesirables; Bucky has no respect for the land or the people who live on it, and his presence is disruptive: “Used to be the church’d hold baptisms over at Slop Creek...but they had to quit after Bucky came in with his spotted heifers and dirtied up the waters” (Greene 36). The lower-class whites are not concerned about their status until the Cochrans impose their elite value system upon them. Byrdie never believes that she is inferior, but she recognizes that Barbara relegates Byrdie to the status of a domesticated animal. Both Barbara and Byrdie make value judgments about poor white trash, but while Byrdie associates the epithet with inappropriate behavior, Barbara proscriptively applies negative value based on overarching class conditions.

The Cochrans instill their ideologies into their children, who learn to assess worth through financial power. The dairy farm is already a foul polluter of the community when Bucky’s adult sons begin poultry farming. The stench and filth of the Cochran farm offends the lower class and contaminates the environment, but its unattractiveness does not touch the Cochrans’ vaulted estimations of themselves or their status. In another inversion of the myth of elite white supremacy, Byrdie finds a causal relationship between wealth and undesirable behavior; it is not poverty that causes the lower class to enact poor choices, but rather wealth that encourages the upper class to adopt wrong behavior. The Cochrans’ affluence does not denote superiority; instead, it privileges chaotic ruptures in the established lower-class order. Their financial superiority creates a false sense of authority that prompts Byrdie to note, “[t]hat’s how them Cochrans are. It don’t matter to them about their neighbors, as long as they’re raking in the money” (Greene 36).

Greene uses the rest of the novel to explore the hardships of poverty, not as they pertain to class construction, but in the limits they impose on the lower class from within. When Myra is a child on the mountain, Byrdie recognizes the suffocating restrictions of economic disadvantage as they trap her granddaughter. Even though their home is a safe space, it is also constrictive because it is the only space the family can inhabit. Byrdie senses Myra's frustration and says that, "[s]he didn't run off once she got bigger, but she'd set on the back steps and chew her fingernails to the bloody quick, looking off in the woods like she didn't even know she was doing it. I'd feel like squalling, watching her gnaw at herself that way, because I knew what it meant" (Greene 63). Byrdie empathizes with Myra because she, too, has suffered from the oppressive conditions of poverty. As a child, Byrdie's feet itched at night (Greene 15), as she longed to flee her environment, and when she is old enough to go to work for Barbara Cochran, "[e]very chance I got I'd sneak and spin [the family's] globe and run my fingers over the shapes" (Greene 27). Byrdie wants to escape the material circumstances that suppress her, but she is helpless to act. Her marriage to Macon Lamb, whose birthmark reminds her of the islands on the Cochrans' globe, soothes her frustration, and when Macon takes her to Bloodroot Mountain, she "decided this was as foreign a ground as my feet would touch. From then on the soles of [my feet] quit itching" (Greene 34). Byrdie is fortunate that her marriage contents her, but even though she claims she was satisfied, there are still hints of yearning: "Up until [Macon] died I had that island [birthmark] to run my fingers over whenever I wanted to" (Greene 27).

Myra, too, searches for freedom, but her marriage is not so fortunate. She falls in love with John Odom, a town boy whose father owns the local hardware store. The Odom family is rumored to have amassed sizable wealth, but the patriarch, Frank, lives like a miser and exploits his sons' labor in the family business. The acknowledgement of unproven wealth places John in

a tenuous position between classes, but he is as frustrated as Myra by the constraints of disadvantage. John's father is an abusive husband who probably killed his wife, and John begins to enact the only behavior he knows shortly after his marriage to Myra. When his abuse becomes intolerable, Myra attacks him with an axe and leaves him for dead, running back to the sanctuary of Bloodroot Mountain, where she gives birth to Johnny and Laura. In order to protect them from the Odom family, Myra hides them away on the mountain for eight years, and they become as wild as the animals in the hills. The children are both victimized and protected by their isolation; they are, like Byrdie and Myra before, trapped in their underprivileged location, but they are also shielded from the danger to which their status makes them vulnerable.

