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“ONE OR TWO THINGS I KNOW ABOUT US:” NARRATIVE STRATEGIES FOR  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, SELF-REPRESENTATION AND HEALING IN FOUR  
MEMOIRS BY POOR-WHITE WOMEN FROM THE U.S. SOUTH

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

JOSEPH A. FARMER

AUGUST 2017

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines autobiographical writings by formerly poor white Southern women, who are rarely considered as a group and are more typically studied with “rough South” male writers, which would suggest that few women have contributed their own gendered experience to discussions of class, race, and sexuality vis-à-vis Southern poverty. Correcting this assumption, I examine formative statements by women from poor white backgrounds, including Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *Red Dirt*, Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and *Wild Card Quilt*, Dorothy Allison’s *Trash*, and Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*. Each of these writers engage in narrative strategies that do not defend a violent, masculinist Southern culture from misrepresentation by outsiders, as do male “redneck autobiographers,” but rather re-establish connections with their families, native communities, and natural environments. In the process of writing on Okies, Crackers, and “white trash,” these writers describe their transition from concealing the truth about their families out of shame to considering them autoethnographically.

Autoethnography provides the methodology by which Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, Allison and Walls write about their personal lifeworlds, a concept from phenomenology that considers the body as the locus of one’s natural, social, and cultural environment. In explicating their memoirists’ most salient themes, I employ concepts by theorists in the phenomenological tradition, including Edmund Husserl, Jurgen Habermas, R. D. Laing, Pierre Bourdieu, and Francisco Varela, who all recommend a practice of self-observation as a kind of “portable laboratory” for investigating the intersections of embodiment, habit, and history. I conclude that

the self-knowledge gained through such a practice enables each of the women in this study to find a voice in the place where she had not had one, and to write authoritatively about her respective Southern culture.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the autobiographies of four female Southern writers from poor-white backgrounds who have not previously been considered together, but who, as I will argue, merit inclusion in a comparative study. I will consider white Southern women who recount their impoverished childhoods in memoirs, autobiographies, and autobiographical fiction, including Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Red Dirt* (1997), Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (2000) and *Wild Card Quilt* (2003), Dorothy Allison's short story collection, *Trash* (1988), and Jeanette Walls's *The Glass Castle* (2005).

As this dissertation deals primarily with forms of autobiographical non-fiction writing and how it complements fiction writing, I will take a moment to differentiate among the varieties of life writing, an umbrella term that covers all the previous forms. First, "autobiography" translates to "writing" (graphy) about one's "self" (auto) or "writing a life" (bio). "Memoir" would perhaps be the most common designation for the works under discussion here. French for a "collection of memories," a "memoir" can be regarded either as a historical account of a life or a formative time in one's life, or a long essay on a given subject. *Red Dirt* for instance offers both an account of Dunbar-Ortiz's childhood and early adulthood *and*, as indicated by its subtitle, "Growing up Okie," an essay on the experience of the group of white Southerners called "Okies" and their identity formation prior to, during, and after the Dust Bowl. Janisse Ray does

something very similar with her *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, an account of her Scots-Irish ancestors who settled in south Georgia and of her own childhood within that milieu. The term “autobiography” is usually taken as synonymous with “memoir,” or the former is accorded more literary value, but I do not distinguish between “literary autobiography” and non-literary autobiographies, as my reading of the works under discussion is more concerned with narrative strategies for how each represents the self or the life contained in the word “autobiography.”

A third form of life writing, “autoethnography,” has become a common form of qualitative research in the social sciences and humanities. One can write the autoethnography of an academic, for instance, or an autoethnography of a war veteran. I understand the term to mean an ethnography of one’s own group, such as Appalachian Southerners or Georgia Crackers, that explains that group to others. The postcolonial critic Mary Louise Pratt offers a more pointed definition for autoethnography:

If ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. (35)

Autoethnography, as considered by autobiography scholar Nellie McKay as well, is first and foremost a defiant genre that not only talks about but talks *back to* one’s dominant culture in specific ways. McKay reads Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for instance, as an autoethnographic text that presents a “fascinating transgressive construction of a black female narrative self” (97). “In a subversion of the race-representative text of oppression,” McKay argues, “*Dust Tracks* breaks with some of the rhetorical patterns of the slave narrative tradition in favor of a strategy that frees black autobiography from the ideological supremacy of

race” (101). Although he does not use the term, James Watkins is essentially describing autoethnography when he writes of female Southern autobiographers that their work rejects both “restrictive models of female behavior” and “monolithic constructions of ‘the South’ and ‘the southerner,’ thus redefining the region in ways that more closely resemble its true heterogeneity” (447).

All autoethnographies are life writing, though not all memoirs or autobiographies are autoethnographies. I characterize Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, and Allison as exemplifying a “deep” autoethnography that corresponds to the definitions put forth by Pratt, McKay, and Watkins. In contrast, Jeannette Walls does not necessarily analyze her experience for its broader connections to the cultural, political, or social meanings that contextualize it. With its more straightforward, episodic narrative, *The Glass Castle* presents a memoir in the more typical understanding of the word.

Having clarified these terms, my project begins at the intersection of women’s autobiographical studies and studies of the poor-white in Southern writing, along with the complementary field of whiteness studies. The field of women’s autobiographical theory emerged as a response to discussions of the autobiographical self by male critics like Georg Gusdorf, who insisted in his essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” that “autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist,” and that an essential prerequisite for autobiography is “a conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (quote in Friedman, 72). In other words, Gusdorf considered every man an island, a “unit” of society but an isolated unit, separate, independent, and somehow free from the influence of the collective (Friedman 166). Such ideas, according to Susan Stanford Friedman, “raise serious theoretical problems for critics who

recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples” (72).

In her essay “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” Friedman contends that although Gusdorf contributed the essential insight that narrative selves are “constructed” through writing and not simply recollected through memory, his “emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography . . . excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism” (75). According to Friedman, early statements of male-centered autobiographical theory do not take into account the gendered differences in the way male and female autobiographers construct their narrative worlds; they do not recognize, for instance, “the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women’s self-definition” (79). Friedman reverses Gusdorf’s suppositions about the integrity of the narrative self:

Autobiography is possible when the individual does not feel *herself* to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community . . . [where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. The very sense of *identification, interdependence, and community* that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman’s identity. (75)

In *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*, Sheila Rowbotham argues that women’s autobiography cannot exist outside either the category of “woman” or a sense of identity predicated on their difference from, and relations to, men: “a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman,

that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture” (75). According to Rowbotham, women experience a gendered variation of W.E.B. Dubois’s “double-consciousness,” by which they become aware of “the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription” (75). Just as a collective and interdependent sense of identity can be a “source of strength and transformation,” however, Friedman argues that this dual consciousness is not an entirely negative situation as “cultural representations of women lead not only to women’s alienation, but also to the potential for a ‘new consciousness of self’” (75).

This dissertation asks whether poor-white women have been denied access to both the coherent, collective identity and the “new consciousness of self” that Friedman and Rowbotham describe due to their investment in the social construct of whiteness. As Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz explain in the introduction to their collection, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, poor whites in America have had little incentive to self-identify as poor as this would imply their differentiation from a blanket majority identity and a whiteness that would prefer to remain invisible. Film critic Richard Dyer writes about white people, “because we are seen as white, we characteristically see ourselves and believe ourselves seen as unmarked, unspecific, universal” (45). Ross Chambers likewise observes that “there are plenty of unmarked categories (maleness, heterosexuality, and middle-classness being obvious ones), but whiteness is perhaps the primary unmarked and so unexamined—let’s say blank—category” (“The Unexamined” 189). Wray and Newitz likewise discuss the “unexamined” investment in whiteness and how those invested have little incentive to relinquish their unmarked status:

It has been the invisibility (for whites) of whiteness that has enabled white Americans to stand as unmarked, normative bodies and social selves, the standard against which all

others are judged (and found wanting). As such, the invisibility of whiteness is an enabling condition for both white supremacy/privilege and race-based prejudice. Making whiteness visible to whites—exposing the discourses, the social and cultural practices, and the material conditions that cloak whiteness and hide its dominating effects—is a necessary part of any anti-racist project. (4)

Partly because Southern poverty presents such a problematic marker of class status which defies the idea of a monolithic whiteness and thus makes whiteness visible, poor whites in the South and the nation at large have historically been construed as “bad subjects” by the mainstream culture.

In his chapter “‘All Manner of Defeated, Shiftless, Shifty, Pathetic and Interesting Good People’: Autobiographical Encounters with Poverty,” John Inscoe considers how autobiographies and memoirs reveal experiential divisions between white Southerners on the basis of class rather than race. Inscoe enumerates recollections of poor whites from writers of a higher socioeconomic class, such as Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin and William Styron, who observed poverty in their neighbors and classmates and who, even after the Great Depression, were confused by the presence of white poverty amid the descendants of the planter class. Inscoe observes that this reality caused Lumpkin and others to develop a “racial consciousness” that developed into a racial conscience, as “seeing the poor of their own race” led them also to consider “the plight of African-Americans in their midst” (76). The fact remains however that until the late twentieth century, such “racial conversion” narratives were still the province of a higher class of Southerners who ascribed racial prejudice and a host of other negative traits to poor whites, as indicated by the Ralph McGill quote which Inscoe takes for his title—“all manner of defeated, shiftless, shifty, pathetic [however] interesting good people.”

Historically, poor-white women in particular have been burdened with stereotypical representations that have threatened their claim to an unmarked whiteness. Ashley Craig Lancaster explores a few of these stereotypes in her study, *The Angelic Mother and the Predatory Seductress: Poor-white Women in Literature of the Great Depression*. According to Lancaster, Southern novels of the 1920's, written by women like Ellen Glasgow, Edith Summers Kelley, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, featured poor and working-class female protagonists who attained a significant measure of independence outside the roles of mother and wife. Following the Great Depression, however, "when the United States seemed to be losing its identity," the physical health and eugenics movements offered "a remedy for this suspected 'diseased' society, and that remedy was found in the body of the poor-white woman" (4). Lancaster concludes that, as bearers of children and culture for the nation at large, Southern poor-white women were presented either "as altruistic mother figures, helping to save America's downtrodden lower class, or as sexual degenerates, threatening to destroy American society" (9). The former was praised as preservers of the family and by extension the white race, while the latter were vilified as feeble-minded "sexual predators" (18). This familiar dichotomy would likely resonate with African-American women as well, who were similarly circumscribed by the binary categories of the "mammy" or the "whore" that emerged during the antebellum era.

The investment in whiteness, however, has often prevented Southern poor-white women from reaching across the lines of color and class to African-American women, their "half-sisters of history," to quote a study from the 1990s. As Nellie McKay argues, "nineteenth century ideologies of white womanhood enabled white women, from their own subordinate position, to negotiate a relationship with patriarchy that joined their class interests with those of white men and actively discouraged them from forging alliances with black women" ("Narrative Self" 97).



“There is no monolithic representation of black identity,” McKay contends, “and the richness of the autobiographical tradition includes its multiplicity and complexity of narrative strategies and its various forms of self-representation that delineate differences among and between black women and men” (97). These differences, McKay continues, can be traced back to the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Whereas Frederick Douglass tends toward dramatic displays of their freedom and agency intricately tied up with his masculinity, as displayed in his fight with the slave-breaker, Edward Covey, in Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet (or Linda Brent) demonstrates her agency by challenging her owner, Dr. Flint, rhetorically and in private (87). McKay explains that one is a characteristically masculine and the other a characteristically feminine approach to the transition from slave to freedom (97-98).

The female African-American autobiographical tradition differs from that of white women as well, as it has, since its earliest instances, valorized “peer group and intergenerational bonds between black women” (McKay 101), while poor-white women would seem comparatively to have languished in isolation from each other as well as from other women across the color line. This is a problem addressed in a 1977 essay by Mab Segrest, a hero and fellow traveler of Dorothy Allison’s. In “Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness,” Segrest examines the prevalence of the lonely “spinster” figure in the fiction of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Carson McCullers. “Spinster” is typically a derogatory term for an isolated woman, a woman without a husband, or “old maid,” but Segrest characterizes the Southern “spinning-woman” as someone who not only weaves the material adornments of a Southern culture (clothing, quilting, etc.) but also, metaphorically, weaves (forming, shaping, and creating) stories about that culture. Quoting the feminist writer Mary Daly, Segrest revises the spinster figure:

a woman whose occupation is to spin participates in the whirling movement of creation. She who has chosen her Self, who defines her Self, by choice, neither in relation to children, nor to men, who is Self-identified, who is a Spinster, a whirling dervish, spinning a new time-space. (32)

The space of writing, and life writing in particular, offers women a solitude not characterized by a “frustrated longing for male attention,” as in the Southern gothic fiction Segrest discusses, but by the need for an introspective room of one’s own, a space that “puts each woman in touch with her inner self” (35). From this space, the female Southern storyteller as spinning woman may purposely stitch herself into the patterns of her Southern family, culture, and region.

The poor-white autobiographical tradition is still relatively young, and has until the twenty-first century been dominated by male writers. Harry Crews’s *A Childhood: The Autobiography of a Place*, Rick Bragg’s *All Over But the Shoutin’*, and Will D. Campbell’s *Brother to a Dragonfly* have remained on the short list of major statements from formerly poor-white men, with J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* a recent addition. James Watkins gathers these titles under the rubric of the “redneck autobiography” (21). This sub-genre, as typified by Harry Crews, is characterized by stories of an embattled masculinity, fighting and alcoholism, and the relationships, whether between father and mother, father and son, or brother and brother, that suffer from these “excesses” (21). The redneck autobiography seeks also to contextualize the lives of Southern poor-white males within a hardscrabble, largely agricultural existence that severely limits their options. “These were not violent men,” Crews writes in *A Childhood*, “but their lives were full of violence” (7). The redneck autobiography, as Watkins explains, “seeks to resist through the autobiographical ‘I’ negative and demeaning stereotypes resulting from others’ representations of their group” (21). “For the majority of redneck autobiographers,” however,

“this process of discursive resistance has involved a cold, unsparing look at the human costs of trying to live up to the excesses associated with lower-class southern white masculinity” (21).

Watkins writes that “like the slave narrative and its post-emancipation counterparts clearly indicate, marginalized groups within the South have found self-representation to be an especially useful way to counter ‘official’ histories written by those who wish to minimize social or racial conflict and maintain the status quo” (21). If poor and working-class white women present an unlikely group for solidarity and coherence, the writing that results from such introspection presents strong evidence for a nascent tradition of writing by Southern women from poor-white backgrounds, who resist the temptation to hide their minoritized experience behind the mask of white-skin privilege—women who break the silences regarding the female experience of race and class in the South.

Southern literary studies have tended to cluster male writers together more frequently as a group; there seems to be no exact equivalent to the “redneck autobiography,” for instance, as a collective term for writing by poor-white women. Watkins categorizes Dorothy Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* as a redneck autobiography, another way perhaps of defining women, in Rowbotham’s words, “according to a dominant male culture.” Watkins is correct to suggest that poor-white female autobiographers also demonstrate a defensive posture in explaining the South to non-Southerners and those above their class, though in poor-white women this defensiveness may also come from their inability to see themselves reflected in what Friedman refers to as the cultural “hall of mirrors” (75).

The poor-white women in this dissertation have felt the need to “shatter” those mirrors in order to “project [their] own image onto history” (27). Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, for instance, writes:

As a student of history, having completed a master's degree and PhD in the discipline, I am grateful for all that I learned from my professors and from the thousands of texts I studied. But I did not gain the perspective presented in this book from those professors or studies. This came from outside the academy. (*History* xi)

Nor does popular culture offer any correctives to the omissions of official history: as Dorothy Allison writes, “my family's lives were not on television, not in books, not even comic books” (*Skin* 17). This lack of representation led Dunbar-Ortiz, Allison, and others to pen accounts of growing up poor-white and female that counter the misrepresentations of their group with which they have self-identified—whether “Okies,” “Crackers,” “white trash,” or the homeless. The depth of their knowledge and experience enables these writers confidently to assert that they too know “two or three things for sure” about their poor-white people (Allison), that there are “one or two things I know about us” (Dunbar-Ortiz), and that “what I come from has made me who I am” (Ray).

Each of these women had to mediate the construction of a narrative self under the stifling pressures of her materially, psychologically, and experientially impoverished world. Dunbar-Ortiz, for instance, grew up “repressed” in Eisenhower-era Oklahoma; Ray was confined by a father whose fear of the natural world would not let her roam the woods like a “young mammal” (*Ecology* 121); Allison felt “imprisoned” in [her] own body” by her stepfather’s sexual abuse (*Two or Three* 63); and Jeannette Walls was “caught” by her parents’ transient lifestyle that precluded her obtaining any measure of security or stability. Although they share much in common with Crews and other redneck autobiographers, Allison and her contemporaries possess aims that differ from those of their male counterparts, stemming from their need to clear a space not limited to their claustrophobic roles as wives and daughters, a room from which to spin their

own stories to replace the narratives they inherited from their families.

The poor-white women in Lancaster's study were stripped of their ability to exist outside of their spousal and maternal roles. The "angelic mother" guarded and led her family into racial uplift, while the sexually permissive "seductress" threatened to sink it into poverty and dissolution. For the life writers in this dissertation however, family itself is considered the problem. As the original cultural sphere where meaning is generated and circulated well beyond its physical proximity, family constitutes a block to historical understanding in Dunbar-Ortiz; a threat to mental health in Ray; a danger to emotional and physical well-being in Allison and Walls; and an impediment to individuation and selfhood in all. These four writers define their families not only autoethnographically—for an outside audience—but also for themselves, in order to determine whether or not they are willing to let the families they have defined define them in turn. They are not entirely eccentric in respect to these families, however, in that they find it impossible, if not undesirable, to write from a position completely outside them. Like taking the poison for the antidote, each writer instead turns the culprit of the poor-white family into a resource for self-knowledge that leads in turn to healing, reconciliation, and group cohesion.

In order to accomplish these aims, the first three writers follow a series of steps in their respective autobiographies, with Walls differing from the others in some key aspects. The first step involves the demythologizing of the poor-white Southern sub-group, a dispelling of both the myths surrounding that culture and those myths that arise from within the culture itself. Secondly, the writing of family autoethnography offers a means of coming to terms with personal history, the circumstances of poverty, violence, abuse, or neglect that characterized the author's childhood years, as well as the insularity, racism, or religious fundamentalism endemic

to her native culture. Finally, she utilizes the space of life writing to engage in an alchemy of personal transformation that transmutes the negative emotions of anger into pride, self-worth, and literary success. Each writer effects a reconciliation with her family and native culture that retains its more positive elements, spinning the gold of relationship, community, and self-knowledge out of the dross of violence, bitter resentment, racial prejudice, and willful ignorance of the historical realities concerning her class position.

This alchemy translates to a weaving of “inner parts” that outlasts and shows through the outer “coat” designed for poor-white women by the outside world. As Dorothy Allison puts it, “I’d rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me” (*Two or Three* 71). If the outer parts of one’s identity are woven from the mythology surrounding the Southern poor, the “inner parts” are woven by their families, by their mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents as well as by friends, teachers, and lovers. In Janisse Ray, these complex inner parts correspond to her mother’s wild card quilt:

Every square was fascinating in its own way. Her quilt squares told of meekness, gentleness, long-suffering, wisdom. They saluted a strength to keep going, to put food on the table, when you didn’t know where it was coming from, to love even when things had fallen apart. The flower-spangled squares told that my mother had been through fire and was not charred. Some worked better than others, but repetition of pattern would overwhelm any one failed square . . . With my mother’s hands in a quilt, it would be well-wrought, and fine. (154)

For Dunbar-Ortiz, these hidden patterns come in shades of red, the color that represents her mother’s Native American heritage, her father’s socialist political legacy, and the soil of her native Oklahoma. For Allison and Walls, these same hidden patterns correspond to the physical

and emotional scar tissue that hides beneath the surface of her professional, adult life.