Leigh Gilmore's study of *Bastard Out of Carolina* identifies the "dominant construction" of law and patriarchy (13) that render Bone both a victim and an object to whom justice and protection is denied. Gilmore cites Peter Goodrich's *Oedipus Lex* to reveal the veiled trauma inherent in law, namely that, while law is endowed with attributes of "positive value," it actually "hides innumerable traumas of enforcement and powerlessness" (50). Myra's position parallels Bone's, as both women are denied protection under the law. Myra cannot protect Johnny and Laura from her husband's patriarchal authority, and she cannot seek aid from the law because her poverty enforces silence. Her only choice is to hide them on the mountain.

An unfortunate trip to town, in which John's brother Hollis sees the twins, shatters the peace on the mountain. Already only tenuously connected to reality, Myra suffers a psychological break that forever disconnects her from her children. With Byrdie dead, the twins raise themselves as Myra grows wild, spending most of her time roaming the mountain (Greene 92). Because they have been exposed, and because Myra cannot hope for legal protection, the

mountain becomes more of a prison than the crawl space under the house in town where John used to trap her. Myra cannot cope with this environment, and she slowly loses her sanity.

When the law does step in, it is, as Gilmore asserts, unsympathetic and biased. The sheriff and Children's Services arrive to take the twins, and Myra enacts a ritualized flagellation that displays the depths of her despair:

Mama stood up and started walking back and forth...She cracked her knuckles and tore at her fingernails with her teeth. After a while she got to muttering under her breath...she didn't sound like a person anymore...Slobber strung down her chin. She walked back and forth faster and faster until she was just about running. Then she was yanking at her hair. Clumps of it trailed from her fingers. (Greene 102)

Myra's powerlessness reduces her to the state of a caged animal, as Greene achieves where Caldwell fails to demonstrate the ravages of poverty with sympathetic horror. Myra is, naturally, taken to an asylum in Nashville, and Johnny and Laura are placed in foster care, three victims of an economic system that enforces their voicelessness and then punishes them for it.

When Johnny and Laura take over the narrative, they relate their agonizing experiences as orphans and wards of the state. There is one advantage to their new surroundings: they are no longer steeped in poverty. Johnny explains that "[w]e had gone to bed hungry so many times on the mountain, unable to sleep at night for the pain in our empty stomachs" (Greene 105). While their hunger is partly due to Myra's negligence, the root cause is their underprivileged circumstances, and physical nourishment does nothing to alleviate the isolation they feel. Johnny reacts to his situation with rage, and he spends most of his adolescence in juvenile detention. Laura is more docile, and she marries Clint Blevins in the hopes of creating a loving and stable

environment. When Clint commits suicide, however, she is left pregnant and alone. She has lost contact with her brother, and she is desperately poor. Like her mother and the rest of the lower class, she cannot find aid from the government.

When she first becomes pregnant, Laura visits the Health Department for prenatal care because “[w]hen you don’t have much money, there’s not a lot of choice where you go to the doctor” (Greene 172). The physician is unpleasant and condescending, and Laura surmises that “he was just there because he had to be” (Greene 172). After Clint’s death, Laura is unable to keep her appointments for a time, but when she goes back, the doctor does not care about her excuses. Laura is thrilled to know that her baby is healthy, but the doctor saps her joy by threatening her with “negligence” (Greene 172). Laura’s experience comes full-circle to her mother’s, with the state bearing down on them and trying to interfere. Laura’s poverty makes her vulnerable, and she begins to both understand Myra’s insanity and to fear that she will emulate it.

Laura’s feelings about federal aid resists Cash’s depictions of lazy poor whites during the New Deal. Her friend Zelda offers to help her apply for government assistance, but Laura “couldn’t hardly stand to think about it. The state had been keeping me up just about all my life and I wanted to provide for the baby on my own” (Greene 173). Her determination is not met with approval, however; after she gives birth, another doctor visits her in the hospital. Laura senses his hostility: “He’d ask me slow questions, like I wouldn’t understand if he didn’t form the words real careful with his mouth. I knowed he thought I was dumb” (Greene 174-175). The state’s involvement in Laura’s maternity constitutes the second intrusion in as many generations, and, just like Myra, Laura loses her baby.

But Greene refuses to permanently locate her characters within a repressive system, and Johnny and Laura represent the possibility of poor white renewal and triumph over destitution.

Their journey is arduous and filled with missteps, but both learn the value of resistance and the benefit of solidarity. Johnny, who “had always wanted to hurt someone” finds that “it was no good” (Greene 182). Like Bone’s, Johnny’s adolescent violence has only reinforced his oppression, and he seeks out his sister, no longer willing to run from his past. When he visits Laura, in jail for assaulting the Children’s Services employee who takes her son, Johnny finds that “I was beginning to see then what I have learned now. It is not forgetting that heals. It is remembering” (Greene 192). For Johnny and Laura, that remembering signals a return to Bloodroot Mountain and a reunion with Myra. The twins have spent most of their lives trying to forget their mother and their home, but they finally understand that abandoning these fundamental aspects of their identity gives their economic circumstances mastery. Johnny and Laura recognize the wisdom of Myra’s unspoken prophecy at the end of the novel; when a young Laura views the world below the mountain and asks if she can “go down yonder,” Myra says yes, “[b]ut you’ll come back. Just like me, you’ll always come back” (Greene 273).

Although the three generations before them succumb to the material conditions of their existence, Johnny and Laura reject the notion that they can be no more than what poverty allows. When Johnny learns that Laura has a son, “[i]t seemed I could feel some old part of myself dissolving into smoke and ash” (Greene 191), and he vows to help Laura get him back. This generation of poor whites will not accept outside rule because their domination yields only misery. They alone must control their circumstances and overcome the strictures of poverty. Together they will create a new and better life for themselves and their families, one that does not labor under false notions of value. The wounds of the past and the fear of a future of repetitive exclusion and silence are erased as Johnny narrates the twin’s final conversation in the novel:

After a while, Laura asked, “Do you still believe there’s such a thing as curses?”

I didn’t have to think about it. “No,” I said. “Not anymore.”

“I don’t either.” (Greene 191)

Johnny’s imaginary return to the mountain, as he sits across the glass from Laura in the jail, places his sister “back in our woods, and...stood her on a mossy log with her arms held out for balance...I shut my eyes and pretended we were high on a rock over the bluff again, my tongue singing with the tartness of the berries she brought me” (Greene 192). Johnny affirms ownership over a poor white sanctuary that includes but is not limited to their Appalachian home, and in the last scene, Johnny, Laura, and baby Sunny enter Myra’s asylum freed from the manacles of stereotyped bondage that have heretofore plagued the entire lower class.

Greene’s assertion of poor white agency negates the condescending notion of lower-class helplessness and the stereotypical claim of poor white culpability. Of all of the texts I have analyzed, Greene’s stands out as the most successful and persuasive evaluation of poor white culture. By eschewing conventional class constructs and locating her poor whites both within and outside of the economic hierarchy while persistently critiquing poverty itself, Greene offers a view of poor whites thoroughly removed from the elite myth of poor white trash. And because her characters do not incorporate the myth of inferiority, we do not read them as Others. Because stereotypes are foregrounded by the necessity of an Other for the purpose of flattering in-groups by comparison, Greene’s technique effectively shuts down this process. Fully realized poor whites do not have to prove their value to the reader or the outside community; their existence is proof enough.

The work of poor white authors like Dorothy Allison and Amy Greene have had a profound impact on Southern literature. By drawing attention to the plight of the poor, lower-class authors have been able to confront the elite myth of poor white inferiority and assert the dignity and value that fictive poor white constructions have withheld from the disadvantaged class. Since the 1990s, depictions of poor whites have begun to rewrite the myths of undesirable and unattractive figures and replace them with neutral analyses that seek to understand the causal relationship between poverty and ideology. While popular culture has been slow to adopt this position, as evidenced by my analysis of *Justified* in the first chapter, the literature of the South is leading the way toward a new poor white paradigm.

While not specifically geared toward the lower class, scholarly interest in whiteness studies, which began in the 1990s and paved the way for the development of academic departments and university courses devoted to whiteness studies, explored the divisions within the white race and necessarily adopted a “focus on the historical development of race-based social domination in the United States and [an exploration of] what the legacies of white supremacy had meant not just for people of color, but for whites as well” (*White Trash* 4). This trend in scholarship is beginning to illuminate the problematic disparities between the myth of privileged and hegemonic whiteness, and the reality of scores of disfranchised whites who have for centuries been denied representation. Along with Allison and Greene, Southern writers such as Pat Carr, Lee Smith, Larry Brown, and Fred Chapell have offered critics a wealth of material through which to explore more balanced treatments of the poor.