This dissertation employs several critical methodologies drawn from the fields of philosophy, sociology, and psychology in explaining how Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, Allison, and Walls represent themselves and their poor-white families and communities, and how they heal the damage done by their unacknowledged historical and familial patterns. Perhaps the most important methodology underpinning all of the autobiographies under discussion is that of autoethnography, as exemplified in chapter one by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

As opposed to Zora Neale Hurston in McKay's reading, Dunbar-Ortiz explores how her youth and education were indeed determined by the "ideological supremacy of race." Her memoir, *Red Dirt*, reveals the extent to which racial as well as class identity shaped the experience of white Southern women. As a child in 1950's Oklahoma, Dunbar-Ortiz was taught that the mythology of white supremacy was her only viable connection to her deep-Southern heritage. She later came to view the recovery of both her mother's (presumably) Cherokee heritage and her father's "Wobbly" political legacy, both suppressed before her birth, as an antidote to the white supremacy in whose name her ancestors, Ulster-Irish "foot-soldiers of empire," killed and displaced Native Americans only to be dispossessed in turn during the Great Depression. *Red Dirt* disputes the Dunbars' claim to a monolithic Southern identity based on the lie of white racial solidarity, thus exemplifying the work of autoethnography representing a marginalized group to readers outside that group, recovering the stories of family members lost to official history, and anchoring a sense of selfhood in relationship with the "other."

If Dunbar-Ortiz's Okies were the "foot soldiers of empire" (17), Janisse Ray's own Scots-Irish ancestors decimated the longleaf pine forests of the Southeast in addition to their original Native American inhabitants, drawing on a matrix of religious beliefs that justified their

dominion over the natural world. Ray demystifies the notion that the destruction of the natural world was necessary for human community to flourish, observing that this myth rather caused deleterious psychological effects on families and communities, as she demonstrates through a close and compassionate look at her own Cracker genealogy. As an antidote to the notion of a biblically granted human dominion over the non-human world, Ray grounds her ecological sensibility in a foundational counter-myth of the mutually beneficial relationship between longleaf pine and lightning, by which she seeks to co-exist with the natural world and restore the landscape of her childhood dreams for future generations of her family.

Dorothy Allison observes that in the 1960's, the Southern poor were valorized by Great Society reformers, who found it in their interest to deny the worst aspects of poor whites in order to generate awareness of their circumstances and revenue for their relief. "There was a myth of the poor in this country," Allison writes, "but it did not include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was this idea of the good poor—hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable" (*Skin* 10). Allison worked for a Social Security Administration office in Miami while writing autobiographical short stories by night that countered the official narrative promulgated by the War on Poverty. The stories that became *Trash* told the ugly truth about her family:

I understood that we were the bad poor: 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. We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful (10).

Whereas Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, and Allison each deconstruct a particular mythology



concerning the Southern poor white, Jeannette Walls provides an interesting foil to these three. In sharp contrast with Dunbar-Ortiz for instance, who writes that poor whites, “the dregs of colonialism” and “those who did not and do not ‘make it,’” present the evidence for “the lie of the American dream” (*Red Dirt* 48), Walls proclaims in an interview that her American dream is “alive and well” (Bussel, “Jeanette Walls”), and promotes a reading of her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, as proof of its survival. Walls explains how her Appalachian father and rancher’s daughter mother instilled in her the inner strength and self-esteem necessary to survive the conditions of transience, homelessness and hunger that characterized her nomadic childhood, and indeed connects these dangerous conditions with the formation of her character. In Welch, West Virginia, Walls benefited from teachers and other War on Poverty reformers who taught her how to model the “good poor,” inspired her with stories of cultural uplift through education, and encouraged her to relocate to New York City. The title of chapter four, “Operation Bookstrap,” thus refers to Walls’s construction of a narrative self that was strong enough to escape from her parents’ poverty and overcome the barriers to her dreams of stability, security, and success.

In addition to autoethnography, introduced in the first chapter, chapter two relies on the concept of the “lifeworld” as explored by the philosopher Edmund Husserl and the sociologist Jürgen Habermas. The “lifeworld” is an important concept in Husserl’s phenomenology, the study of the structures of consciousness and perception that gives as faithful an account as possible of one’s embodied, felt experience prior to scientific abstraction. For Habermas, the lifeworld is constituted by the cultural and linguistic meanings shared and communicated by its inhabitants. The lifeworld is “colonized” by “systems” (whether economic and political) whenever system imperatives shape decisions affecting the lifeworld without the consent of its inhabitants. “Lifeworld” and “system” are helpful concepts in explaining Janisse Ray’s pointed

critique of the extractive timber industry that has altered Georgia's longleaf pine ecosystem and landscapes across the South. I argue that the concept of the lifeworld offers a new way of thinking about Ray's relationship to her native homeplace and its people that complements discussions of her environmentalist ethics, as well as a better understanding of how Ray writes herself back into her own family and community after her self-imposed exile.

Like Zora Neale Hurston in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, climbing the Chinaberry tree at her front gate to explore the horizons of her world (36), Ray writes a phenomenology of her lifeworld prior to her immersion in a Southern milieu shaped by capitalist and religious-fundamentalist value systems. Ray writes lyrical chapters that offer a literary analogue to Husserl's "phenomenological reduction," a state in which the subject suspends judgements regarding the natural world in order to achieve a sense of detachment or tranquility. In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray writes, or attempts to write, her "life" as a biological life among other lives, both human and non-human, before willingly accruing to herself the layers of family, ethnic, and regional identity—the "ethno" of autoethnography. I say, "attempts to write" because the pressures of Ray's conservationist ethos ensure that she must also confront the reality that those pines are also endangered and must be preserved if her children and grandchildren are to enjoy the same relationship to their own Cracker ecology.

Ray's writing constitutes a less solipsistic version of the self-centered autobiographical "life" discussed by Friedman and is rather a form of life writing that gives an account of an embodied experience of life. Jeffrey Nonemaker writes that it is indeed "this accounting for and full employment of the researcher's body and felt experience that gives rise to *autoethnography*" ("Searching" 98). Ray's second memoir, *Wild Card Quilt*, transitions, in phenomenological terms, from this solitary, embodied "natural standpoint" to an intersubjective or "personalistic"

attitude, “the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion” (Husserl 192). In this way, Ray stitches herself back into her native rural community, accepting it on its own terms before rethinking its potential for ethical, environmental action.

Chapter three explains how Dorothy Allison likewise turns her attention inward while at the same time expanding the purview of her self-analysis beyond her native South Carolina and into college, graduate school, and beyond. This chapter departs from previous scholarship in arguing that Allison, a sociology major in college, tacitly applies the techniques of self-analysis and “socioanalysis” to the widening circles of her personal and professional life, the stages of which are represented in *Trash*. Simply put, “socioanalysis” is social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu’s term for a self-analysis that occurs within the essential context provided by social situations. In a more complex sense, according to Bourdieu scholar David Swartz,

Bourdieu thinks of the practice of sociology as *socioanalysis* where the sociologist is to the “social unconscious” of society as the psychoanalyst is to the patient’s unconscious. The social unconscious consists of those unacknowledged interests that actors follow as they participate in the unegalitarian social order. Since, according to Bourdieu, it is the misrecognition of those embedded interests that is the necessary condition for the exercise of power, he believes that their public exposure will destroy their legitimacy and open up the possibility for altering existing social arrangements. By exposing those underlying interests that bind individuals and groups into unequal power relations, sociology becomes an instrument of struggle capable of offering a measure of freedom from the constraints of domination. (10)

In the stories examined in chapter three, Allison exposes the unspoken power relations between her and her college professors, as well as among her friends and lovers and her circle of lesbian-feminist colleagues.

This chapter also engages another unexamined structure in the concept, developed by the psychologist R. D. Laing and others, of the external or “lived with” family versus the internalized or “lived by” family structure. As evidenced by her short stories, Allison continued thinking and writing about and through her “lived by family” long after she had left the sphere of her “lived with” family. Although her choice of fictional form distinguishes *Trash* from more proper memoirs and autobiographies, Allison’s blurring of the lines between subjective and objective structures is something that Bourdieu does as well. The concept of the “lived by family” overlaps with Bourdieu’s *habitus*, a way of “reconciling social structure and individual agency, how the ‘outer’ social and ‘inner’ self-help to shape each other” (Maton 48). The *habitus* “designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition*, tendency, *propensity*, or *inclination*” (Bourdieu, quoted in Maton, 48). Like the lifeworld in chapter two, the *habitus* provides an interpretative schema for how Allison relates to her inner and outer worlds.

Through the nameless, self-identified narrators in *Trash*, Allison searches for an alternative family and community, only to find that the unconscious reproduction of her “family habitus” or “lived by” family structure continually snares her in abusive relationships and causes her to recoil from healthier ones. I argue that in this way, the stories in *Trash* allow Allison to realize and explore her own drives and dispositions as dramatized in fictionalized versions of herself that are nonetheless as autobiographical as the narrative selves constructed in most memoirs. Further, I explain how *Trash* provided Allison with a “portable laboratory” for

exploring the kind of issues worked out in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* and her essay “A Question of Class.” Allison’s aim in these stories is to learn how to accept not only her family but her own body, locus of her habitus and the dispositions of hunger, anger, and transgressive sexuality intimately connected to her poor-white background.

A family prefers to write, or rather speak, its own narrative, one that balances its aspirational self-image against the reality of its circumstances. In the case of the Walls family as depicted in *The Glass Castle*, that story took the form of a frontier narrative that propelled Jeannette Wall’s nomadic parents, Rex and Rose Mary, across the western United States while masking the dysfunctional pattern undergirding their freewheeling dynamic. Chapter four explains how Rex’s hometown of Welch, West Virginia became the point where hunger and hardship ultimately persuaded the upwardly mobile Jeannette to diverge from her parents’ narrative and pursue her own path, which, as I argue, is written in a language of “cultural uplift” and “bootstrappism” that Allison and Dunbar-Ortiz would find problematic. Walls’s narrative strategy is analogized in the “glass castle” of the title, a transparent structure through which the reader sees Walls’s family as though her eyes. This approach trades interiority for a straightforward text that more often reads like what Nancy K. Miller calls a “euphoric narrative,” in which “the protagonist moves from a position of danger and social marginality to one of triumph,” than like the kind of intensive self-study preferred by the other writers featured in this dissertation (“Pacts, Facts, Acts” 343).

For this reason, chapter four introduces no new critical framework other than that provided in the previous chapters and the points of comparison provided by the other writers. I explain that the events Walls describes are externalized in a narrative that meets film producers halfway, as evidenced by the film version of *The Glass Castle* in post-production at the time of

this writing. Walls offers another analogue for her narrative strategy in the scar tissue she sustained during the outrageous trials of her childhood. A scar, she argues, presents a “textured” surface as opposed to the “smooth” surface of unblemished skin— ‘smooth’ was boring, but ‘textured’ was interesting” (286). I argue that Walls’s narrative style is “textured” in its nuanced depiction of her childhood years, but comparatively “smooth” in that it avoids both the deep autoethnography preferred by Ray and Dunbar-Ortiz and Allison’s narrative process for healing her own inner scars.

The first three chapters of this dissertation in particular may be read as individual case studies in poor-white female autobiography, but I intend for all four to serve as the evidence for a larger, emerging story of self-representation on the part of poor-white women, whose stories have only begun to be collected in anthologies like Lorraine Lopez’s *An Angle of Vision: Women Writers on Their Poor and Working-class Roots*, a volume that would have benefitted from the inclusion of other white or Anglo-American women besides Dorothy Allison. Regionally speaking, the writers in this dissertation take significant steps towards the kind of “Southern literature of wholeness” that Mab Segrest predicts will rise not only “out of our profound respect for female solitude and selfhood” but also out of “a community of Southern women searching together in the delicate connections between solitude and friendship for our visions of ourselves and what our world could be” (41). Despite their differences, these writers are all activists for interconnecting agendas, including feminism (Dunbar-Ortiz, Allison), environmentalism (Ray); and advocacy for the homeless (Walls). Each has seen beyond the interests and limited perspective of her race and class and towards the kind of interracial community of Southern women described by Segrest. In the process, the autoethnographies discussed in this dissertation also change the form of life writing itself. As I argue, women from poor-white backgrounds

have made contributions to the genre of autobiography that extend the concept of the self to the people and places that formed that self, that defy the traditional notion of autobiography in the male-oriented sense of life writing that valorizes “individualistic paradigms of the self” while neglecting “the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (Friedman 72). To paraphrase Janisse Ray, each of the following writers covered here explains how “what [and who] I come from has made me who I am.”

## CHAPTER II

### “ONE OR TWO THINGS I KNOW ABOUT US”: AUTOETHOGRAPHY IN DUNBAR-ORTIZ’S *RED DIRT*

Violet Dutcher defines the term “autoethnography” as “a genre of autobiographical writing which combines personal narrative, an account of the self, with ethnography, an account of the other” (93). Autobiography narrates the self, while ethnography traditionally provides “an account of a particular social group through such activities as participant observation of events, interview, audio and video recordings, and written field notes” (94).

Feminist, postcolonial, and other critics have argued that the value of autoethnography lies in its capacity for crossing the boundaries of genre. Francois Lionnett for instance understands the term as “the defining of one’s subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis” (*Autobiographical Voices* 177). As a distinctly literary genre, autoethnography brings language into the foreground of the autoethnographer’s approach to life writing. Lionnett finds her exemplar for autoethnography in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a rare amalgamation of autobiography, history, mythology, and social critique. *Dust Tracks*, as Lionnett explains, addresses the African-American experience while resisting the temptation to consider itself a definitive account of that experience.

Mary Louise Pratt has employed the term “autoethnography” more pointedly as the expression of a marginalized culture to educate an outside audience about living within a postcolonial situation. “Autoethnographic expression” for Pratt denotes “instances in which



colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's terms" (*Imperial Eyes* 9). Pratt explains that "if ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the other construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (9). The aforementioned critics all view autoethnography as a highly individualistic statement which offers special insight into the experience of a given culture or class. A genre-blurring form of life writing, autoethnography offers the writer the opportunity to narrate his or her life as a member of a marginalized social group while purposely setting out to correct the misrepresentations and stereotypes concerning that group. As such, autoethnography seems well-suited for writing about poor whites, who as a class continue in the twenty-first century to be the butt of misrepresentation in American cultural expressions, whether literature, television, or film. This chapter examines Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Red Dirt* (1997), an autoethnography on a segment of poor whites known historically as "Okies."

The daughter of a landless poor-white sharecropper father and part Native American mother, Dunbar-Ortiz grew up in Piedmont and other towns along the Canadian River in west-central Oklahoma. She moved from Oklahoma City to San Francisco with her first husband in 1961, leaving behind a family her father-in-law considered the kind of "racist, lower-class whites" resisting desegregation in the South at that time (2). "Leaving Oklahoma was necessary for the survival of my sanity," she writes; "racism and Christian fundamentalism pushed me out. I desperately needed to escape from a cauldron of hatred and meanness that could be mitigated, if at all, by forces more powerful than my constant anger" (*OW* 9). Eager to channel this anger and energy into the Civil Rights Movement, Roxanne attended an event recruiting Freedom Riders to travel to Mississippi to protest segregated interstate transportation ("Foreword" 1). She

stood in line to sign up for the ride, but when she approached the desk, “suddenly I heard my voice asking ‘are you all planning to talk to poor whites down there?’ . . . ‘No,’ one of the young men responded, and added that they weren’t recruiting them either” (3). Roxanne tried to play off the question as a joke, but “my terrified face and trembling hands must have made clear that I was serious, and that I myself was one of the poor whites” (3). “It took several years before I tried to get involved again,” she writes, and this was “only after I had successfully gotten rid of my accent, changed my way of dressing, grown my hair long and driven the working-class rural Okie girl underground in order to be accepted by the Movement” (3).

By 1968, Roxanne had left her husband, disassociated herself from her Okie roots, and reinvented herself as an “outlaw woman,” the title of her second autobiography. 1968 was a watershed year for civil rights and social justice movements, including the Civil Rights, women’s liberation, and American Indian Movements. Roxanne involved herself with each of these as a radical self-styled “militant feminist” who founded the group Cell 16 and edited the journal series *No More Fun and Games*.

Dunbar-Ortiz’s distinction as a scholar and academic, however, comes from her training as a Marxist cultural historian with a primary focus on land struggles in the US and abroad. The title of her first autobiography, *Red Dirt*, reflects her preoccupation with land as the ground for virtually all the liberation struggles she had involved herself in as an activist. In her *Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (2014), she writes that “everything in US history is about the land—who oversaw and cultivated it, fished its waters, maintained its wildlife; who invaded and stole it; how it became a commodity (‘real estate’) broken into pieces to be bought and sold on the market” (1). In graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, Roxanne read extensively in global postcolonial literature, such as Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*,

a novel which “reflected my place and my people as few things from outside my small world did: an arid land of red soil and wind and windmills; rural poverty; racial segregation; native ‘homelands’ like U. S. Indian Reservations” (OW 7). She began to understand her home state as likewise the “product of settler-colonialism” and a topic as worthy of consideration as that of her doctoral dissertation, on the history of land tenure in Mexico.

Dunbar-Ortiz writes that she “neglected her dissertation” in order to pursue a personal “life-history” that would combine history and autobiography with a psychological approach that engaged contemporary theories in order to better understand herself and her people back in Oklahoma.

Trained as a historian I applied those research skills and knowledge to myself and my family as a case study. At the time I was influenced by psychoanalytical theory and practices, particularly Jacques Lacan and R. D. Laing. I believed that as a historian I had to do the same kind of historical self-analysis that a psychoanalyst does in personal analysis. That is, I had to master my own life history and reveal who I was in writing any other history. (“Bloody Footprints” 77)

Dunbar-Ortiz would later include this formative work of “historical self-analysis” in *Red Dirt*, an autoethnography that contextualizes her family story within a larger history of settlement, displacement, and exile in her home state of Oklahoma. Although she first conceived the project in the 1960s, the book came to fruition decades later following a reconciliation with her father, Moyer Dunbar, in 1997.

### **I. Patrimony: Moyer Dunbar**

The first chapter of *Red Dirt* takes this reconciliation as its framing narrative. Entitled “The Great Good Luck of the Found Horseshoe,” this chapter begins by reversing the trajectory

of the more typical Okie story, in which an Oklahoman leaves home for the “promised land” of California (217). Roxanne’s return was ostensibly prompted by her wish for her daughter, Michelle, to meet her grandfather before he died. Roxanne however, who had been “estranged from her father since [she] left home at 16,” also admits a personal desire “to hear my father’s stories, his language, the cadence of his speech, and, yes, even his maddening provincialism, his bigotry. I needed to figure it out, to understand” (2). Roxanne had promised herself she would go simply as “the professional historian specializing in oral history that I was trained to be,” and that she would “treat the old man like any other source” (2). In other words, she had intended to play the role of ethnographer as described by Dutcher: a disinterested participant-observer, an archaeologist digging for artifacts in the debris of her own past.

Roxanne’s plan to remain objective was undone by an old horseshoe found by her brother, Hank, on the site of one of the homes where her family had lived as sharecroppers in the 1930s and 40s (3). When Michelle presented the horseshoe to her grandfather,

He took the horseshoe into his gnarled hands and touched every inch of it as if he had just pounded it out fresh, and he told the story of the place, and the time (1939), of the horse the shoe was made for, of the meanness of the landlord, of the disastrous New Deal agricultural policy, of the coldness that winter living in the drafty shack, of the baby (me) who nearly died of asthma, and of the three-year old boy, my brother who had found the horseshoe, who tailed him everywhere he went and had watched him make it. (4)

In Moyer’s hands, the horseshoe became a palimpsest, encrusted with the strata of the familial, social, and material culture of poverty along with the titular red clay.