Now, in the first decades of the 21st century, the poor white stereotype is ripe for deconstruction. More than ever before, the nation appears ready to reevaluate its long history of discrimination and intolerance, and to offer a genuine, if hesitant, opportunity for poor white

self-representation. The myth of poor white trash is by no means eradicated, and there are still regions in which the elite myth of upper-class white exceptionalism is a fundamental aspect of American ideology, but for every two series like *Justified*, there is at least one *Saving Grace*, which subtly threatens the notions of supremacy and inferiority.

It is too soon to predict exactly which tactics Southern authors will utilize to confront and rebuke the white trash stereotype, but three things are certain. First, the tactics must be varied, just as the elite approaches to poor whites have been, because the myriad uses of the myth have fostered too many versions of trash to simply tackle one aspect. These new tactics must also attempt a wide range of representative poor whites; some must be too flattering, and some too unforgiving, because the past is littered with both. Chesnut reveals the initial division between poor whites and the nation, Caldwell and Agee demonstrate the way that authors have polarized the poor white, Dickey represents the abusive reaction to too hasty sympathy or acceptance, and Crews exemplifies the resultant insecurity and self-loathing that these standards engender. To achieve an accurate picture, authors must answer the insidious charges beneath these previous uses. Last, no matter which avenues for exploration these emerging voices choose, they must be thoroughly Southern. The opposition first between North and South prior to the Revolution, and later between urban upper class and rural lower class within the region, necessitates a wholly Southern rebuttal due to the deep divisions of Southern class structures and the myth of white trash's solid reputation as an exclusively Southern product. The myth of the poor white is multi-layered and spans generations, but its roots are firmly centered below the Mason-Dixon, and so must be the voices of dissent.

If, as Carr claims, Southern progress and multiculturalism foster a resistance to the “common underlying myth” of elite white supremacy (167), there is great reason to hope that the nation will shortly reject the myth of poor white trash as well.

Where are We Going? The Future of Trash

From its first use, the phrase “white trash” has served to belittle and ostracize a select group of whites, the economically vulnerable and the politically powerless. The function of white trash has changed over a century according to the needs of those in power, who have variously utilized it to justify, protect, and perpetuate their own dominance. Along the way, it has promoted race antagonism, particularly between poor whites and blacks, and worked against national efforts toward economic uplift. Rather than reject the harmful stereotype, Americans have embraced it, taken it for granted, and accepted it as fact long after the phenomena of political correctness has told us this should not be so.

What does this mean, then, for poor whites? For elites? For African-Americans? For all of us? As we move through this 21st century and beyond, how will the stereotype affect our understanding of, our response to, race and class? Unfortunately, the future looks bleak. Three important determinants point to this conclusion: the attempts by poor whites to co-opt the phrase; the growing bias against the South at-large; and the spread of white trash out of the region.

Efforts to wrest control of a stereotype from those who wield it are nothing new. The pejorative “nigger” has been embraced by some in the African-American community, who argue that their use of it removes the power it may have in racist mouths. Many members of the rap community use the term as a stand-in for “friend” or “brother,” words meant to indicate connection. Rapper KRS-One argued that “[i]n another 5 to 10 years, you're going to see youth in elementary school spelling it out in their vocabulary tests. It's going to be that accepted by the society" (*New York Times*). The problem with this prediction is that it was made in 1993, so while the theory is still popular, it has not borne itself out. Instead, the word has continued to be as damaging as Langston Hughes noted in his 1940 *The Big Sea*: “Used rightly or wrongly,

ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter... The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.”

Even when African-Americans assert that, by making the words their own, they achieve a measure of control over their meanings, the stance is problematic. The first is that there is no consensus among either group about the efficacy of such a strategy. For all of those in the African-American community who believe that co-optation will neutralize the word's negative implications, still others argue that it is impossible to undo the work of over a century and to make benign what has heretofore been hateful and hurtful. Then there is the question of how far reclaiming a word can go. Referring to one's friends as “niggers” may lessen the sting of the epithet in some ways, but it does nothing to combat the use of the word by those intend to wound. In addition, there will always be conflicting sets of rules about who is allowed to use racist or sexist language, no matter the motivation, and there is great risk of offending the very groups who have sought to escape discrimination.⁹

Similar troubles surround poor white attempts to claim “white trash” for their own purposes. Although the term has been employed in recent years by popular culture icons and economically disadvantaged whites alike, it has never been redefined. Even those who purport to elevate white trash adhere to the elements of the stereotype, the set of criteria written on to the word by elites. Worse, the effect of celebrating an irredeemable stigmatization may actually promote the very behaviors the stereotype is built upon. Tyler Farr's recent country hit “Redneck Crazy” (2013), for example, recounts a scorned man's revenge upon his cheating lover, including

⁹ For an example, see the conflicting opinions about Quentin Tarantino's use of the word “nigger” in *Django Unchained* (2013), particularly between the white Tarantino and African-American director Spike Lee.

stalking, heavy drinking, and potential assault. Toby Keith's "White Trash with Money" (2006) makes it perfectly clear that improvements in poor whites' economic conditions will do nothing to make them acceptable members of society. While these and numerous other examples seem to insist that there is nothing wrong about white trash, that it should no longer be viewed as an insult, they work backwards from the supposition that all of the components of the stereotype are true. In this way, they both encourage those components and surrender to them.

It is highly unlikely that the use and overuse of any slur in a positive way will do much to transform that slur into a compliment. Even a concentrated and unanimous decision on the part of poor whites to make white trash laudable will not silence those who use it to belittle and demean. In fact, quite the opposite can be predicted: white trash is already an accepted cultural marker; to increase its usage for any purpose is to make it more prevalent and to risk negating any benefits that saturation might achieve.

A second cause for alarm is the growing bias against the entire South. While the term "white trash" was initially used exclusively to describe a specific group of poor Southern whites, it has over decades been conflated with the whole region and peoples below the Mason-Dixon. Once used by upper-class whites to distinguish themselves from their perceived inferiors, white trash has transgressed economic boundaries to the extent that the South, poor or otherwise, is regularly depicted as backward, racist, and resistant to change. After the 2012 presidential election, for example, a map comparing states which favored Republican candidate Mitt Romney over the biracial Barack Obama circulated on social media sites Facebook and Twitter. This map correctly indicated the Southern states as those in which Romney was more popular. That a conservative populace would prefer a conservative president is a given, but the map had troubling insinuations, as it also highlighted the antebellum slave states; the implication, of

course, is that the only objection a red state could possibly have to Obama is his race.¹⁰ Never mind the fact that voters in the South previously supported George W. Bush, a Republican, over the white Democrat Bill Clinton—or any white Republican over a white Democrat; the attempt—or even the earnest belief—of the originators of the post, and those who reposted, was foregrounded on the charge that the entire South is narrow-minded. The political fallout of this assumption may hinder important debates about economic and foreign policy, federal aid, immigration, and the rights and obligations of citizens. The cultural damage must also be calculated, as unflattering accusations about the South at-large work against the common goals of the Union.

While it could be argued that upper-class Southern whites have reaped what they must now sow, we cannot ignore the potentially devastating impact the white trashing of the entire



Jefferson, Cord. "Commentary: Why Compare the 2012 Electoral Map to a Slave-State Map?"

BET.com. BET Interactive, LLC, 9 Nov. 2012. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.

South may have on poor whites. The rates of unemployed and underemployed workers continue to rise, as does the number of poor whites who receive federal or state aid. The abuse of prescription pain medication is on the rise, as is the production and distribution of methamphetamine. Poor Southerners—white and black—are still more likely to drop out of high school and become teenaged parents, and disproportionate numbers of poor males will find themselves in prison. I have demonstrated the way that the term “white trash” is used to blame the poor for their problems in order to withhold aid; to view the entire South as white trashed is to render all of its people undesirable and irredeemable.