Until this point Dunbar-Ortiz had maintained the pretense of viewing her own past from the detached vantage point of the professional historian. Moyer, however, captivated his

granddaughter with a remarkable embodied narrative which was, to borrow a phrase from Dunbar-Ortiz's editor Mike Davis, "rooted in the red dirt and debris of memory" (xi). Roxanne yielded the ground to her father in the contest for her daughter's understanding: 'he won,' I said to myself, 'damn him he won, won my daughter's heart—and mine too' (4). The "good luck horseshoe" was a fortuitous find because it led Roxanne to reconcile with her father, and also because it challenged her to write a narrative of her own, a gloss on her father's story that would equal its historical sweep and emotional impact for an audience represented by Michelle. "After that trip" she writes, "I returned to California knowing if I wanted to write my life history, I had to start over" (4). That horseshoe provided the starting point for an account of Roxanne's Okie childhood that would require her to uncover the accounts of her father as well as her mother, who died in 1968, and to square their stories with her own memories of growing up in Piedmont, Oklahoma in the 1940s and 50s. Initially framed as a contestation of narratives, her long-gestating autoethnography emerged as her vehicle for the recovery of her family history and in turn the history of the people who came to be called "Okies." By turning to her own family for historical insight, Dunbar-Ortiz thinks with and about her own parents in order to see the commonalities of experience that link their stories to the unofficial history of her home state.

*Red Dirt* takes the story of the "good luck horseshoe" as its starting point, yet predates that story by several years in explaining her father's youth in an Oklahoma which little resembled the conservative Republican "red state" in which she grew up. Prior to the First World War, the Socialist Party of America (SPA) boasted a sizable presence in southwest Oklahoma, where the radical International Workers of the World (IWW), or "Wobblies," promoted the idea of "one big union" for wage-earning laborers. The IWW, Dunbar-Ortiz recalls, "controlled the town and country where I grew up, and practically all the mines and

fields” (11). The Wobblies “were mostly anarchists and suspicious of the electoral system, but many of them like my grandfather voted for Eugene Debs and the Socialist Party all five times he ran” (12). As Moyer would explain: “It was different here in Oklahoma than some places. Why by nineteen and fourteen Oklahoma had more dues-paying members of the Socialist Party than any other state in the Union—twelve thousand. That year they elected over a hundred Socialists to office” (12).

Roxanne’s grandfather, Emmett Dunbar, was a wheat farmer, a grassroots IWW union-organizer, and a respected community member who served on the county school board (4). His son Moyer was born in 1907, “two years after the IWW,” so Emmett named him Moyer Haywood Pettibone Scarberry Dunbar, after the organization’s founding members. Moyer, the names of the Wobbly leaders inscribed in his very name, was meant to inherit his father’s leadership role in the radical politics of Canadian County.

The Wobblies were not long for Oklahoma, however, when in 1915 they opposed the US’s entrance into the war in Europe, contributing to a milieu of dissent which came to a head in the so-called “Green Corn Rebellion” of 1917. In this event a coalition of armed black, poor-white and Native tenant farmers organized a revolutionary band “determined for a moment to overthrow the government of the United States, for a world of economic, social, and political justice” (Dunbar, “Dreams” 47). When the government declared the Selective Draft Act of 1917, white and black tenant farmers determined that they could not spare their sons for a “rich man’s war,” and joined with Muskogee/Creek and Seminole Indians, who had consistently fought against the U.S. government for over a century (“Indigenous”). Over five days the coalition blocked roads, pulled down power lines, knocked out pipelines, burned bridges, and created “a liberated zone where they ate, sang hymns, and rested” (*History* 167). The Rebellion

was eventually put down by local posses, with three farmers killed and hundreds arrested (3). It was one of a few minor revolutions that catalyzed the national “red scare,” and the local reaction against the Socialist Party of Oklahoma and the IWW was particularly severe. Members of the resistance were pardoned by 1922, but the United States’ entrance into World War I “produced a wave of patriotism and a brutal backlash against the antiwar Wobblies and Socialists in Oklahoma. Fiery crosses burned all over the state, and the ranks and resources of the Ku Klux Klan burgeoned” (*RD* 17).

Moyer Dunbar portrayed the Green Corn Rebellion to his children as “a great moment of heroism, a moment of unity, betrayed by the 'electric-light city' Socialists, who scorned it” (15). The uprising was largely ignored and forgotten by official history. “Of course, nothing about Wobblies and Socialists appeared in my U.S. or Oklahoma history textbooks,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “so I began to doubt my father's stories, especially about the Green Corn Rebellion” (15). The “green corn” designation, she explains, was a “seasonal, folkloric designation,” deriving from the old green corn dance of the Creek/Muskogee Indians and indicating not a “revolution” as the rebels had called it, but “a polite mockery and evasion of their politics” (“Dreams of Revolution” 42). In this way, she argues, official history rendered this radical revolutionary movement a harmless historical footnote, relegated to the Native past.

The color red on the other hand, associated with socialists via communist Russia, was vilified in the national imagination by the “red scare” of the 1920s, when it was associated with two groups that had come to be viewed as enemies of white nationalism—socialists and Native American. “Like red Indians,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “U.S. red socialists fit the American story best when dead and gone” (“Dreams of Revolution” 44). From her childhood as a socialist “red diaper baby,” these two shades of red were suppressed in her family as “two secrets that were

whispered in oblique stories”:

One was about my mother's mother being part Indian. The other was about my father's father being a Red—a radical socialist and member of the IWW. The secret about being part Indian was kept, because it was both dangerous and shameful to be an Indian in Oklahoma before the 1960s. My father warned me to keep secret stories about his Wobbly father that he told me, because it was dangerous and shameful to be a Red at the time, the communist witch hunting time of “McCarthyism.” Somehow, those secrets became the core of my imagination and identity. (“Many Shades of Red” 1)

Even though Roxanne’s grandfather, Emmett Dunbar, had played no part in the Rebellion—the IWW did not accept tenant farmers because they were not wage-workers—he nonetheless suffered from the backlash against the Wobblies and other leftist groups painted with the same brush as the Working-Class Union (WCU) that had planned the opposition to the Conscription Act (“Rebellion”). Emmett moved his family to San Antonio to protect them from the Klan harassment of “red” socialist families in Oklahoma. He died in 1934 after he was kicked by a horse, though Moyer held the KKK responsible for his father’s death “because a dozen years before they had beat [him] half to death and left him with brain damage” (11). Prior to the Klan attacks, Moyer and Louise had stood poised to inherit Emmett’s land and one of the largest estates in town, but they “returned to Piedmont as sharecroppers” (13). Moyer briefly took a job with the WPA in Oklahoma City before deciding that he would rather scratch out a living as a tenant farmer in Piedmont, where he had grown up. “The red soil was in his blood,” his daughter explains (21). Just before reaching Piedmont, Roxanne recalls, “there was a hill and from there the red earth spread out as far as the eye could see. That moment always thrilled me. In my head I heard trumpets like in the Bible” (9). If the red land beckoned like a promised



land to Moyer, the family's proximity to the dirt brought equal measures of pride and pain for him and his children.

A third "secret" intimately associated in Roxanne's memory with the color red was that of her family's poverty. She recalls walking home from rabbit-hunting with her brother, Laurence, one afternoon when two cars pulled up that were leaving a party at the Barnes's house down the road. "The two big cars slowed and almost stopped," she recalls. "The landlord threw something out the window that landed at our feet. Then the two cars dug out and sped away, leaving us in a cloud of red dirt. We all looked down at the objects on the ground. There were four shiny pennies almost the same color as the red dirt. I crouched to pick up the pennies but jolted upright when Laurence snarled, 'Leave them. Never take handouts, Roxie'" (27).

"Complaining was forbidden" in the Dunbar home, Dunbar-Ortiz writes, and "anything that suggest weakness was forbidden" (32). "We took pride in not being gripers, whiners, 'belly-achers.' And that was our image writ large, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the stoical, silent-suffering, dignified people of the soil" (32). "We were nearly the poorest of the poor," she continues, "but my family's poverty was gilded with the memory of my grandfather's status as a landowner and a veterinarian, and we were not the poorest of the poor, not as poor as our cousins who went on welfare after their father died...not as poor as the few itinerant families who settled for a time, then left, not as poor as my mother had once been" (50).

In 1940 Moyer worked as a hand on the Barnes Ranch, which he referred to as "the Barnes Prison," investing a year breaking horses for the owner, who reneged on a personal promise he had made to Moyer and replaced the horses with oil wells (27). At the Barnes Ranch, Moyer learned that there was nothing stopping the landowner, the man at the center of his own agrarian ideal, from ejecting tenant farmers, plowing under his crops, and setting aside his land

for oil production. Later the “cotton fields were turned over to wheat and there was no sharecropping wheat because you needed expensive machinery to harvest it” (50). Eventually Moyer Dunbar could no longer even rent or sharecrop when the farmers who had employed him “went under and were replaced by large corporations” (227). Moyer’s employment trajectory after the Barnes Ranch estranged him from the landscape and animals he loved, taking him from horse-breaker and cowboy to sharecropper and tenant farmer, to driver of a gas truck with a “winged horse painted on it” (60). Moyer spent the last of his working years as a roofer in Oklahoma City, an occupation that literally removed him from the land.

Roxanne’s childhood was characterized by her parents’ explosive fights over money and parenting. She recalls that upon moving to Piedmont her mother and father had “wanted to conform, tried desperately to conform, to the traditional family pattern, but they were definitely different, neither of them ever quite fitting in, even within their own families, I realized later. My father had not followed in his father’s and brothers’ and sisters’ footsteps in becoming comfortable landowners, and he had ‘married down’ to a poor, homeless half-breed” (32). Moyer never attained his dream of owning land like his father. Although he was a “born farmer,” he “never owned his own farm but instead only rented and sharecropped” (227). Ultimately, Roxanne suggests that the inability of her parents to acknowledge their mutual experience of disappointment and bitterness led to their estrangement from each other and their marriage dissolved by the early Sixties.

Dunbar-Ortiz embeds within her contending version of her father’s narrative a forceful critique of land-hunger rarely seen in life-writing by poor whites, one exception being the late novelist Harry Crews, whose autobiography *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* recalls the lives of tobacco farmers in Bacon County, Georgia in the early twentieth century. *A Childhood*

mounts a significant critique of the southern agrarian view of America as a republic of land-owning “yeoman” farmers. Crews makes clear that it was a fantasy fueled by the “illusion” of profits which drove his father, Ray Crews, to take up tobacco farming in 1927. His stories of the fierce and sometimes cruel lives of white and black tenant farmers gives the lie to the southern agrarian social philosophy and indicts the systemic marginalization of the poor, rural laboring classes, who nonetheless subscribe to the failed dream of landownership—a prevalent theme in Dunbar-Ortiz’s autobiography as well. Martyn Bone has argued that Harry Crews demonstrates a “postsouthern” attitude towards land ownership, exposing “the ideological lacunae in the Agrarian vision, developed in the 1930’s, of the yeoman subsistence farmer at the center of the proprietary ideal” (245).

Similarly, Dunbar-Ortiz evinces a “postfrontier” outlook on history strongly opposed to the “pioneer” mentality that persisted long after the closing of the American frontier which, as she maintains, died in Oklahoma with the land runs that represented the white settlers’ last chance to extend that frontier into a new territory. Dunbar-Ortiz maintains that Oklahoma was the place where the American dream of aspiring land-owners “came to a halt” (“Bloody Footprints” 46). Moyer Dunbar’s shame, “like all ‘white trash’ and colonial dregs, was poverty, that is failure within a system that purports to favor us” (48). Like Harry Crews’s people, the Dunbars subscribed to the master narrative of America as a “republic of landowners” (234). Moyer stayed invested in a racial philosophy he did not believe in and a social hierarchy which located him at the bottom, or the “dregs” of his rural, agricultural society. Meanwhile the ranch hands, tenant farmers and sharecroppers, those at the bottom-rung of the wheat and the global oil-fueled economies occupied a precarious position as “marginal people, border people, people on the edges of empire who can fall off with the slightest gust from transnational capital” (12).

In her chapter entitled “Patrimony” Dunbar-Ortiz explains that the particulars of her father’s story essentially encapsulate those of the white “settler culture” from which he, and she, descended. She contends that “the core group of those designated as ‘Okies’ are the descendants of Ulster-Scot— ‘Scotch-Irish’—colonial frontier settlers” (*Red Dirt* 12). “Patrimony” traces the Okie’s origins back to the migration of the Protestant Scottish settler class in the English colony of Ulster in seventeenth-century Ireland. Having served the English as “foot soldiers of empire” in the colonization of Ireland, Dunbar-Ortiz observes that the Ulster-Scots

were already seasoned colonialists before they began to fill the ranks of settlers to the English colonies in North America in the early eighteenth century. Before ever meeting Native Americans the Ulster-Scots had perfected scalping for bounty on the indigenous Irish. They and their descendants formed the shock troops of the Westward movement, that is, of expanding the United States continental empire. (44)

The Dunbars’ ancestors fought at Valley Forge and in Andrew Jackson’s Indian Wars. They “saw themselves, and their descendants see themselves, as true and authentic patriots who spilled blood for independence and spilled rivers of blood to acquire Indian land, who won the land by ‘blood-right,’ leaving bloody footprints across the continent” (45). In her essay “Bloody Footprints,” Dunbar-Ortiz phrases this idea of the white settler culture’s hereditary “right” to the land still more forcefully:

Those who didn’t make it, and even some of those who did, moved on, shed blood opening new land, usually lost again, and moved on . . . They unleashed rivers of blood, torrents of blood, unimaginable violence, murder, slaughter, which we refuse to acknowledge and confront but which cannot be dislodged from our collective memory.

In the process of that struggle the trekker, the frontier settler, imagined himself and his

progeny transformed into *the* Native Americans, the true Americans. *Blood right*, it could be called. (75)

The Ulster-Scots settled in Oklahoma during the “land runs” of 1889 and 1893, which, according to Dunbar-Ortiz, constituted the final trek of the Scots-Irish settler culture, as “many descendants of the frontier trekkers moved on from Kentucky and Tennessee to Missouri and Arkansas and then moved on to Oklahoma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (*Red Dirt* 46). Okies, then, are the “latter-day carriers of America’s national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempts to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settlers into an ‘indigenous people,’ believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regard themselves as the ‘true’ children of Israel, established by a God-given Covenant” (47). Okies and other descendants of the trekker culture would not think of themselves as “foot soldiers of empire,” Dunbar-Ortiz explains, “nor is that the image of us that dominates the popular imagination” (46).

Identifying the white side of her family as descendants of a “settler culture” is Dunbar-Ortiz’s key psychological insight into her mother and father. Her use of this key term in post-colonial theory corresponds to work on the subject by Bill Ashcroft, Garth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their introduction to the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*:

Settler colony cultures have never been able to construct simple concepts of the nation, such as those based on linguistic communality or racial or religious homogeneity. Faced with their “mosaic” reality, they have, in many ways, been clear examples of the *constructedness* of nations. In settler colony cultures the sense of place and placelessness have been crucial factors in welding together a communal identity from the widely disparate elements brought together by transportation, migration, and settlement. At the

heart of the settler culture is also an ambivalent attitude towards their own identity, poised as they are between the centre from which they seek to differentiate themselves and the indigenous people who serve to remind them of their own problematic occupation of the country. (“Introduction” 118)

Drawing a direct line of descent from the Ulster–Scot settler class to the Dust Bowl Okies of her father’s generation, Dunbar-Ortiz frames her family’s experience of dispossession, migration, and downward mobility as characteristic of their position at the end of the American frontier. “We Okies” she writes, “are those tough, land-poor losers whose last great hope in the American dream was born and died with the opening of the Oklahoma and Indian territories to white settlement at the end of the nineteenth century” (“Bloody Footprints” 76).

A brief history of the state of Oklahoma and its racial and ethnic dynamics is essential to Dunbar-Ortiz’s understanding of her own “settler culture” and its opposition to the “mosaic reality” of life in twentieth-century Oklahoma. The young state situated on land formerly known as “Indian Territory” presents an example of what Mary Louise Pratt would call a post-colonial “contact zone” (8). A “contact zone” for Pratt is synonymous with “Colonial Frontier,” the “place and time where subjects previously separated by time and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (8). In the 1830s, members of the “Five Civilized Tribes,” Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Indians east of the Mississippi, were removed to Indian Territory, and in some cases accompanied by their African slaves. By the end of the nineteenth century, these already displaced Native American were further displaced by land-hungry white “Sooners”—largely descendants of the Ulster-Scots class, who literally raced into Oklahoma in a play for the free homesteads that the Harrison administration had made available to non-Indian settlers (*RD* 46). At the turn of the twentieth century, African-

Americans were also lured to the new state of Oklahoma by boosters like the “Exoduster” E. P. McCabe, who promised not only land but social freedom and economic independence for black settlers in the former Indian Territory (Curtis 114).

The 1922 Tulsa Race Riot, in which white citizens invaded Greenwood, that city’s thriving “Black Wall Street,” ended the Exoduster vision of Oklahoma as an all-black state that could develop outside the segregated racial lines of the South during the Jim Crow era. In this event Tulsa whites drew upon a minor incident involving a black man and white woman to spark a major conflagration in which blacks were marched at gunpoint into downtown holding cells. The national guard was deployed for the “bombing and destruction” of Greenwood, and it became painfully apparent that blacks could not maintain their independence and autonomy on a single street in Oklahoma, let alone achieve an all-black state (“Insurgencies”). David A. Chang thus writes, in *The Color of the Land*, that Oklahoma has by turns “been termed an Indian homeland, a black promised land, and a white heartland” (1).

As for the descendants of the white settler culture, they were only permitted to settle a generation or two in the “promised land” of Oklahoma before the Dust Bowl uprooted them almost as swiftly as they had displaced the Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians before them. The Dust Bowl was an unprecedented ecological disaster precipitated by decades of commodity farming that had dominated the landscape since the Homesteading Act of 1862 opened the Southern plains to ranchers and farmers, who decimated the ancient prairie ecosystem in a matter of decades (Worster, *Dust Bowl*). First the overgrazing of cattle, and then the unchecked “sodbusting” of prairieland for cash crops like cotton and wheat divested the Great Plains of their ancient tallgrass cover and left the exposed topsoil vulnerable to the Plains’ characteristic sweeping winds. The resulting massive dust storms famously sent tenant farmers

and sharecroppers packing for California, leaving large-scale operators like Barnes, the Dunbars' landlord, in the ascendancy.

Thus, multiple groups pursued similar goals for new land and lives in the "Sooner State," only to have those dreams broken within a few years by a shared if varied experience of dispossession accompanied by bitter disillusionment. Roxanne Dunbar learned as a graduate student to frame her family history within this much broader narrative of settlement, dispossession, and resettlement. Her father, however, blamed two isolated historical events for the precariousness of the Dunbars' lives in the 1930s and 40s. When Roxanne asked why her family was so poor despite her grandfather's wealth, Moyer, who hated being reminded of his poverty, responded: "I did all right until the Dust Bowl and the danged Depression. Why even rich bankers were jumping out of windows back then. Danged Roosevelt dumped our crops in the ocean and got the bankers back on their feet, then tried to drive us off the land. I wasn't about to go to no California" (13).

In his stories, Moyer sounded less like the son of an IWW union-organizer and more like a character from *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel, according to Sylvia Jenkins Cook, that misses its potential for a radical critique of class dynamics in its emphasis on elemental forces, like the dust storm that levels Sallisaw, Oklahoma and forces the Joads to hit the road. By focusing "on a singular ecological catastrophe in Oklahoma," Cook observes, Steinbeck "revealed as much by evasion and implication about the peculiar relationship of socially conscious fiction to the southern literary consciousness as did those writers who tried the more complicated task of fusing them around a more genuine image of the poor white" (xiv).

"I suppose," Dunbar-Ortiz writes, "that all of us who become self-conscious about being Okie have read *The Grapes of Wrath*. That novel, together with the 1940 epic movie based on it,



etched an indelible picture of the Okies in the minds of a whole generation, so that for them and their children the book represents not fiction, but truth” (*RD* 6). Steinbeck popularized the national image of the Dust Bowl migrant with his Joads, who leave Oklahoma to pick fruit in California’s Central Valley. *Red Dirt*’s largest bone of contention with *The Grapes of Wrath* lies not with Steinbeck’s negative portrayal of poor whites but—indeed the opposite—with his portrayal of the Okies as the aboriginal Americans, as a people “preindustrial and deeply democratic,” and nobly inextricably tied to the land, confirming the Okies’ most cherished view of themselves as the true and rightful stewards of the land (6). Steinbeck’s descriptions of peasants “brought up on the prairies where industrialization never penetrated” demonstrates little knowledge of a state in which “a hundred thousand wells pumped three billion barrels a year valued at four billion dollars, the highest production of any state in the United States” (*Red Dirt* 39). The author’s apparent ignorance of the actual social and physical landscapes of Oklahoma indeed leads Dunbar-Ortiz to conclude that Steinbeck “imagined an Oklahoma that never existed” (6).

Nonetheless, Moyer Dunbar read *The Grapes of Wrath* several times in his life, a detail implying that his understanding of his Okie story was shaped more by Steinbeck’s mythology than by the history his daughter traced much farther into the colonial past (6). Moyer himself must have noted how Steinbeck’s novel ignores the distinctions which divided white Oklahomans in his day; it makes no mention for instance of either the Wobblies or the Ku Klux Klan. In his desire to make his poor-white characters more sympathetic to a national audience, Steinbeck presented the dust-bowl Oklahoman as the quintessential red-blooded American, with a narrative that glossed over the minority experiences and native, mixed-blood identities which *Red Dirt* seeks to reconstruct and that are embodied in Dunbar-Ortiz herself.

Unlike the Joads, Moyer's family remained in Oklahoma, an important distinction, Dunbar-Ortiz points out, as "those of us who did not leave during the Dust Bowl thought ourselves somewhat more righteous and superior to those who fled during the thirties" (4). Those who stayed in Oklahoma would certainly have had many reasons for wanting to distance themselves from the Dust Bowl migrant experience. Migrant Okies dwelt in California labor camps and were turned away by businesses that hung signs that said, "no Okies" ("One or Two Things" 2). The farmers who employed Okies and the physicians who treated them all considered them dirty immigrants (as opposed to migrants) and indeed many were still literally coated with the depleted topsoil of the plains. Resented, distrusted, and treated like children, these dusty travelers were denigrated as, in the words of one Madera County doctor, "shiftless trash who live like hogs no matter what is done for them" (Gregory, 100). Steinbeck himself depicts some of the worst of the slurs employed against the group: "Okie used ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a bitch...you're scum" (205).

The California Okies thus developed a defensive mentality to match the moniker of "Defense Okies," which they earned manning the munitions factories in Bakersfield during World War II. Okies in California hardened into a determinate ethnic caste which included all migrant whites from the South, West, and Southwest while excluding black and Latinos. This "Okie" culture was concentrated in towns like Bakersfield, from which city grew a distinctive brand of country music, in whose songs one can track the move away from the expansive philosophy of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" to the defensive posturing evinced by the speaker in Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee" and "The Fighting Side of Me" (La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie*). Dunbar-Ortiz writes that "country music, evangelism, romanticism, patriotism and white supremacy have been able to coalesce my people as a people

united despite class differences or social roles, mirroring Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American nationalisms, which exhibit similar contradictions and limitations” (47).

Dunbar-Ortiz considers the “defense Okies” her “people” because regardless of whether they left Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl or stayed behind, the same bitter experience that transformed Bakersfield also transformed Canadian County, along with the rest of Oklahoma, into its present-day political alignment as an ultra-conservative “red state.” “By the time I was coming of age in the 1950’s,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “Oklahoma had been for three decades a tightly run proto-fascist state” (“Many Shades of Red” 1). Staying behind in Oklahoma meant that the Dunbars had to adapt to the new sociopolitical dispensation and cultural institutions redrawn to enshrine the doctrine of white supremacy, which in Piedmont meant a church and a Masonic Lodge dominated by the Ku Klux Klan, whose members were comprised of “the better-off wheat farmers and Baptists” (55). In post-Dust Bowl Oklahoma, Dunbar-Ortiz explains, “wheat and oil” kept “a small ruling class super-wealthy and the rest of the population poor and ignorant” (“Red”).

Tokens remained, however, of the family’s Wobbly past in their Piedmont home, in the form of a framed copy of the IWW constitution and a portrait of Emmett Dunbar, both of which hung in the back bedroom of the house. As a child Roxanne would often visit the portrait of her grandfather, tracing his features and staring into his eyes (11). The picture of Emmett was “muscular,” “handsome,” with “thick dark hair” and resembled her mother’s portrait of Jesus in the front room, which “never brought out a sense of devotion compared to that of my grandfather’s picture” (11). The two portraits competing for Dunbar-Ortiz’s reverence illustrate her mother’s mutual investment in the Dunbars’ Scots-Irish ancestry and in evangelical religion. Much more so than Moyer, who bitterly opposed the church and the local and national

government, Roxanne's mother, Louise invested heavily in the institutions of Christianity and white supremacy, despite of, or all the more fiercely because of the fact that she was part Native American.

## II. "Prairie Red Wing": Louise Dunbar

Dunbar-Ortiz dedicates *Red Dirt* to the memory of her mother, Louise Edna Curry Dunbar. Louise, Roxanne writes, "was part Indian, most likely Cherokee" (*OW* 5) the daughter of an Indian woman and an Irish father who was "itinerant and alcoholic" ("Author's Note" xi). Having lost her mother to tuberculosis at age four, Louise grew up orphaned and homeless in foster homes, where she was treated as little more than a servant, and would often run away (xi). When Moyer met Louise, she lived in a home for juvenile delinquent girls. The details concerning Louise's Native American lineage, such as the specific nation to which she belonged, remained a source of mystery and speculation for Roxanne: "I wanted to ask [Moyer] if mama's mother had been an Indian, but I knew—I don't know how—that that was a question I should never ask" (*RD* 28). The silence surrounding her mother's Native identity was broken only by deprecation and insult, as when Moyer would call her "blanket-ass" and "squaw" when "he was mad at her, or trying to make her mad" (28).

Because her mother kept her silence concerning her native identity, Roxanne likewise learned to downplay all signifiers of ethnic difference lest her schoolmates call her "half-breed" and the town marginalize her as it had her mother, who was "more or less isolated in that narrow, white community of Piedmont" (77). Louise was converted to Christianity by Moyer's Baptist sister, Ruth. Her adoption into a Christian family permitted her to feel like she was part of a white majority and that whites were her own "indigenous people" despite the "whispered stories" about her dark skin and presumed Indian heritage. Louise's survival depended upon assimilating

with her husband's "people" and claiming every aspect of his cultural heritage as her own. The extent of her mother's investment in the Dunbar patronymic is illustrated by a conversation Roxanne recalls regarding her last name.

Once I asked my mother why my father's family name, Dunbar, was shared by a black person. In English class we read the poems of African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. I hoped my mother would say he was a relative of ours because I loved his poetry. But she said that my Dunbar ancestors were "Scotch-Irish" and had once owned huge plantations and many slaves and that slaves took the names of the masters. "How do we know we're related to the masters and not the slaves?" I would ask. "Because you are white." (48)

As a teenager Roxanne could not square the reality of her family's poverty with her mother's claims to Southern aristocracy. Nor however did she self-identify with the poor whites on the other end of the Southern social spectrum. "So who was I then," she asked herself, "who were we and what were we anyway? Half-breeds? Hicks? Rednecks? Hillbillies? I don't remember identifying with those terms that were used to refer to people like us" (47). Regarding the epithet "white trash," Dunbar-Ortiz recalls: "I believe the first time I heard that term was when I saw *Gone with the Wind*, referring to some pretty creepy people, dirt poor, sneaking, conniving, violent tenant farmers, or perhaps migrant cotton pickers. At the time I saw the movie my father was alternately a tenant farmer, cotton picker, and ranch hand, but I did not for a minute identify with those whom the planters and the enslaved Africans called 'white trash'" (47). Roxanne found it much easier to identify with Scarlett O'Hara, the quintessential Southern belle whose family "belonged to the original Scots-Irish settlers" (47).

In her essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves," Susan Stanford Friedman utilizes the

metaphor of “the mirror” to describe the experience of women within a “prevailing social order” which surrounds the subject like a “a great and resplendent hall of mirrors” that “owns and occupies the world as it is and the world as it is seen and heard” (75). A woman’s “mirror,” Friedman contends, “is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which she stares to form an identity” (75). In her daughter’s account, Louise’s “mirrors” reflected only a dominant white, patriarchal culture which offered her no other reflections in which to view herself. Louise “married up” when she married Moyer— “never mind that he was a migrant cow puncher, then sharecropper. Upon marriage to him my mother became white, or at least her children would” (“Bloody Footprints” 74). Because she ostensibly had the most to gain from identification with a Southern white elite, Louise carried the burden of Okie culture while her husband had the freedom to scorn the Klan and the “Christian hypocrites” in the church as well as the local “law-enforcement authorities” (*Red Dirt* 13).

Louise likewise demonstrated her own prejudice towards Native Americans, made devastatingly clear in a scene that takes place in front a dime store in El Reno, where Roxanne and her mother encountered a Native woman and two Native men, “lying on a blanket on the sidewalk, passing a liquor bottle and hand-rolling cigarettes” (76). She had “never been that close to a real Indian, not, like my mother, assimilated or intermarried.” Seeing that Roxanne was admiring her earrings, made from porcupine needles, the woman took out one of the earrings and gave it to her. At that moment Louise grabbed her arm and dragged her away, warning her “don’t ever, ever try to talk to an Indian again. They have diseases and they’re dirty” (76). Roxanne, who had “never imagined you could catch a disease by talking,” reminded her mother that “you said Daniel Boone liked Indians.” Louise replied “that was different. The Indians in his time were proud warriors. These around here are just old, dirty, drunk Indians” (77).

Dunbar-Ortiz recalls that “mama’s sympathy for the Indians never went much further than Daniel Boone and the Scout guides” (74). Louise seemed to consider the Indian-fighting pioneers who replaced the “vanishing Indians” as America’s rightful “native” inhabitants (75).

In her latest book, *All the Real Indians Have Died Off*, Dunbar-Ortiz illustrates one of the most dominant myths about Native Americans, that of the “vanishing Indian.” The idea behind this myth is that the “real Indians,” meaning the “savage,” “warlike,” aboriginal inhabitants of America, valorized in the popular imagination by western films, have disappeared into the mists of time and that because somehow only the full-blood Indians were worthy of the name, authentic Native ethnicity has disappeared as a result of intermarriage with whites and other groups. The “real Indian” is the warrior brave of the frontier tradition who had his day but receded into the past to make way for the manifest destiny of the white settler culture.

Again, the motif of a redness denied and repressed resurfaces to make contact with *Red Dirt*’s narrative, here in the form of Indians who appear as autobiographical “others.” For his part, Moyer Dunbar would tell his children that the soil of Canadian County was dyed red from the shed blood of fallen Indian braves. Even after she no longer believed this story Roxanne would sometimes imagine that she “smelled blood in the breeze rising from that red dirt” (156). Moyer looked to Oklahoma’s Native American past for his conception of a right relationship to the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants. Canadian County sat on lands opened to whites after the Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe treaties of the nineteenth century (*History* xi). Moyer would tell Roxanne stories of how the US forces under General Custer killed unarmed Cheyenne who danced the ghost dance in mourning for “their lost way of life” (28). When Roxanne asked if the dead warriors “came back to life,” her father told her that according to a Cheyenne cowpuncher he had ridden with in the Panhandle, “they come back and settle in some living person, not just

Indians. Said he thought one had settled in me, the way horses liked me and all” (28). “Weren’t nobody better hunters or loved horses better than the Cheyenne,” he would say (9). Notably, Moyer spoke of the Cheyenne as though they had all died off, despite the fact that he had heard these stories from a living Cheyenne cowboy. In his imaginative reversal, an Indian “settles” in a descendant of the white settler culture as opposed to a white man “settling” on Native land. This would suggest that Moyer’s whiteness was somehow negotiable in a way that Louise’s was not, even though Louise Dunbar had a more substantive claim to Native American heritage. According to the double-standard that prevailed in 1950s Oklahoma, however, a man could roam the plains like an Indian while his wife was expected to run the household as, in Ashley Lancaster’s phrase, the white, or whitened, “angelic mother.”

Roxanne grew up seeing Indians as fleeting figures who, like Louise Dunbar herself, seemed intimate yet distant and mysterious. She writes that in the small towns of Oklahoma, in which “strict segregation ruled among the black, white, and Indian towns, churches, and schools,” she “had little interchange with Native people” (xi). For Roxanne, “real Indians” appeared as speechless ciphers who passed along gifts she invested with symbolic power, like lodestones drawing together the missing pieces of the lost sides of her heritage.

Dina Gilio-Whittaker, Dunbar-Ortiz’s co-author on *All the Real Indians Have Died Off*, argues that the notion of the “vanishing Indian” has been highly detrimental to notions of kinship and community among Native nations themselves, let alone for an Indian like Louise Dunbar, who was raised outside the bounds of any particular nation. For the harmful effects of this myth Roxanne did not need to look much farther than her own mother, whose assimilation acted as a double-edged sword that cut her off from the Cherokee nation, even while she was never fully accepted in the white community on account of her dark complexion.



“Mama thought I was ugly” Roxanne writes, “even though I looked exactly like her” (126). Roxanne’s skin was dark like her mother’s but her “straight, fine hair” could be “improved,” so Louise spent her egg money on permanents for her daughter, “trying hard to remake me into something like Anita Bryant, with curly hair and dimples” (126). Louise certainly chose an icon of unmarked whiteness in Anita Bryant, then a child gospel singer, later Miss Oklahoma, and known nationally as an anti-gay activist who in 1977 led a “save our children” campaign whose aim was to repeal a Dade County ordinance preventing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Mason 4). In her book *Oklahoma*, Carol Mason writes that

At a time in which Christian businesses and Cold War Apocalypticism were sweeping through [her] home state of Oklahoma, Anita Bryant emerged as a moral entrepreneur who embodied the wholesomeness of white femininity that connoted the American heartland and exemplified the national ideal of womanhood. It was this unspoken norm of whiteness that undergirded fighting for “our” children. (4)

Roxanne’s own “dirty brown skin” was “darker than anyone else in town,” precluding her passing for white at school, and so she began praying to God to miraculously lighten her complexion. One day she was startled to find this prayer had been answered by the appearance of white spots, first on her chin, then around her eyes, and then down her body. A doctor explained that Roxanne had developed a “rare melanin defect” that caused her to lose pigment in her skin, a condition she would later know as vitiligo, the “Michael Jackson disease” (128). Louise had wanted her daughter to enjoy the privileges of an unmarked whiteness as one of Anita Bryant’s “children” and not her own, but now Roxanne’s whiteness was made strangely visible.

Louise told Roxanne, “you’re never going to be pretty, so you’d better use your brain”

(128). “I took her message to heart and immersed myself in school,” Roxanne writes (128). Dorothy Allison’s mother told her the same thing, suggesting a connection between the autoethnographer’s willingness to critique her native culture and her inability to fit into that culture’s prevailing standard of beauty, taken as synonymous with an unproblematic whiteness. As recounted in her chapter entitled “Becoming a Girl,” Roxanne’s vitiligo appeared around her thirteenth birthday, when she had recently been “shaken by the mystery of menstruation” (128). In other words, Roxanne’s initiation into womanhood was marked by a quality still more visible than her previously dark skin because it appeared *too* white, unnaturally white, and thus punctured the veneer of an unremarkable whiteness. Although Dunbar-Ortiz does not make this point explicitly, the double-edged sword of her blanched skin would also prevent her from claiming the Native American part of her heritage in a region where phenotype has retained its importance despite the kaleidoscopic multiculturalism of Oklahoma’s population. In even presenting the choice between affirming or denying whiteness, however, Dunbar-Ortiz demonstrates the tenuous position the autoethnographer occupies within her own culture.

If the Dunbar women could not see themselves reflected visibly in their culture’s “hall of mirrors,” they could still appreciate its cultural expressions. Louise listened to nothing but country and gospel music – the “music of our people”—with the exception of a few folk songs passed own from her mother. She “used to sing and play that old traditional song, ‘Prairie Red Wing,’ every day, pounding out the tune on our old out-of-tune upright piano with chipped keys” (42). “Somehow,” Roxanne writes, “I always knew Mama was telling me about her life story when she sang about the poor little Indian maid, Prairie Red Wing” (42).

In the absence of any other cultural inheritance, Louise adopted the ideology of the dominant white culture, despite its adversarial relationship to Native American. If the Latin root

of the word “matrix” means “mother,” then what Dunbar-Ortiz describes as a “matrix of stories” came to take the place of the missing maternal presence in Louise’s life. In her mother’s absence, Louise had to rely upon this matrix of stories for her feelings of identity and belonging. She came to identify with the stories of the white settler culture and its heroes in lieu of the stories of her Cherokee mother and grandmother, both of whom had died by the time she was five (42).

In *Autobiographical Voices*, Francois Lionnett cites Adrienne Rich’s idea that “the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy” (118). Lionnett likewise views the recovery of the mother’s story as an essential component of autoethnography understood as a specifically feminist practice. She writes that “the loss brought about by the patriarchal customs of the ‘village’ is a painful enactment of separation and fragmentation, of lost connections to the mother as symbol of a veiled and occulted historical past” (118).

In a cruelly ironic twist, Louise, who had denigrated Indians as “dirty drunks”—a stereotype used against poor whites as well—took up drinking herself following her separation from Moyer and remained an alcoholic until her death in 1968, the year that Roxanne began to channel her influence into her sense of purpose as an activist for justice for women, Native American, and other oppressed groups. The loss of her own mother may help explain Dunbar-Ortiz’s initially exclusive definition of “Okies” as those of Scots-Irish ancestry, a definition that at times seems to deny the inclusion of Natives and other non-whites in the Okie experience. Louise’s early disappearance from her picture would indeed appear to leave Moyer’s story as the framing narrative for that experience, and for this reason he appears to occupy more space in *Red Dirt*. Roxanne could not recover her mother’s memories as an adult reconciled with her parents

and incorporate them into her “life history” as she could her father’s in the 90s. This is not to suggest, however, that Louise Dunbar did not continue to exert a powerful presence well beyond her death. The love and loss of her Native American mother greatly informed and inspired Roxanne’s exploration of the many “shades of red” that make up her own complicated identity.

Dunbar-Ortiz remembers her mother tragically as a self-loathing woman, but she also remembers her more positively as a “she-lion,” a proto-feminist in her own right who once resisted a patriarchal institution by starting a local Cub Scout troop integrating boys and girls, in defiance of the national Scouting rules (74). When a visiting Scout supervisor came to the house to advise her that girls had their own separate organization, Louise insisted that “we’re a small town here and we do everything together” (74). When the supervisor threatened to ban the troop, Louise chased him away, threatening “I’ll take a shillelagh to you”—a notably Irish choice of weapon (75).

If the Scots-Irish anger and resentment over the loss of the land that she inherited from her father influenced Roxanne’s choice of subject as an academic, her mother’s imagination inspired her talent for writing in the first place. Louise taught her “storying,” in which you “just make up whatever you want to be. If you don’t like someone, pretend they are someone else. You can turn a dry, hot cornfield into a cool, blue lake or a molehill into a mountain” (41). Louise wrote down her stories, and parlayed her talent into a weekly column for the *Piedmont News*. Her stories appeared in three weekly papers in the county. “Finally,” Roxanne recalls, “my mother was able to create her own niche in that small, white rural world where she had not been entirely accepted, and she was happy” (81).