The final element of my prediction moves outside of the South to encompass the nation. White trash has ceased to be an exclusively regional signifier, and this has broad-reaching and dangerous implications. The F/X drama *Justified*, which I discussed in Chapter One, is now in its sixth season. Protagonist Raylan Givens is still chasing white trash bad guys, all of whom, including the still-racist and violent rocket-launching Boyd Crowder from the first season, reside, formulate, and carry out their terrorist agendas in the South. The white trash antagonists have not changed in appearance, sensibilities, motivations, or machinations—nor would a viewership fully indoctrinated in the stereotype expect them to.

The most popular series on the network today, however, is the motorcycle club drama *Sons of Anarchy*. For six seasons, the members of the club have enacted stereotypical white trash behavior through increasingly gruesome acts of violence, misogyny and sexual promiscuity and deviance, and rampant drug or alcohol use. The Sons are, as a group, uneducated and poor, and they reject and are rejected by upper-class whites. Each season, the club revisits two sets of adversaries: the law and diversity. While they form tentative alliances, according to their

immediate needs, with each, they have no respect for either. A prominent wall in the Sons' clubhouse displays members' mug shots, and the faces in the pictures are white.

The Sons are, for the most part, on friendly terms with the Grim Bastards, an African-American motorcycle club, but that alliance is short-lived, and the racist underpinnings of the Sons of Anarchy's philosophy become clear in the fourth season, when a member is blackmailed into assisting the authorities to hide his African-American paternity. In addition, the Sons regularly battle the Niners and the Mayans, or—as they are most politely called—“black” and “brown.” The club does not reserve its judgments for African-Americans and Latinos, however; there is more than enough hate to spread to Asians, Italians, and the Irish. Their views on race closely mirror those of elite whites, as the Sons work to maintain the purity of their organization.

But the Sons are not elite whites. Lest their behavior fail to convince the audience, writer Kurt Sutter makes it explicit: in the third season, the members are identified as white trash. This pronouncement is interesting because it comes from ATF agent June Stahl, who is not upper-class but who serves as the mouthpiece and enforcement arm for a privileged agenda. Stahl's indictment is the first time the term “white trash” is used to describe anyone on the series; afterward, however, club president Jackson “Jax” Teller regularly refers to himself by the pejorative, as though Stahl has somehow enlightened him. And not once does the phrase have any celebratory or positive connotation; Jax appears to have heard it and incorporated it into his conception of himself in a singularly hopeless and self-deprecatory way.

As white trash, Jax is both responsible for and helpless to escape his life. In spite of his plans, he is inextricably tied to his club and its business, transporting guns and drugs, carrying out assassinations, making pornography, and running a brothel. All the while he must remain a step ahead of the authorities, from the local sheriff's office to the state attorney to the DEA, CIA,

and ATF. All of his efforts to extricate himself have proven futile, and he makes excuses for his inability to walk away while at the same time reveling in his bloodlust. None of the characters believe that Jax will be able to make a better life for himself, and neither do we. In fact, as the series has progressed and Jax has more clearly become white trash, we are increasingly uncertain as to whether Jax deserves the opportunity. At the end of season six, Jax is headed to prison for a potential life sentence; the only other plausible path will lead to his death.

Sons of Anarchy offers nothing novel in its approach to or depiction of white trash. All of the tired stereotypes are present, and viewers instinctively understand the poor white constructs on screen. Jax, Clay, Chibbs, Bobby, Tigg, and Juice will fight, fornicate, and flaunt their inability to function within the parameters of social and cultural acceptance. What is unsettling about the series is its setting, the fictional small town of Charming, California. White trash, it seems, has made it all the way to the West Coast.

The relative ease of relocating a once-firmly placed marker of regional unfitnes speaks to the pervasive logic of class stereotypes. White trash has grown so large that it can be applied to any group of whites, no matter their place on a map. The movement of the stereotype outside of the South jeopardizes all economically disadvantaged whites, making them vulnerable to oppression and pushing them to the fringes of society.

But it is not just whites who are in danger. Matt Wray's attempts to deconstruct the term "white trash" focuses separately on each word, finding that their combination seems incongruous. What Wray does not discuss is the way that "trash" as a marker of undesirability can be applied to any ethnicity. We do not speak of "black trash" or "Mexican trash"—not yet—but we cannot expect "white" and "trash" to be exclusively bound forever. As our nation

becomes more diverse, as the demographics shift, “trash” may more clearly and openly express what it has always been used to describe, define, and oppress: poor.

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