Roxanne likewise acquired her interest in social justice movements from observing the way her community treated women who, like her mother, did not fit in. Many of her reflections

in *Red Dirt* deal with the community of Piedmont and its ambivalence toward women and those designated outsiders. She recollects a grisly murder case, for instance, which began when a young couple parked by the creek south of town stumbled over a woman's head. The couple reported the evident murder to the sheriff, who organized a posse of men to search for the woman's killer. A local artist drew a sketch of the victim which made the rounds in town. As Roxanne recalls:

The drawing showed a pretty blonde woman. They said her eyes were cornflower blue and her hair was natural blonde but peroxidized even blonder. They thought she was no more than twenty years old. The hand didn't have a ring on, so what with the bleached hair and no wedding ring, they decided she had been a prostitute who was probably murdered by a man who took her out. It seemed to me if the woman had a ring the murderer might have stolen it, [yet] after the authorities had decided that the woman was a prostitute who had sold her body and probably deserved to get killed and cut up, the search was called off. (103)

The mere suggestion that the victim may have been a prostitute who had ran afoul of social morality prompted the local men to write off the victim and call off the search for her killer.

Dunbar-Ortiz remembers this incident playing out against a backdrop of national news dominated by the trials of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the Army-McCarthy hearings. During this period Roxanne began confusing fallen (scarlet) women and (red) communists and Satan, all of whom seemed to her "somewhat preferable to the supposed God-fearing pillars of the community" (99). A concern for social justice, along with the acceptance of difference and an innate sense of empathy and relationality in her accounts of her autobiographical "others"—whether Indians, Communists, or prostitutes—is built into Dunbar-Ortiz's critique of her narrow-

minded native culture.

The prevailing worldview in Piedmont, she writes, “was Manichean not Buddhist. There was no Yin and Yang. There was no balance, just absolutes” (49). She explains that it simply was not possible for an Okie to celebrate her Scots-Irish heritage alongside her Native American ancestry; the two constituted mutually irreconcilable “absolutes” (49). Dunbar-Ortiz’s own “mirrors” presented her with the reflections of several competing and conflicting identities: socialist/patriot, Native American/Okie, white trash/aristocrat. She did not view her world as a white supremacist, in terms of black and white, but rather in adversarial “shades of red.” The “red” in *Red Dirt* signifies both “red” socialist Wobblies and “red” Indians, two shades that run together in her memories, belying the supposedly monochromatic whiteness of her culture and the oversimplification of Oklahoma’s “red state” status.

Dunbar-Ortiz’s investigations into her family history open up room for what Lionnett, citing the Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant, calls “métissage.” Métissage allows for the “braiding” of cultures and an interweaving of multiple identities—a practice which Lionnet sees as an inherent aspect of all autobiography and autoethnography in particular. Anne Lancaster-Badders observes that Lionnett puts Glissant’s concept of métissage in play precisely to undo “static, Manichean binaries (white/black, good/evil, man/woman colonizer/ colonized, and so on) that do not reflect changing cultural realities” (“Lionnett” 366). Lionnett sees in the word “half-breed,” for instance, a term connoting the “pedigreed ascendance” of the racial majority and their “moral judgments” concerning miscegenation with a racial minority (“Voices” 328). As opposed to the word “miscegenation,” “métissage” frees language of such notions as racial purity or a single origin. As it applies to a theory of autobiography, métissage “allows for the expression of a multiplicity of voices in each woman, revealing the many cultural scripts

involved in the making of her identity” (“Lionnett” 366).

Dunbar-Ortiz’s early understanding of the “mosaic reality” of her racial and class identity placed her at odds with the “Manichaeism” of her white native culture and its scripts of uniformity and white supremacy and enabled her to “weld together an identity from widely disparate elements” (“Introduction” 117). In San Francisco, for instance, Roxanne discovered a surprising parallel between the songs her mother would sing and the leftist anthems adopted by young radicals. She recalls a student rally at which “the hundred or so rallying students were singing along so I joined in. I knew every word. But then I noticed I was singing different words. I was singing *There once lived an Indian maid and the stars shine tonight on Prairie Red Wing*. They were singing *there once was a union maid and I’m working for the union*. I was confused. I asked the student next to me where that song came from, and she said, ‘Woody Guthrie. You never heard it?’ Not that way, I said. I thought it was another song. Of course, I soon learned about Woody Guthrie and that he had grown up not far from where my mother had” (42). Roxanne did not think that she was hearing the same song because she knew “Prairie Red Wing” in a Native American not a labor context. The connections she made in college however helped Roxanne foster a sense of cross-cultural métissage that her parents could not maintain beyond the crackdown on nonconformity that followed the Green Corn Rebellion.

In Oklahoma, such fertile connections were driven underground, or more properly, into the ground itself, buried like the lost women of the distaff side of Roxanne’s heritage. As a child, she had intimately associated the red land with “ancient memories” that would notably recall her ancestral, Native past. The iron-rich red earth had received the blood of fallen Native Americans, including her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. “I think Mama, as I would later, reconstructed a memory of her mother and the funeral from songs, especially “Can the Circle Be

Unbroken,' about a child's loss of her mother" (42).

A recovered maternal history is veiled in Dunbar-Ortiz's motif of the color red. In her study of *Gone With the Wind*, "The Myth of Aunt Jemima," Diane Roberts observes that although the landscape of Scarlett's world is lush, it is far more red than green. Scarlett may like to wear green to match her eyes but she is surrounded by a very feminine redness: the moist hungry earth waiting upturned for the cotton seeds, showing pinkish...vermillion and scarlet and maroon. Around her everywhere are reddish peach blossoms, the roads she travels on look blood-red, she notices Cherokee roses, violets, pink crab-apple and scarlet and orange and rose, honey-suckle. (178)

For Dunbar-Ortiz as well, the color red connotes a receptive, feminine aspect. In addition to the "bloody footprints" tracked over the land by white settlers like she emphasizes the receptive aspect of a landscape invaded by oil derricks, scarred by "foot-diameter pipelines," covered with "towering, white grain mills," and fenced in with "barbed wire" (51). The family drove "muddy red roads" to church (26), and "red shale" and "red dust" share the same lines as "ripe golden wheat fields, corn, and cotton" (51).

Despite her troubled relationship with her home state taken in the abstract as a hotbed of political conservatism, Roxanne has maintained a powerful physical connection to the red dirt she associates intimately with her mother. In *The Concept of Woman*, Prudence Allen observes that in ancient cosmology, down through Plato and the Western tradition, the feminine has been considered a receptive quality while the masculine has been considered the generative property in nature (197). If Roxanne's father's people shed the blood of her mother's people, that blood was received by the land, giving the earth its red hue in Roxanne's imagination. Roxanne understands herself as the child of a troubled marriage, consummated in the red ground and in



her own body, with its alternating shades of white and red. Roxanne's shifting, productively hybrid racial identity generates a discourse that challenges the unexamined racial ideology which stifled her parents as individuals.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of Louise's death, Roxanne visits her mother's grave, and, looking out over the "vast expanse of red dirt," admits that she also feels a powerful emotional connection to the land. In very different ways, both her white and Native American ancestors considered the land their spiritual birthright. If she conceives of a relationship with the land as drawn outside the lines of landownership and the proprietary ideal, Roxanne still maintains an undeniable emotional connection with the red land she grew up on. In the end, Dunbar-Ortiz admits that she loves the land as dearly, and as irrationally at times, as did her parents. Previously, she had only framed her understanding of her father and his love of the land as a historian who contextualized that land as the object of historical battles over its possession and exploitation. In the closing pages of *Red Dirt*, as she stands at her mother's grave, Roxanne expresses her feelings toward the land in a much more personal sense, musing that "just below the skin that I show the world resides a peasant girl who absorbed ancient memories of the land. Love of the land is not located so much in the mind, or in the heart, as in the skin; how the skin feels when you go back. I know it by how my skin feels when I'm there, in that ten-mile-square areas where I grew up, and when my eyes sweep over the expanse of red dirt" (217).

*Red Dirt* ends in the way it began, with a reconciliation between Roxanne and her father. The two share a moment ironically occasioned by their shared fascination with *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the company of her friend Wilma McDaniel, Roxanne visited Weedpatch Camp, the federal labor camp in Arvin, California where the Joads find refuge in Steinbeck's novel. Back in San Francisco, Roxanne called her father to describe the visit. Moyer, who had read *The Grapes*

of *Wrath* several times, replied “yeah, them poor folks sure did suffer, couldn’t even grow their own food. Least you kids never went hungry like them” (224). Doubtless an ironic echo of Scarlett O’Hara’s “I will never go hungry again,” this line cleverly references Roxanne’s Scots-Irish ancestry and its attachment to the land with neither judgement or justification, in a rare instance in the text in which history, literature, and family align harmoniously, and in which she permits herself an unguarded pride in her Okie roots: “For the first time in my life I felt unashamed, and even proud, that the bottom line of my life was that I never went hungry” (224).

### III. Dunbar-Ortiz’s Contributions to Autoethnography

Much as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* features wry observations on those aspects of the African-American experience Huston found less than flattering, Dunbar-Ortiz’s conclusions regarding her native white culture demonstrates a pronounced ideological edge which sets itself to other aims besides the amelioration of the Okie’s bad reputation. *Red Dirt* instead promotes a deeper historical understanding of the class’s origins within a transnational, postcolonial historical situation. Mike Davis suggests that this project amounts to nothing less than a “secret history of poor-white people in America” (x). Dunbar-Ortiz’s insistence on placing the Okie’s story within a national and indeed global context distinguishes her autoethnography from John Steinbeck’s fictional representations of Oklahoma poor whites. In *Red Dirt* Oklahoma serves as a microcosm for the country at large— “American history told in fast-forward,” as David Chang observes (2).

In addition to the Californian Steinbeck, Dunbar-Ortiz engages the poetry of an Oklahoma native, Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel. McDaniel’s collection *A Primer for Buford* invites the descendants of Dust Bowl Okies “to recover and pass on our memories”—a project akin to Dunbar-Ortiz’s own primer on Okie identity (*RD* 5). Roxanne’s affinity with the

character Elbie Hayes in McDaniel's "Buried Treasure" led her to meet and befriend McDaniel (xi). In "Buried Treasure," Elbie has "ruined his expensive shoes squashing around the autumn desolation of a sharecropper farm in Caddo County" (*Red Dirt* 4). Elbie, an "Okie boy turned fifty" is "searching for anything that had belonged to his father when he was fighting the Great Depression" (5). He "kicked at a lump behind the caved-in cellar and uncovered a rusty Prince Albert can / Stowed it away as he would a saint's bones in his Lincoln Continental and headed back to Bakersfield" (*Red Dirt* 5).

There are obvious parallels between Elbie's prodigal return to Oklahoma and Roxanne's. McDaniel's elegiac poem considers the Okie a figure lost to posterity; for her, the diminishing Okie past is as "vanished" as the Indian's, to be mourned and celebrated by children and grandchildren who dig through the red clay seeking remnants, like Moyer's horseshoe, of a past way of life in order to restore meaning to their lives. Dunbar-Ortiz on the other hand considers the Okie a recalcitrant mainstay in the present. Moyer Dunbar was no "saint" and nor was Louise; Dunbar-Ortiz represents her parents rather as flawed people of intense passions who came of age in a period when agrarian ideals clashed with the realities of an industrialized modern world. Her "patrimony" is not so much a Prince Albert can or an old horseshoe but rather an intransigent anger towards the government and non-white minorities—an embittered siege mentality.

While writing an article entitled "One or Two Things I Know About Us" for *The Monthly Review*, Dunbar-Ortiz found a tragic illustration of the contemporary Okie's mindset on the front page of her daily newspaper, whose headline read "Gunman Killed by a SWAT Team in a Sacramento Tax Office." Upon reading the article, Dunbar-Ortiz gathered from the facts of the case that the gunman "was a white man named Jim Ray Holloway, age 53, from Manteca,

wearing a cowboy hat, carrying a rifle, a shotgun, and a hand-gun, ex-cop, mad about taxes” (1). She then mentally reconstructed Holloway’s life:

Possibly the child of Oklahoma sharecropping parents who migrated to California during the mid-1930s Dust Bowl, he was born one year after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps in a labor camp in the Central Valley. His parents probably got on their feet during the wartime boom and soon he could feel superior at least toward the Mexicans and Blacks because his parents taught him to be proud of being white and a native-born American. He might have to drive a truck or work in the oil fields or construction, but he became a California Highway Patrolman. Very likely he voted for Ronald Reagan for governor, Nixon for president, served in Vietnam, and hailed the presidency of Reagan. But he probably felt he had nothing to show for it and his beloved country was going to blacks on welfare, Vietnamese boat people, and the feminists and gays, with him footing the tax bill while no one had ever helped his family when they were in need. It’s a common story among the descendants of the Dust Bowl refugees. (1)

While the news article made no mention of “Okies”— “that would never happen in California these days”—the Okie mentality displayed by Holloway endures in bitterness like the southern Lost Cause, to the detriment of the group’s national image and their ability to adjust to life in contemporary America. The implications of Dunbar-Ortiz’s more expansive use of the term “Okie” have become apparent in the twenty-first century American experience of recession and depression, which seems to have produced a new generation of “Okies” out of poor and working-class Americans regardless of color or creed. *Red Dirt* asks this generation to recover the lost narratives that lend an essential perspective to the anger and bitterness that seem to have motivated a whole new “silent majority” to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential

election. As a radical writer and activist, Dunbar-Ortiz understands the rage over a lost American dream and redirects it towards a global economic system that exploits indigenous peoples and white settlers, nativists and Native American alike. Her reframing of the Okie's story, in the words of her editor, thus "confounds the prevalent view of 'red versus blue states'" and "challenges the persistent stereotype of the Okie 'other'" (Davis xii).

The Okies are a class which has figured as an essential part of America's "usable past," to borrow literary critic Van Wyck Brook's notion of a distinctive American tradition—whether recovered or invented—placed in the service of a progressive future (Clayton 1). In *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*, Sylvia Jenkins Cook suggests that Steinbeck became the great literary chronicler of the Dust Bowl precisely because *The Grapes of Wrath* continued, and in many ways invented, a premodern agrarian American tradition which reflected not so much the way the nation saw the problem of the contemporary poor white in particular as the way it desired to see its own recent past receive an epic narrative treatment (159). *The Grapes of Wrath*, Cook writes, "represents the final depoliticizing and remythologizing of the poor-white social novel" (183). "Real economic conditions are not distorted," she writes, "but instead of challenging them with real economic or political solutions, Steinbeck alters the people to make them more competent to deal with the situation by returning to them traditions of courage and generosity and philosophies of optimism and endurance" (183). Like the Native American before them, Okies have been relegated to the country's past despite the fact that they too are still around, silently marginal to and threatening to expose the inherent weaknesses of any progressive narrative that does not address the deleterious effects of economic inequality and the closing of the American frontier on a populace/electorate that has come to represent America's present as much as its past.

Perhaps the most significant way an autoethnographer distinguishes herself from the ethnographer is by acknowledging her status as a member of the group she writes about, by admitting to herself and her readers her reasons for using the communal “we” as well as the autobiographical “I.” Violet Dutcher observes that autoethnographers are “careful to write from the ‘I’ position, in order to maintain a reliable account not only from their own perspectives as insider and outsider (and so, perhaps, neither) but from the perspectives of the participants in the project” (95). On the other hand, “the temptation is strong to give up the position of ‘I’—in its specificity and humility—in favor of a general and communally sanctioned ‘we’” (95). When Dunbar-Ortiz switches from the autobiographical “I” to the communal “we,” it signals her desire to appeal directly to the members of her poor-white class, as in this passage:

Potent memories inform my broad theories and conclusions. I cannot forget my grandfather and his time, the Wobblies and the Green Corn Rebellion. Therein lies a truly valiant history, a history little known to its descendants, a history usable only if celebrated in the context of acknowledging the lie of the origin myth, and only if class is central to *our* future identity as the Okie subculture. (47, emphasis added)

Here Dunbar-Ortiz both clarifies the aims of her autoethnography and establishes her ethos in writing any history at all of a poor-white “subculture” which would prefer not to think of itself as a minority so much as a “silent majority.” Although in recent decades the term “Okie” has been extended to include anyone from the state of Oklahoma, for Dunbar-Ortiz the word still retains an original bite which derives specifically from its roots in a minoritized, underclass experience. To deny that history for her would mean denying the experience of the poverty which defined her youth and inspired her career as a Marxist critic of capital and fierce advocate for social justice.

Lionnett considers Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an "anamnesis"— "not self-contemplation but a painstaking effort to be the voice of that occluded past, to fill the void of collective memory" (118). Mike Davis suggests a Lionnettian reading of *Red Dirt* when he writes that Dunbar-Ortiz opens "Oklahoma's collective closet," and that her "potent memories" offer a remedy for the "historical amnesia" which is "not an Okie franchise but rather the ontological disease of most Americans of poor-white ancestry" (xi). Lionnett, channeling Frantz Fanon, suggests that "our problem as colonized people is that we all suffer from collective amnesia" ("Voices" 118). Dunbar-Ortiz places the accounts of her parents within a broader narrative which illustrates how the condition of forgetting affects the children of the colonizers as well as those of the colonized. When family accounts partake in the mythology of a culture as much as its history, the autoethnographer views her role as crucial to the process of unforgetting. Though her account may or may not claim to be the "definitive account," what matters is the autoethnographer's desire to unify the seemingly disparate experiences of a people—to "fill the void of collective memory" and to correct the "omissions and distortions" of official history ("Responsibility"). This task—what Dunbar-Ortiz considers "the responsibility of historians" is particularly difficult for writers who struggle with understanding and redefining their role within patriarchal cultures and resisting the temptation to leave their old lives behind once they are presented, as was Dunbar-Ortiz, with the opportunity to redefine their lives.

That *Red Dirt* came so late in her career has much to do with Dunbar-Ortiz's difficulty in shifting her focus from the colonized situations faced by groups like the Sioux Indians (*The Great Sioux Nation*) and Pueblo Indians in New Mexico (*Roots of Resistance*) to her own white settler class. As she admits in "Bloody Footprints," "the most painful part of my quest for identity has been the juggling of my poor-white experience and my knowledge of the power of

white supremacy in this society” (79). Given how “defensive” the Okies can be regarding their class and racial identity, they and other poor whites would seem the least likely to engage in the practice of autoethnography. Whites find it very difficult to admit either their privilege in American society or their lack thereof.

Dunbar-Ortiz exemplifies the aims of the autoethnographer by acknowledging that her presumed identity—whether Southern or Okie, is largely based on a fictional or mythological understanding of her social and cultural origins. She is willing to dispense with her culture’s most dearly held ideals of itself, and she is brave enough to refuse the heroic narrative of the “stoical, silent-suffering poor” that may have improved the poor white’s national reputation for a time but can never sustain poor whites themselves, as evidenced by the eventual failure of her parents’ struggle to exemplify the “true American” (*RD* 32). Acknowledging unpleasant truths about one’s class and culture constitutes the essential first step in assuming the mantle of self-confidence necessary to speak as an authority on that class—a role ungranted and unlicensed by a culture that would prefer its daughters remain silent in the face of outside scrutiny or critique. As an activist and academic, Dunbar-Ortiz had first to break through her own silence and the shame surrounding her rural Oklahoma background in order to appeal to working-class women. As an autobiographer, she broke fresh ground for the writing of autoethnography by poor-white women in America.



### CHAPTER III

#### “WHAT I COME FROM HAS MADE ME WHO I AM”: JANISSE RAY AND CRACKER LIFE(WORLD) WRITING

This chapter seeks to better understand the relationship between Janisse Ray’s ecological vision and her approach to life writing. I argue that Ray’s two principal memoirs represent the fulfillment of a two-part aim to reproduce and revitalize her native Cracker community or lifeworld. The first, *Ecology of A Cracker Childhood* (2000), traces the contours of Ray’s personal relationship with the longleaf pine ecology of southeast Georgia. The second, *Wild Card Quilt: Taking a Chance on Home* (2003), recounts her return to her hometown of Baxley, Georgia after seventeen years away. The difference between these two memoirs illustrates many of the possibilities and a few of the limitations of lifewriting as a vehicle for Ray’s environmental activism.

A major concept from the philosopher Edmund Husserl provides the framework for my study. The “lifeworld” (*lebenswelt*) constitutes the pre-given ground for all lived experience, “the world in which I find myself and which is likewise the surrounding world” (53). While a consensus view of the concept has been difficult to achieve, scholars are nearly unequivocal in pointing out the persistence of certain aspects of the lifeworld. First, each person carries her individual lifeworld wherever she goes. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram explains that “the life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience *as we live it*, prior to all our thoughts about it. It is that which is present to us in our everyday tasks and enjoyments—reality

as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our science” (40). Second, the lifeworld is also a shared or “intersubjective” phenomenon; one’s personal lifeworld partakes of the social world one shares with the other. Abram also argues that the lifeworld is “not a private, but a collective dimension—the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are entwined” (40). Finally, the lifeworld is constituted by the natural world as well as by the social and cultural worlds that give it meaning. Ulrich Majer explains the concept like this: “you and I see the same tree, ‘this’ tree, but from different perspectives relative to your eyes and my eyes” (“Origin” 12). Andy Fisher, in *Radical Ecopsychology*, defines the lifeworld as no less than “the everyday world of cultural meanings and traditions, ethical attitudes, artistic expressions, social relations with nature, and so on” (208).

For my purposes, the lifeworld might best be explained as a foundational grounding of self and other within a shared natural and cultural world, or “homeworld” (*umwelt*). By way of illustration, Scott Romine has applied the concept of the lifeworld specifically to Southern literature in his essay on William Alexander Percy, the Mississippi Delta planter’s son who eulogized the Southern planter class in his autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee*. Romine explains that the planters’ daily ritual of preparing and drinking a mint julep on the veranda, in the summer heat, “reproduces” the lifeworld Percy remembers not as a private indulgence but as a social ritual involving William’s father, LeRoy Percy, neighboring planters, and the young William himself, who was permitted to drink the “delicious mess of ice and mint and whiskey” that collected in the bottom of the glass (Percy 65). Thus, the mint julep is not just a cocktail but a symbol that “metonymically invokes a wide range of feelings, values and relationships broadly associated with a Southern way of life” (Romine 137). In the julep-drinking ritual, family, social class, and the sultry Greenville summer all combine to evoke a distinctively Southern lifeworld.

For Jurgen Habermas, the lifeworld functions as the foundation, or “background knowledge” that supports a given society— “but the moment this background knowledge enters communicative expression, where it becomes explicit knowledge and thereby subject to criticism, it loses precisely those characteristics which lifeworld structures always have for them: certainty, background character, impossibility of being gone behind” (109). Husserl and Habermas agree that the lifeworld is always a pregiven, unreflected background of consciousness. Writing the lifeworld then would seem to constitute a fall into signification that closes down access to that background in the very act of bringing it into the foreground: “the lifeworld is that remarkable thing which dissolves before our eyes the moment we try to take it up piece by piece” (Habermas 109). Lamentably for Percy, the planters’ lifeworld can never again be taken for granted, but only recreated through memory and its literary corollary of autobiography.

Habermas scholar John Sitton, however, observes that “the role of the lifeworld can *only* be appreciated from the perspective of an observer attempting to see the lifeworld as a whole and therefore revealing the manner and consideration of its production” (66). When symbolically “reproduced” in life writing, the lifeworld serves as “a medium of ‘symbolic space,’ within which culture, social integration and personality are sustained and reproduced” (13). In the case of William Percy, the “observer” is privileged both as a white male scion of the planter class and as the backward-looking elegist for a lost Southern way of life. Percy’s melancholic notion of a lifeworld at ebb tide might be characterized as “this world has died before me,” or, more pointedly, “this world will die with me.”

How does it change the genre of life(world) writing, however, when a female member of a poor white class takes on the role of observer and reproducer of her lifeworld? As the title

*Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* suggests, Janisse Ray is a writer from the opposite of Percy's economically privileged background, and hers is a form of life writing attuned to the lifeworld understood both as her natural and cultural world.

If I am to characterize Ray's memoir as life (world) writing, I should first address the question of whether the terms "lifeworld" and "ecology" are interchangeable in Ray or elsewhere. Although Ray never refers to the "lifeworld" by name in her writing, she uses the term "ecosystem" to describe much the same concept. "Ecology" refers specifically to the scientific study of the interactions of organisms within a given environment (Chapman and Reiss 2). Thus, the philosophical term "lifeworld" refers to a *pre*-scientific, pre-theoretical world, and the scientific term "ecology" refers to the accepted scientific knowledge regarding that world. If one revisits the earliest definition of "ecology" however, the term reveals a more intimate sense of the word. The zoologist Ernst Haeckel first coined the term "ecology," referring to the Greek *oikos* "house," "dwelling," or "family," and *logos*, or "word" (Schwarz and Jax 145). Thus "ecology" suggests "the science of the household of organisms, i.e. of their relations to their biotic and abiotic surroundings" (147). Such a translation encourages us to think of one's ecology as firmly grounded in the childhood world of the "household," the foundation of an individual's experience of nature and culture, of human and non-human life.

Janisse Ray considers her situation as a member of the "family" or group to which she belongs; she is one of the organisms under study within her given environment, an individual family member who explores her room in the house where she was born before stepping outside to compare it to other houses, other ecologies or "alienworlds" that are always constituted against the background of her own homeworld (Beyer, "Husserl").

According to Daniel White, "both ecology, especially in its evolutionary dimension, and

phenomenology, especially in regard to the lifeworld, share a quest for origins to answer the basic question, ‘whence did we and our world come about?’” (78). White argues that “evolutionary ecology looks at this question ‘objectively,’ phenomenology ‘subjectively,’ and this dichotomy, with its metaphysics and discourse communities, has largely come to characterize the rift between the sciences and the humanities, respectively” (517). Janisse Ray’s life writing bridges the gap between literature and science in the manner that White seems to suggest. Her more intimate way of understanding ecology and her literary techniques for transmitting that knowledge help us to read *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* as her study of the interactions between the human and the non-human inhabitants of her native environment, south Georgia’s share of the longleaf pine forests that once stretched from Virginia to East Texas (“Longleaf Pine Ecosystem”).

My question in this chapter does not concern whether one can study objectively or scientifically the landscape with which one is so closely acquainted—the zoologist Louis Agassiz once, when asked how he spent his summer vacation, famously replied “I got halfway across my back yard” (Lyons 68). I argue instead that the term “lifeworld” offers an alternative (or supplement) to “ecology” as a focus for my study because, although Ray demonstrates an extensive scientific knowledge of the flora and fauna of her home region, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is more remarkable as a literary text for the ways in which it reproduces its author’s subjective experience of her pre-scientific childhood world, a phenomenal experience of place that occurred *prior* to her immersion in the world of science—even a science as expansive and attuned to a broader field, or *gestalt*, as ecology. I argue that in its delimiting of one’s lived experience in a given place and time, the concept of the lifeworld offers fresh insight into the dual aims of Ray’s two memoirs: the reproduction of the Cracker lifeworld of her youth and the

revitalization of that lifeworld as an adult writer and activist.

I should also pause to consider the difference between the phenomenological “life” of the lifeworld, and “life” in the biological sense. The co-authors of *The Embodied Mind* explain that we view our bodies “both as physical structures and as lived experiential structures—in short, as both ‘outer’ and ‘inner,’ biological and phenomenological. These two sides of embodiment are obviously not opposed. Instead, we continuously circulate back and forth between them” (xv). In James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self* also, the phenomenological sense of self corresponds to the meaningfulness of the private, inner self that must be externalized through life writing in order to communicate that sense of self to readers.

There is also “a life,” the linguistically constructed life of “autobiography,” in which the emphasis is typically placed upon the prefix “auto,” indicating that the self being written is in some way privileged above the other lives from which it arises. In her memoirs, however, Ray does not de-privilege the self, or “auto,” so much as she attempts to give equal emphasis to the “bios,” or biological life: the other human and non-human lives that share her ecology. Ray writes a “life” inextricable from its natural environment, a life(world) writing that begins from the lived body, the “zero-point” of an embodied consciousness rooted in her experience of her environment or lifeworld. The self or “auto” of “autobiography” never exists in isolation, yet whereas it is possible for a memoirist or autobiographer in the ordinary sense of the word to write for hundreds of pages without consciously investigating his position as a privileged subject, the life(world) writer suspends or “brackets” those aspects of her lifeworld (e.g. social position, politics, religious beliefs) that constitute her world as “sediments” or layers accrued upon her life, taken at a more basic, biological level. Husserl called his methodology for accomplishing this process the phenomenological “reduction,” by which the subject “returns” (from the Latin

verb *reducere*) to the body, “the zero-point of orientation, the bearer of the here and now, out of which the pure ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses” (163). The “phenomenological reduction” enables the subject to bracket off, or temporarily suspend, the sedimented layers of her culture in order to come as close as possible to an individual, bodily-oriented experience of the lifeworld. While this reduction is never complete, in that the philosopher/writer can never fully reach the “pure ego” of consciousness independent of her social environment, the idea is to come as closely as one can to this position which opens a new window onto the world, and then to invite others to see the world through her eyes (Natanson 81).

Janisse Ray as autoethnographer also realizes that her world was always intended towards others, in a foundational intersubjectivity which Husserl locates at the center of his phenomenology (Beyer). Having emerged from the “natural attitude,” by which he means the unquestioned taken-for-granted aspects of her lifeworld, she then reconsiders those aspects of the lifeworld which Husserl’s phenomenological reduction brackets out. Maurice Natanson describes these complementary trajectories as those in which we move from “the world to the ego” and from “the ego back to the world” (139). “A phenomenology of the life-world,” Natanson writes, is “an effort to account for the historicity sedimented in the career of consciousness” (139). This aptly describes Ray’s exploration of class identity and family history, with its poverty, mental illness and fundamentalist religious beliefs that constitute her subjective or “experiential dimension” of history, or her “historicity” (139).

Lastly, phenomenologists contend that an individual life is always *intended* towards one “world” or the other. The constitution of a world, specifically a better world, is the province of a writer like Janisse Ray with a “reinhabitory” ecological vision for the future (Welling).

Although, again, Ray does not explicitly employ a Husserlian vocabulary or methodology in her memoirs, I argue that a phenomenological reading demonstrates how the development of her voice as a writer tends toward the ethical considerations of the lifeworld in which she is involved and towards which she feels a strong sense of personal belonging and ethical responsibility.

### **I. Reproducing the Lifeworld: *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood***

As observer of the lifeworld, Ray reproduces her native landscape and culture for an audience, and, as A. James Wohlpart has argued, for herself, in a narrative structured in such a way as to re-order that experience for the benefit of both. Key to Wohlpart's argument is the idea that Ray finds meaning in her life story by grounding her first memoir in native terrain that she explores, as in T.S. Eliot's phrase, "in order to know the place for the first time." Wohlpart contends that Ray only gained a scientific (botanical, zoological) knowledge of her native south Georgia landscape upon returning to her hometown after seventeen years away. He bases this conclusion on Ray's own admission regarding her youthful ignorance of local plant and wildlife:

When I pick up my childhood like a picture and examine it really closely, I realize that I left home not knowing how to swim, not knowing the name of one wild bird except maybe crow, and that I couldn't identify wildflowers and trees. I knew the decimal system inside and out, could calculate the force of gravity on a ten-pound block sliding down an incline, had read Dumas and Chekhov and Bronte but couldn't tell a weasel from a warthog. (211)

There are several passages in *Cracker Childhood* however in which Ray grounds her knowledge of the landscape in a pre-scientific, "pre-given" lifeworld. In "Forest Beloved" for instance, she describes "the landscape I was born to, that owns my body, the uplands and lowlands of Southern Georgia" (13). In passages like these Ray's relationship to the landscape appears to



prefigure her actual lived experience, as though she has been granted access to a deeper cultural memory rooted in the pine forests. The magnificent longleaf pines loom large in her earliest memories and in her imagination: “maybe a vision of the original longleaf pine flatwoods has been endowed to me through genes, because I seem to remember their endlessness. I seem to recollect when these coastal plains were one big, brown-and-tan, daybreak-to-dark longleaf forest” (65).

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that one’s personal existence resumes a “*prepersonal* tradition”— “there is therefore another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body” (Fisher 107). Our bodies, for Merleau-Ponty, “bear the past within them and so anticipate or are prestructured for the world” (Fisher 107). For Husserl as well, the inherent wisdom of a body rooted in the natural world “supplies the necessary background for all intentional acts and is the ‘meaning fundament’ for all other worlds it is possible to inhabit (e.g. the world of science, the world of mathematics, the world of religious belief, and so on)” (*The Husserl Dictionary* 190). “Where I come from,” Ray writes, “has made me who I am” (33). Ray expresses her relationship with her native landscape in a poetic language that communicates, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “a direct and primitive contact with the world” (vii), and builds on this foundation a memoir that accrues additional layers of natural and cultural history. Long before the longleaf pinelands became the object of Ray’s passionate career as an environmentalist, they were home, the source of her memories and dreams, myths and metaphors.

Janisse’s parents helped kindle this imaginative connection to the non-human landscape when she was a child by giving her a personal “creation story” that explains her early feelings of rootedness in the natural landscape. One night, the story goes, Franklin and Lee Ada Ray were

out walking in the junkyard when they heard the sound of a “bleating cry” (7). The couple traced the sound to a stand of palmettos and found, cradled in pine needles, a baby: a “long-limbed newborn child with a duff of dark hair, its face red and puckered. And that was me...I came into their lives easy as finding a dark-faced Merino with legs too wobbly to stand” (6). Baby Janisse sprang autochthonously from the ground like the pines themselves, engendered by the same Georgia earth.

Ray likewise demonstrates her own talent for mythmaking and allegory in her parable of a pine seed “that fell in love with a place that belonged to lightning” (35). In this story, told in her chapter “Built by Fire,” a seed blew into the “open, flat land” of the Southern coastal plains, fell in love with the land and decided to take root and grow there. The seed grew to a pine tree, laying low during the thunderstorms that rippled through the plains every evening. One summer day, the lightning announced itself: “I reign over this land. You must leave immediately” (35). The pine tree entreated lightning to share the land, but lightning refused to yield the ground. Pine defiantly took root and grew tall, waging a years-long war with lightning in which lightning hurled millions of bolts down upon the invader. Finally, lightning delivered a killing strike. In dying, however, the pine showered cones upon the ground that grew to adulthood while the lightning “went to sleep through the rainy springs” (37). When lightning attacked again, it realized “the pine tree was plugging its needles with volatile resins and oils, rendering them highly flammable. The tree, of course, thought only to make the fires burn rapidly so danger would pass quickly” (37). Flammability, Ray explains, “was important in driving wildfire through the forest, in order to leave the older trees unharmed” (37). Lightning, however, saw “volatility as an act of remuneration” (37). Under the ensuing truce, lightning periodically burned the thick underbrush that grew beneath the pines, and this understory carried the fire

quickly through the woods, permitting the trees to grow into the tall, magnificent longleaves of legend (38). Thus the two former adversaries, Pine and Lightning, learned to co-exist peacefully within the same ecosystem. In this interstitial chapter, one of many that intersect her more strictly autobiographical chapters, Ray claims the wild pine forests as both poetic muse and historical subject, positioning herself as the inheritor of this metaphorical talent for negotiation, compromise and co-existence within the natural world. Her two creation myths, one personal and the other anthropomorphic, bridge the gap between the “auto” and the “bio” in autobiography.

Ray’s Cracker ancestors, however, settled on the same beautiful land but never learned to co-exist harmoniously in the manner of lightning and pine:

My ancestors crossed the wide Altamaha into what had been Creek territory and settled the vast, fire-loving uplands of the coastal plains of southeast Georgia, surrounded by a singing forest of tall and widely spaced pines whose history they did not know, whose stories were untold. The memory of what they entered is scrawled on my bones, so that I carry the landscape inside like an ache. (4)

The lives of the old Cracker settlers were a battle from the start, in frontier conditions that placed them at odds with the landscape and its non-human inhabitants:

Passing through my homeland it was easy to see that Crackers, although fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to death, hadn’t had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities. Our relationship with the land wasn’t one of give and return. The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas— racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was overtilled; eroded; cut; littered; polluted; treated as a commodity, sometimes the only one, and not as a living

thing. Most people worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it. (164-5)

Taking on the role of apologist for her Cracker lineage, Ray bears witness to the decimation of the longleaf pine ecosystem and the painful knowledge of her forebears' participation in its near-extinction, accepting the "shameful" legacy of the Crackers' wrong relationship with the land as an essential part of the inherited wisdom "scrawled on [her] bones" (4). She internalizes the loss of the original south Georgia landscape she had never known and experiences it as a melancholic longing, as though for a beloved she never met in person. Fisher explains that the body possesses "a kind of knowledge of the environment as well as motivations of action," and that it "expresses itself in well-constructed purposive series and complexes of wishes" (107). Ray often speaks in comparable terms of a sense of loss and imbalance in the world, when describing her "implacable longing" (273), for instance, the "ache" she carries inside her (4), and her "desire for this world to be better" (*Wild Card Quilt* 41). *Ecology* takes this sense of something missing in Ray's affective landscape and writes that sense of lack onto the contemporary terrain.

Ray's Cracker ancestors, however, did not speak the language of the pines, due, she suggests, to the hardscrabble circumstances that eclipsed their potential for a more ethical relationship with their environment. Because Ray on the other hand enjoyed the relative privilege of one born into a ready-made ecology, a household set in order by her father, she established a world-body dialogue as a child at play in the woods around the junkyard. She could climb a tree and swing from its branches as opposed to seeing a tree as her ancestors did, as fuel for a fireplace in winter, or as building material for a cabin. This confidence in her own right relationship with nature lends Ray an authoritative voice that can tell the "untold" stories of the longleaf pines and those of the settlers who lived among them. Her knowledge of the natural and

cultural history of her bio-region gives her the authority to speak for the Georgia Crackers from a position of relative privilege, albeit a different kind of privilege than that of a William Percy. Hers is the voice not of the man at the center of the Southern proprietary ideal but of the autoethnographer who circumscribes her community from her position on the margins—not merely from her class position as a poor-white woman, but from a perspective gained from having left and then returned to re-inhabit that community.

Because its comprehensive view of the lifeworld is grounded in a subjective, individual experience however, *Ecology* also reveals its writer's eccentricity in relation to that Cracker culture for which she often takes the liberty to speak. For an illustration of this dynamic, one observes how Ray's narration often seamlessly blends the personal pronoun "I" with the collective "we," as in the passage below, in which she describes a solitary walk through a hardwood forest:

I drink old-growth forest in like water. This is the homeland that built us. Here we walk shoulder to shoulder with history—our history. We are in the presence of something ancient and venerable, perhaps of time itself, its unhurried passing marked by immensity and stolidity, each year purged by fire, cinched by a ring. Here we see ourselves as human, as southern, in a natural order that is again grand and whole and functional. I am humbled, not frightened, by it. I am comforted. It is as if a roundtable springs up in the cathedral of pines and God graciously pulls out a chair for me, and I no longer have to worry about what happens to souls. (69)

Andy Fisher theorizes the need for an "existential clearing" that will "differentiate and back off the underdistanced otherness that presses in on us, or operates covertly in our background, so that we may become more aware of it and enter a freer and more caring

relationship to it” (116). He continues: “anyone who knows what it is like to feel anxious or pressured—states in which it is hard to breathe, knows how claustrophobic our lived space can become and how tightly a dreaded future can squeeze in on us, such that we lose our ability to creatively and freely respond to the present moment. For all of us, the more open this clearing becomes, the more we are able to use our freedom in making good contact with others, and so serving the life force of nature” (116). The clearing Ray describes in the above passage connects metonymically with the psychical clearing Fisher describes, and also recalls the original clearing at the heart of *Cracker Childhood*—the forest cleared by the cleansing fire that consumed the choking underbrush and permitted the pine tree to grow unimpeded, exemplifying the “natural order” Ray desires to restore in her life in the present.

The old-growth forest where Ray finds peace is an exception to the general rule of fragmented topography in the Southeast, where the environment “ranges from intact, functional habitat to a fragmented forest, then an archipelago of forest patches in a sea of development” (*Pinhook* 7). *Ecology* traces the source of this fragmentation to one year: 1940, the year Cracker timbermen adopted the tree-farming method of silviculture, in which they planted fast-growing, fire-intolerant slash and loblolly pine, to be cut in twenty-five years’ time (124). In the absence of a periodic natural fire that cleared the natural forests, “within ten years a canopy would close, and the commercial plantation was dark within, darker than you can imagine a forest being. The limbs and needles of the overcrowded pines drank every inch of sky. Any native vegetation that survived land preparation did not survive loss of light” (125). Room to grow is a vital need for a life among lives, and an overcrowded pine plantation is to a forest what a cramped psychological state is to an “existential clearing.”

In the solitude of the old forest, Ray can recover something of an animal intimacy with

nature. But while her younger self saw a pine tree as an object to be climbed in play, or one that provided shade from the Georgia sun, the adult Janisse cannot help but see a longleaf pine, an individual member of an endangered species of longleaf pines in need of conservation. It is because her experience of the lifeworld is grounded in an ecological ethics that she views a hardwood tree in this way—as an artifact of the past to be preserved for future generations.

The pressures of Ray's ecological outlook demand that she establish her difference from the "we," if by "we" she means her fellow southern Crackers, who do not share her ethical worldview. Notably, Ray is the only congregant at this table in the "cathedral of pines"; her church needs no preachers to mediate between her and God. If she can always find her way back to this clearing, inviting others to take their seats at the "roundtable" of shared vision and mutual purpose remains a challenge. The interplay between "I" and "we" in *Ecology* reveals an ongoing challenge for the autoethnographer who would speak to, rather than merely about, her people. Otherwise, the appeal to "southern" identity seems merely rhetorical on Ray's part—not an essential part of a mutually constituted "homeworld" but an idiosyncratic voice expressing foreign values of an "alienworld," particularly where religious beliefs are concerned.

The combination of naturalistic spirituality and environmental consciousness in the above passage distinguishes Ray significantly from her native group of Southerners. She describes a lifeworld in which regional identity ("southern") and Christianity are subsumed by a "natural order" that obviates the need for a religion concerned with the fate of the soul in the afterlife. Janisse's unorthodox views on religion place her at odds with her "fundamentalist, fervent, holy-rolling" father (105), and constitute a radical departure from the Southern evangelical religion commonly practiced by her fellow Georgians. Janisse's father, Franklin Ray, observed strict religious rituals inspired by scripture, including forty-day fasts in which the family would eat and

drink nothing until sundown, and “tarrying services” in which they “gathered in the upstairs study to call Jesus’s name over and over, hoping, especially our father, who craved a divine presence the most, that the Holy Ghost might appear to us” (117). Janisse recalls that fear for her soul kept her “isolated” at home for much of her adulthood, and that the chance “simply [to] be a young mammal roaming the woods did not exist” (121).

Nature for Janisse is irreconcilable with a religion that ignores and discourages relations with the natural world in favor of a rewarding afterlife: “I will not endeavor to reconcile Christianity with respect for nature. What I want to describe is that when I was growing up, the world about me was subverted by the world of the soul, the promise of a future after death. Much of my time I spent seeking purity, meaning I desired to be good, to honor my parents and glorify God, in order to enter his kingdom one day” (120). Many of Ray’s chapter titles however are biblical in tone, such as “Heaven on Earth,” “Beulahland,” and “Promised Land.”

In a series of ironic reversals, Ray draws from scripture to designate the places where she first felt the stirrings of her personal, natural religion. Her “promised land” for instance refers to “the infinite hopefulness of a virgin forest where time stalls” (271). Her version of Beulahland, another name for the Christian heaven, was the home of her maternal grandmother, Beulah. Nestled in a copse of longleaf pine, Beulahland was a place where Ray could be a body “running through the woods,” a chance that “did not exist” in her father’s junkyard (121). “Between the outbuildings,” she recalls, “grew huge water oaks where I would play in the jade moss that grew around the buttresses of their bases. I would set tables for hand-me-down Barbies, filling acorn cups with water on brickbat tables. The moss was a cool carpet, here a nook for the kitchen, a space between roots for a living room there. It was another world, one of the mind, and in that world the trees were home” (179). Here, in this model household, is Ray’s model for the



*lebenswelt*, the life-world, where she made her home in the space between the roots of trees. In the Bible, the name “Beulah” is translated as “married,” as in Isaiah 62:4: “No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married” (NVT).

Beulahland then was a world where the soul was married with the body, a union impossible in the Ray home, where Janisse’s body remained a “captive spirit” trapped in the cage of the soul.

Ray explains that her father’s religious strictures prohibited activities like sports or swimming that required that the children show their skin (106). Ray’s “heaven on earth” by contrast was also her natural “habitat,” as she will later describe her grandmother’s house in *Wild Card Quilt*, a place free from the negative connotations associated with the body. In defiance of her father’s spiritual system that saw the body as a source of sin, that “subverted” the body with “the world of the soul” (120), Ray came to understand the body and its senses in the way that phenomenologists understand it: as a “privileged part of nature” that gives us access to the natural world (Fisher 58). After she overcame her inherited fear of the body and reincorporated it into her sense of selfhood, Janisse enjoyed a healthy relationship with her lived body, restored to its place as the center of perception that anchored her consciousness to referents in her natural environment. Franklin’s religious fanaticism by comparison was an intense affective state disconnected from his surrounding environment, to the extent that in one instance symptoms of his mania were the same as those of one drugged with LSD (92).

If Ray nicely illustrates the concept of the lifeworld in describing the longleaf ecosystem, *Ecology* also presents a brilliant correlative for “system,” the other side of Habermas’s dynamic, in her descriptions of the junkyard in which she was raised. In contrast to the lifeworld is the “system,” or “systems.” Systems “colonize” the lifeworld through the “steering media” of

money and power. The capitalist economic system, for instance, “parasitically draws the life out of the lifeworld, relentlessly invading non-marketized regions of our lives and rechanneling to efficiently meet the needs of the system (an obvious example being the commodification of the Christmas celebration)” (Fisher 210).

Psychologist Tod Sloan explains that “lifeworld processes include forms of communication and practice aimed at identity development [who we are], the transmission of cultural knowledge [what we value], and the resolution of disagreements about ethical and normative matters” (“Colonization”). “Ideally,” he continues, “these have priority over and serve to guide activities related to system operations. For example, a community’s conscious sense that a certain old tree is a cultural landmark would have priority over someone’s desire to cut it down for firewood.” To expand upon Sloan’s example, a lifeworld colonized by the capitalist system in the form of a lumber company like Weyerhaeuser would view longleaf pines not as Ray sees them—as irreplaceable members of a natural community or ecosystem—but strictly as commodities to be harvested and replaced by quickly regenerating pine plantations.

Jurgen Habermas departs from Husserl’s conception of the lifeworld as taken-for-granted and always “already there,” modifying the term to mean, primarily, a “language community” which must be “mediated, materially reproduced and symbolically structured” (Moran 277). Habermas asserts that we grasp the structure of the individual lifeworlds only through interaction in a social context. Dermot Moran writes:

Habermas understands the lifeworld primarily as the culturally transmitted and linguistically structured horizon within which human beings *act*. Society can be conceived in terms of the activities of agents or simply as a self-regulating system. The systematic approach tends to neglect the role of the individual agents. (277; emphasis

added)

One way for individuals to “act” is through “communicative action,” which occurs among subjects in a healthy society and continually feeds or replenishes the lifeworld through symbolic reproduction. This amounts to individual “agents” acting to preserve a way of life rather than simply taking for granted that it will always be there for them. “The lifeworld,” Moran continues, “underpins communicative action, whereas preoccupation with system tends to distort the lifeworld” (277).

The colonization of the lifeworld interferes with symbolic reproduction and silences communicative action, which according to Habermas leads to certain “social pathologies” in its subjects (303). These pathologies include “a loss of shared meaning, a deepening sense of demoralization and alienation, a spread of social disintegration and instability, and a growth in personal suffering and psychopathology” (Fisher 214). Habermas has been criticized for remaining vague on the ways in which the signs of these social pathologies manifest in the subjects of a colonized lifeworld. I argue, however, that in charting her family history and the variations of the mysterious “sickness” that plagues it, Janisse Ray offers compelling evidence for the explicit connections between the colonization of the lifeworld and its resulting social and psychological disorders. As I will explore, the men of the Ray family lead imbalanced lives that bear the traces of their relationship to a natural community decimated by the logging industry—the same industry that provided a livelihood for many poor-white Crackers in the twentieth century.

An intriguing Ray family dynamic first emerges in the story of Janisse’s great-grandparents, Woodward, called “Pun,” and Mattie, called “Little Granny.” A land surveyor and lumber checker for a timber company, Pun “was famous in Appling County both as a

mathematical genius and as a sot. He threw drunks that lasted for days at a time, but on sober evenings he sat by the fire or in his chair on the porch, scrap of paper in hand, figuring aimlessly, the way others read or embroider to while away the time before sleep” (102). “Little Granny” was “a tiny, sharp woman who surrounded her unpainted, heart-pine house with flowers,” a figure for the *oikos*, or ecology as household. (102). In those days, Franklin tells Janisse, “they knew more about the names of plants and birds and so forth. You didn’t harm a bird around Mattie. Couldn’t shoot a mockingbird. Probably she was kinder to birds than people” (102).

The mathematically minded Pun on the other hand treated the longleaf pines as commodities, as a means to an end. In his job as lumber checker, Pun sent thousands of longleaf pines to the mills in Lumber City. Janisse wanted to believe that her great-grandfather “felt some love for land and trees—after all, they had been his livelihood and surely his wife lobbied him to save land for wildflowers and birds” (102). Ray’s father, however, who worked for Pun when he was young, disabused her of this notion: “[Pun] walked the woods a lot, but not for enjoyment. Much of the land he surveyed in preparation for logging” (102). Pun once expressed his cavalier philosophy to Franklin in the form of a little poem: “There’s just as many fish swimming in the ocean today / luscious and beautiful in every way / than have ever sputtered and spewed in the saucepans of yesterday” (103). The moral of the story is ‘*Never take more on your heart than you can shake off on your heels*’” (103). Of all lessons,” Ray writes, Pun’s was the one “I never learned and hope I never do” (103). One sees in Pun’s individualistic, mathematically minded approach to the woods a tendency to treat nature strategically or instrumentally, and a preference for system over lifeworld, albeit a system anchored, as Habermas argues all systems are, in the lifeworld (Ingram 274). Moreover, Pun seemed to view the woods as inexhaustible and endlessly self-replenishing, like the fish in the ocean.

Had Pun felt as his great-granddaughter would towards the trees that provided his “livelihood,” he would have been open (Ray imagines) to Little Granny’s entreaties to preserve the hardwoods instead of marking them for death. Pun, however, seems to have had either no interest in or access to the kind of communicative action that might have mitigated the clearcutting of the natural longleaf forest. Ray paints Pun’s lack of commitment to the natural environment and equivalent lack of commitment to community (if we take seriously his cavalier philosophy of life) as symptomatic of the colonization of the lifeworld, and the individual subject, by capitalism. Pun worked in the era when the tree-farming system altered the “material reproduction” of the landscape for subsequent generations. The Crackers of his generation and their descendants, as Ray prophesizes in “Clearcut,” would reap what they had sown in lives suffering from alienation and anomie in a topographically and spiritually fragmented region.

The Ray bloodline produced several instances of an almost schizophrenic disparity concerning attitudes toward the natural world, passed down from one generation to the next. Ray describes her own father’s aversion to nature, his obsessive need for control over his environment, and his irrepressible religious mania as the chief symptoms of his particular strain of a mental illness for which the Ray family was known throughout Appling County:

The disorder has run through my father’s side of the family for at least three generations that I know of, although kinfolks have said that many of my grandfather’s ancestors had been crazy. The illness courses most strongly through the men, although women are not spared, and appears to be caused by a combination of genetic predisposition and stressful environment. Usually it lands for a time upon a person and then it may never recur. The illness took my grandfather, and at random it hit among his brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. It took my own father. (41)

Franklin Ray occasionally suffered hallucinations that developed into full psychotic breaks and landed him in the state hospital in Milledgeville for months at a time, during which Ray's mother, Lee Ada, would take over the care of the household and patiently wait for her husband to return to himself. Visiting her father during these periods, Janisse would capture glimpses of sanity for "minutes at a time" that gradually "expanded" until "they came together, like warm currents of water in a river, until all of it is summer" (96).

Janisse contrasts her father's insane behavior with her own healthier relationship to the natural world: "I was different. It was not with great distress, not until later that I longed to be normal, because I was so well shielded from the world that I did not know what normal was" (115). Maurice Natanson writes that insanity calls attention to the lifeworld by revealing its symbolic structure:

In the strangeness of mental illness, the familiarity of ordinary experience comes, fleetingly at least, into relief...if familiarity is the primary characteristic of everyday life, strangeness is the imminent threat of the loss of the familiar—an estrangement of man from taken-for-grantedness of any kind. Strangeness penetrates familiarity as the potential debilitation of the lifeworld. (136)

The "debilitation" of the lifeworld calls attention to the existence of a wholesome, enveloping lifeworld against which the aberration stands in relief. To even know what "normal" looked like, Ray needed the examples of the Ray men who would occasionally break down, becoming unable to function as members of society in their everyday lives. Their negative examples inspired Janisse's efforts to obtain a right relationship to her natural and cultural lifeworld.

Another reason for presenting her family psychopathology in such a way is to render mental illness as a fragmented psyche isomorphic with the fragmented piney woods landscape.

In eugenic studies from the early twentieth-century, poor whites were thought to seek out and inhabit environments that somehow reflected their genetic and cultural defects or, the inverse, exercised a determinative shaping of their character (Matt Wray). *White Trash*, Nicole Hahn Rafter's collection of "eugenic family studies," lists the genetic traits associated with poor whites through the representative Juke, Kalikak, and Zero families, who figured in studies of pathology and criminology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These "defects" included "alcoholism, crime, feeble-mindedness, harlotry, hyperactivity, laziness, and a host of other ills" (1). Grady Macwhiney's *Cracker Culture*, a touchstone for Ray, likewise lists the character traits associated with Crackers in particular, who were reputed to be "lazy, lustful, quarrelsome, violent, ignorant, superstitious, drunkards, gamblers, and livestock thieves" (xvi). Ray, however, does not infer that her family's insanity is hereditary, in the sense of bad genes that somehow fortunately skipped her, but rather that psychological disorder has characterized their attempts to maintain order, or equilibrium, in the face of changes to their natural environment. The sign of these disorders manifest as behaviors that appear abnormal only when they impaired family functioning, as when Janisse's grandfather, Charlie Joe Ray, would leave home for weeks on end.

Charlie had also been institutionalized in Milledgeville by his wife, and escaped by swimming the Altamaha River (*Drifting into Darien* 32). Janisse describes Charlie as a "brawling boaster," a "lunatic woodsman" who periodically abandoned his family and vanished into the understory and his secret huckleberry grove (*Ecology* 63). Charlie demonstrated symptoms which would now be classified as "manic depressive," or "bipolar," and suffered from "an imbalance defined by flamboyant highs and pitch-black lows" (41). A poor provider, he would "disappear for days into the floodplain swamps of the Altamaha River, a truly wild place

then. . .where he hunted and trapped, fished and plundered” (41). “Because he withdrew often to the woods for safety and comfort and shelter and food,” Ray writes, Charlie “knew them like nobody I’d ever known . . . All his life, he never loved a human being the way he cherished woods; he never gave his heart so fully as to those peaceful wildland refuges that accepted without question any and all of their kind” (40). To depict her grandfather in bestial terms, as treeing a raccoon like a dog (44), fighting like a rattlesnake (49), and living as an animal among other animals who accepted him as “their kind” is not an unfavorable judgement from a writer who herself wished to “roam the woods” like a colt (121). Charlie Joe was “more comfortable in woods than on any street in town” (40). The forest, or natural lifeworld, and family and human society constituted the two “poles” of his personality, and he continually gravitated toward the former. Charlie had a “profound effect” on his granddaughter, and Janisse regrets that she did not learn more from him as a youth: “Grandpa could have tutored me, had he been able, in the swamp’s secrets—how to survive . . . there and how to survive in general” (64). Instead, Charlie’s example taught Janisse how to maintain the struggle between independence and autonomy on one hand and human society and belonging on the other.

The Ray family “illness” took the opposite form in Charlie’s son, Franklin, a loving and devoted father who “shielded [his family] from the world,” desiring to protect them from the terror he had experienced as a child. The source of her father’s “sickness” bewildered Janisse until the day she asked him why he never went hunting or fishing like other men (96). Franklin told her of the night Charlie Ray took him and his brothers coon-hunting deep in the woods when he was five or six (96). “We followed him for hours in the dark,” Franklin remembers; “we got tired and hungry and wanted to go home. He made out like we were lost and something might attack and kill us, all such as that. He had us all crying” (97). “And that was that,” Janisse



laments. “So much for tradition. So much for a long line of outdoorspeople. So much for the woods. What my grandfather planted in my father was a crazy fear and mistrust of being lost in a wilderness alone” (97). “Although my grandfather took to wilderness for solace to ease his wracked mind,” Ray surmises, “my father turned to machines, and somewhere, between the two of them, the thread of nature was lost. Fierceness took different forms in them, one savage, one inventive. What was balm for one was terror for the other” (96).

Janisse describes her father as a *bricoleur*, a “native genius,” able to “take the materials and technology at hand and solve complex problems” (89). Franklin had a talent for repairing engines and “an amazing triad of traits—frugality, creativity, and mechanical ingenuity” (89). Franklin’s wrecking yard provided him with a rationalized system based on the principles of systems enumerated by George Ritzer: “efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control” (13-15). The comparatively unpredictable, uncontrollable natural world had little part in Franklin’s system. Nature, when it intruded onto his land in the form of weeds or rattlesnakes, was just “in the way” (128). Ray explains that her father built his junkyard to be a buffer against the natural world, whereby he attempted to eliminate danger from his family’s existence.

Franklin hated needless suffering in people or animals, and repaired wounded creatures as though they were broken machines. In one instance, he mended an injured heron or “pond scoggin,” fixing a splint for the bird’s leg and keeping it in a cage until it healed, before releasing it back into the wild. In this way, Franklin created an artificial environment within whose parameters he attempted to control life and death itself. “His game is understanding and order,” Ray recalls of her father, “two things denied him early on” (75).

Andy Fisher explains that “if our world is not a place in which our trust and faith can flourish, then the need for security and control wins out over the need for open contact and

growth” (74). The appeal of abstract systems, whether profit-based, extractive industries or irrational belief systems, lies in their proposed alternative to poverty and an uncertain existence set adrift within a fearful environment. Jay Watson cites a story from *A Cracker Childhood* that provides further insight into the link between Franklin’s poverty and his fear of the natural world. In this story, Franklin took the family motorboating on the Altamaha, in a craft “made on the cheap” from a design in *Popular Mechanics* (223). The boat “struck a snag that ripped a hole halfway down its hull” (224), and Janisse, who was only three months old at the time and strapped in a life preserver, spilled out of the submerged craft. “When the river took me,” Janisse was told, “I bobbed up and down with it, spewing water, and floated to shore” (224). Frank swam in for Janisse’s mother and sister, and when all were safe Janisse asked her mother, “was I crying?” Lee Ada replied, “No...you seemed at home” (224).

Watson explains that Frank’s fear of the river “may be the understandable response of a man whose straitened circumstances leave him particularly vulnerable to the exigencies of the natural world, and thus unable to participate in it with any real confidence, intimacy, or enjoyment.” But, he continues, “it is also the fear of a poor white man who has nearly lost his children, and children often represent a special source of material abundance, sometimes the only one, in the lives of the poor” (502). In a similar incident, Franklin and the children were visiting an acquaintance who lived on a houseboat on the same river when Janisse’s brother, Steve, fell over the side. Frank dove into the water, and “swimming in an adrenaline river,” reached his son just before he was carried to the bottom. These instances, in which the family was placed in clear danger by the river, render Frank’s misgivings about the natural world less “crazy” and go straight to the heart of his need to secure and protect those he loves from its unpredictable power. It is also telling that Janisse, an infant at the time, refers to the boating accident as occurring in “a

time before memory” (224). “At home” in the elements even as a baby, Janisse simply did not share her father’s fraught relationship to the south Georgia lifeworld. Precisely because she was exposed at a young age to dangerous situations from which she was rescued by a protective caregiver, Janisse, as Watson suggests, was somehow able to keep poverty “from corrupting her relationship to the environment” (508).

Franklin guarded Janisse and her siblings “exactly like a warden,” and “taught us always to think of safety first and to be prepared for the worst and not to trust and always be afraid” (227). His was a closed system that kept his family “isolated from the world” (115) and discouraged “open contact” with nature and wildness, the quality that Janisse would come to value most in her daily life: “I search for the vital knowledge of the land that my father could not teach me, as he was not taught, and guidance to know and honor it, as he was not guided, as if this will shield me from the errancies of the mind, or bring me back from that dark territory should I happen to wander there” (97).

Janisse laments that her father was deprived of a proper initiation into wildness at the hand of a patient and willing guide. She herself was fortunate enough to have had such a guide in her fifth-grade teacher, Miss Lucia Godfrey, who took the time, through communicative action, to “nurture [her] interest in the living world” (211). Lucia, whose name means “light,” set the spark that illuminated an entire field of environmental awareness for her young student. She did so by taking the time to walk with her at recess, identifying the names of the diverse flora growing in the vicinity of the school playground. She showed Janisse, for instance, the spire-like male flowers of a pine tree, called “candles,” and the female “cone” (213).

According to Ray, “one essential event or presence can save a child, can flower in her and claim her for its own” (127). One of these formative images for her is that of “a clump of

pitcher plants that still survives on the backside of my father’s junkyard” (127). The pitcher plant, so-called because its hooded leaf resembles a drinking pitcher, is a carnivorous plant that “lures insects with a sweet-smelling nectar” (127). Ray recalls how she sliced open the plant’s stem to reveal “a ripe stew of insect parts—ant bodies, fly legs, beetle wings” (128). The pitcher plant’s “carnivory” taught Ray “the sinlessness of predation” and “its columns of dead insects the glory of purpose no matter how small” (128). In that plant, Ray writes, “I was looking for a manera de ser, a way of being—no, not for a way of being but of being able to be. I was looking for a patch of ground that supported the survival of rare, precious, and endangered biota within my own heart” (128). Janisse entered the specimen at a 4H competition as part of her project on predacious plants, but recalls that the “judges were not impressed” (128). Mrs. Godfrey, however, encouraged her interest in the pitcher plant, explaining that “because [it] needs more minerals that the soil provides, since they grow in infertile places, they found a way to utilize the nutrients of insect bodies. They adapted in order to survive” (215). Ray never forgot the lesson: “Evolve. Adapt. Survive” (215).

Frank Ray, on the other hand, lived in a “dark territory of the mind” precisely because he never had a Miss Lucia to show him the light:

Suppose someone had found my father the boy and said, *If you look closely, you will find palmetto bugs hardly bigger than apple seeds, and their iridescent black shells are walking onyx. And, A Yellow-rumped warbler is in the wax myrtle. The eggs of fairy shrimp spread by wind.* Suppose. What then? (216)

The pitcher plant, with Miss Godfrey as interpreter, spoke to the way the young Janisse experienced the world, not merely in shades of good and evil but in the more complex emotions, or “biota,” of her heart. One of Ray’s literary heroes, the Florida writer Marjorie Kinnan

Rawlings, offers a similar reflection on the nature of predation in the natural world in her memoir, *Cross Creek*, in reference to a colony of ants: “in a still predatory world, good and evil are not fixed values, but are relative. ‘Good’ is what helps us or at least does not hinder. ‘Evil’ is whatever harms us or interferes with us, according to our own selfish standards” (151). The pitcher plant offered Ray an early glimpse of a naturalistic world drawn outside the lines of her father’s evangelical religion, an image that stimulated her healthy respect for the natural world in contrast to her father’s “crazy fear and mistrust.”

Franklin’s system also sought to control his daughter’s budding sexuality. Janisse and her sister, Kay, were “hindered by Daddy’s canon, which restricted daughters to the household and made them mistresses of domesticity and which prohibited an intemperate tramping about” (64). Ray’s chapter “Second Coming” begins with a quote from James Dickey’s “Cherrylog Road”: “through dust where the blacksnake dies of boredom, and the beetle knows the compost has no more life” (267). One could see the appeal of Dickey’s poem for Ray, in its celebration of a young girl’s erotic freedom in defiance of her junkyard-keeper father. “Cherrylog Road” juxtaposes verses about the deadened life of the junkyard with the poem’s central action, in which the speaker has sex with the girl, Doris Holbrook, in the backseat of “some grandmother’s long Pierce-Arrow.” The encounter between the male speaker and the junkyard-keeper’s daughter restores biological life to the stultified soil buried beneath smothering layers of dead technology:

I held her and held her and held her  
Convoyed at terrific speed  
By the stalled, dreaming traffic around us,  
So the blacksnake, stiff

With inaction, curved back  
Into life, and hunted the mouse

With deadly overexcitement,  
The beetles reclaimed their field  
As we clung, glued together,  
With the hooks of the seat springs  
Working through to catch us red-handed  
Amidst the gray breathless batting. (152)

Franklin's ten-acre junkyard greatly resembles the junkyard in Dickey's poem: a system not so fully closed or rationalized that it does not allow for the potential for danger and eroticism.

For her part, Ray is only slightly less subtle than Dickey in her presentation of natural life drives set against an austere mechanical environment. As a girl Janisse would sit in church and daydream about birthing a child of her own: "all my life I have loved babies, and my maternal instinct as a young girl was even more powerful than when I had matured" (109). Janisse would take her imaginary child down to the wrecking yard and nurse it in the backseat of a junked car, "sitting in a dusty back seat surrounded by two or three [dolls], teaching them, fussing over them, holding their plastic mouths to my pea-sized breasts" (111). Both settings for these daydreams (church and junkyard) suggest the permeability of man-made borders with natural life drives. Visiting the junkyard as an adult, Ray observes that wild creatures now share the junked vehicles like tortoise burrows: "Carolina wrens nest in the old cars, from which anoles [lizards] and snakes come crawling. Field mice birth pink babies into shredded foam under back seats" (267). A wrecking yard, as Ray paints it here, is a system in the process of giving way and

returning to the natural lifeworld.

“Walk through a junkyard,” Ray perceives, “and you’ll see the schemes that wilderness takes” (269). “In junkyard as in wilderness,” she writes, “there is danger: shards of glass, leaning jacks, weak chain; or rattlesnakes, avalanches. In one as in the other you expect the creativity of the random, how the twisted metal protrudes like limbs, the cars dumped at acute, right and obtuse angles, how the driveways are creeks and rivers” (268-9).

Ray also points out the corollary—that there is a harmonious order to be found in a pine forest: “In the same way, an ecosystem makes sense: the canebrakes, the cypress domes. Pine trees regenerate in an indeterminate fashion, randomly here and there where seeds have fallen, but also with some predictability. Sunlight and moisture must be sufficient for germination, as where a fallen tree has made a hole in the canopy, after a rain. This too, is order” (269). As Watson observes, a wild forest is itself a complex and elaborate system placed on a grander scale (508). Ray’s recoupling of lifeworld (forest) and system (junkyard) corresponds to Habermas’s assertion that all systems are anchored in the lifeworld.

In tracing the sources of Franklin’s mental illness, Ray does not seek to “other” her father but rather to demonstrate that he possessed the same psychological and spiritual needs as other people—that he desperately “craved a divine presence” in his daily life (*Ecology* 117). If Ray details the manifestations of her father’s “crazy fear and mistrust,” she also notes instances in which he displays what the Buddhist writer Chogyam Trungpa calls “basic goodness,” or “basic sanity” (109). Trungpa writes that “every human being has a basic nature of goodness which is undiluted and unconfused... Thus, when we hear a beautiful sound, we are hearing our own basic goodness” (109). Ray shares glimpses into a basic goodness in her father that appreciates and responds to the loveliness of the natural world:

It wasn't that Daddy didn't know or love beauty because he preferred systems. He did... There was an old heart-pine house near our property that we called haunted. We never went inside it but stood many times on the dirt road looking at its lonesomeness. A climbing, running rose grew around the front porch, the pink flowers beautiful against the sag and gap. We asked if we could pick some. Daddy didn't say no. He said, you know, it's a shame to pick something beautiful from dilapidated surroundings. There needs to be beauty everywhere. (140)

Franklin invested in carefully-constructed "systems" to insulate his family from the poverty and uncertainty he learned from youth to associate with forests, rivers, and wildness. I argue that these systems offer a concrete application of Habermas's dynamic of system and lifeworld, and that this dynamic provides insight into the Ray family in turn. The corporate structures and bureaucratic systems Habermas describes are after all comprised of individuals, and individuals are made up of private psychological needs, drives, and fears. Ray humanizes the systems that mechanize, routinize, and insulate human beings against the natural world by compassionately revealing the psychological "pathologies" that manifest in different ways in the men of her family, one of whom relates selfishly and strategically to nature, viewing trees as mere commodities and selfishly calculating the profits (Pun), one who takes to the forest to hide from his responsibilities to wife and children (Charlie), and one who desires to fix people and animals as though they were so many hurt machines (Frank). If Ray pathologizes her own poor-white family, she does so, through each of her case studies, to reveal the suffering brought about by a damaged or imbalanced relationship with the natural world.

If poverty can corrupt one's relationship with nature, it may also be the case that a people's corrupted or "colonized" relationship to the natural world lies at the root of its



economic, cultural, and experiential poverty. Acknowledgement of this “eco-suffering,” in Fisher’s phrase, is central to Ray’s insistence on therapeutically facing down the private pain that has driven her family members to act eccentrically in regard to community and each other:

My heart daily grows new foliage, always adding people, picking up new heartaches like a wool coat collects cockleburs and beggar’s-lice seeds. It gets fuller and fuller until I walk as slow as a sloth, carrying all the pain Pun and Frank and so many others tried to walk away from. Especially the pain of the lost forest. Sometimes there is no leaving, no looking westward for another promised land. We have to nail our shoes to the kitchen floor and unload the burden of our heart. We have to set to the task of repairing the damage that’s been done by and to us. (103)

“By meditatively going into one’s suffering,” Fisher writes, “one is supported by nature in going through that suffering, in widening out a ground of inner peacefulness and strength, or opening a clear and loving space within which a continual stream of new phenomena may enter, arise, or show themselves” (113). As a student at North Georgia College, Ray sought out experiences beyond her studies in history and literature, experiences which helped her to conquer her hereditary fear. She rappelled down a mountain-side, parachuted from a plane, and camped out under the stars drinking beer with boys (258-263). “In the ‘danger’ and ‘thrill’ of this immersion in life,” Watson suggests, “[Ray] finds ‘a form of healing and survival’” (508). Ray writes: “I was well loved. Very well loved. We were isolated from the world, but we had each other. We were constantly reminded of our blessings: health, enough food, a place to live, parents who loved us beyond reason” (115).

In order to recognize these blessings Janisse had to be released from her isolated soul cage into the wild, like the pondscoggin with one broken leg. It is her ability to heal that

differentiates Ray from her kinsmen. As opposed to merely surviving and adapting to a less than optimal environment, she clears an expansive “loving space,” having escaped from the loving but constricting and overprotective system into which she was born.

So expansive is the “loving space” within Ray that it includes the land as it existed before her birth and as it will long after her death. In her epilogue, entitled “There is a Miracle for You if You Keep Holding On,” Ray dreams of a junkyard restored to its original wildness and passed on to a future descendant, in a sequence that bookends the earlier image of her birth, sprung from the ground like a tree:

I will rise from the grave with the hunger of wildcat, wings of kestrel, and with possession of my granddaughter’s granddaughter, to see what we have lost returned. My heart will be a cistern brimming with rainwater—drinkable rain. She will not know my name, though she bears the new forest about her, the forest so grand. She will have heard whooping cranes witnessing endless sky. While around her the forest I longed for all my short life to see winks and slips and shimmers and thumps. She will walk through it with the azure-bodied eagerness of damselfly. *My child*, I will try to call to her. *My child. I have risen from the old cemetery buried in the forest where your people are laid. Where once a golf course began. That was houses and fields long, long ago.* (273)

It is notably a matrilineal legacy Ray passes down through women. Whether demonstrating her intention to have children in Appling county or whether she here refers to the spiritual children who will outlive the patriarchal systems that diminish and rein in wildness and wilderness, the hope is that her vision will be sustained long after her father’s junkyard has returned to forest. Ray’s descendants will not inherit a house, wealth, or land as a commodity to be bequeathed as such— (“*that was houses and fields long, long ago*”). There is a radical critique in this vision of

a pure lifeworld beyond the boundaries of class status and land ownership. Thus, *Ecology* ends with Ray's prediction that a restored longleaf ecosystem will outlast commercial development and expansion, and that the Georgia Crackers will survive coextensively with the land, rooted in place for generations after her death.

Ray's writing changes the genre of autobiography that more typically centers on and follows an individual life wherever it may roam. Her life writing amounts to a decentering of the individual life in time while grounding it more deeply in place. Husserl writes that one's homeworld transcends the individual ego, and that "generative world constitution extends before me and after me, before us and after us in a community—of generations" (32). Margaret Chatterjee further extrapolates this statement as follows: "my lifeworld is both individualized and connected with other people's lifeworlds. And since time extends before and after us, I am connected with the lifeworlds of both earlier and later generations" (32).

It is through autoethnography that Ray establishes herself at the center of this unbroken line of a family, community, and class that survives into futurity. The self is the crux which joins one's personal lifeworld, in its verticality and depth, with the horizon of the natural world, which according to Merleau-Ponty is "the horizon of all horizons... which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life" (385). Autobiography benefits from this grounding in the lifeworld, as it develops the genre's potential for ethical involvement. Ray conceives of autobiography as a primarily ethical task rooted in the lifeworld and without which her *Ecology* would not have been written, as she largely "brackets out" those chapters dealing with the disruptions of her personal life (her graduate school education and relationship with her son, Silas' father, for instance) that do not relate directly to her experience, knowledge or critical understanding of her home region.

It is the prerogative or “will” of the life(world) writer so situated to exercise what Chatterjee calls the “ethical imperative,” which consists in the need “to judge what should be reclaimed/retained, and what should remain in the past” (9). The authority of the autoethnographer consists in this prerogative to focus on those elements of the lifeworld that extend the ethical dimension beyond both the personal. “Personal lifeworlds,” Chatterjee continues, “are related to intersubjective worlds e.g. communities (with which an individual may find himself in radical disagreement” (32). One’s ethical convictions emerge in a process of conscious critique that renews the subject’s relation to her homeworld, even while it sets her apart from those who remain in the “natural attitude,” or unconscious acceptance of that world.

Pamela Moss explains that “lifeworlds are accessed through interrogating daily life activities, for example, labor, communication, and meaning” (14). William Percy’s autobiography eulogizes the loss of a Southern way of life intricately bound up with patriarchal institutions and their trappings (the plantation home, the mint julep, the black “help,” etc.) without necessarily “interrogating” those trappings for what they reveal about the constitution, or symbolic reproduction, of his given lifeworld. In her own way, Ray legitimates her authority to speak as a Southerner representing a tradition or community of Southern writers, but she differs from the male Southern Brahmin in exhorting future generations to preserve a Southern way of life viewed from an environmentalist perspective. From this perspective, the battle to preserve and restore the dying hardwood forests of the Southeast is not a “Lost Cause” but one that might still be won:

We Southerners are a people fighting again for our country, defending the last remaining stands of real forest. Although we love to frolic, the time has come to fight. We must fight...In new rebellion we stand together, black and white, urbanite and farmer, workers

all, in keeping Dixie. We are a patient people who for generations have not been ousted from the land and we are willing to fight for the birthright of our children's children and their children's children, to be of a place, in all ways, for all time. What is left is not enough. When we say the South will rise again we can mean that we will allow the cutover forests to return to their former grandeur and pine plantations to grow wild. (272)

Ray's rallying cry for a "new rebellion" replaces Southern-nationalistic models of identity with a conservationist ethos. Ray does not subscribe to a Southern nationalist program for preserving a Southern identity that clings to outmoded symbols of patria like the Confederate battle flag. "Southern culture" for her has nothing to do with abstract symbols but rather "springs from the actions of people in a landscape" (271). If her rhetoric at times resembles that of an unreconstructed Southern Agrarian in her indictment of Northern timber companies and the excesses of industrial capitalism and development, Ray is far more concerned with Confederate Roses than with Confederate leaders, the longleaf forest than with Nathan Bedford Forrest. The environmental crisis for Ray constitutes a Southern cultural crisis— "what Southerners are witnessing is a daily erosion of unique folkways as our native ecosystems and all their inhabitants disappear" (271).

Ray insists throughout her work that "Southern culture," and, for that matter, "Southern literature," are meaningless signifiers when removed from the landscape from which Southern culture, as all cultures, originally flowered. In her essay "An Endangered Literature," Ray warns that the decimation of the native Southern landscape will inevitably render the literary reproduction of a Southern lifeworld more and more difficult until it eventually becomes all but impossible:

As the Southern landscape changes, so too what it means to be Southern—especially a

Southern writer—changes. A culture—meaning a set of stories that describe and explain life—is inextricably tied to a landscape. Wallace Stegner said, “Tell me where you’re from and I’ll tell you who you are.” What kind of doom does it spell for our culture if we destroy 99 percent of a landscape that engenders it? Or 98 percent? Does the culture become urban, street-wise, irreverent, disloyal? Does it turn its back on family, history and place? Does the literature, as Reynolds Price suggested, consist of “bad poems and novels full of neon light on wet asphalt, unshaven chins, scalding coffee at four a.m.?” Is this the danger, that we lose a culture that has defined us, and so must, through our literature, reinvent ourselves? (Ray, “An Endangered Literature”)

From her vantage point as observer of a particular, localized Southern lifeworld, Ray places Southern culture *in toto* on the endangered species list.

*Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* was praised for its elegant structure, in which lush, poetic meditations border more strictly autobiographical chapters and calls to environmentalist action. Ray’s first memoir reproduced the Husserlian lifeworld that she “drank in like water.” What is not always clear in her first memoir, however, is how Ray transitions from a literary observer of the lifeworld to an activist who relied on specific forms of “communicative action” to achieve her dual aims of restoring human community along with the longleaf pine ecosystem. Ray’s second memoir, on the other hand, recounts her efforts to revitalize that lifeworld through active presence and participation within her native community. Taken together, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and *Wild Card Quilt* constitute a two-part approach on Ray’s part that considers both the “eco” (*oikos*) of environmental writing and the “ethno” of autoethnography. Ray could not conceive of her life without either of these interconnected, mutually constitutive aspects, and thus the sequence of the two books is important to my discussion of how she

balances her urgent environmental message and practiced literary technique in her life(world) writing. *Ecology* is more attuned to Ray's natural lifeworld and *Wild Card Quilt* her social, cultural homeworld. The latter demonstrates how, to transmit her goals and values, an activist must engage in communicative action beyond the level of the book, which means using the imperfect vehicle of language for reclaiming the lifeworld. If, according to Habermas, language leaves the lifeworld vulnerable to outside or "alien" values, it can also restore the "intersubjective, ethically grounded condition" fragmented by the intrusions of system (27).

## II. Revitalizing the Lifeworld: *Wild Card Quilt*

"Fragmentation" constitutes a key term for Janisse Ray as well, who sees her native landscape and culture as equally "fragmented by logging, development, and conversion of [wild forests] to agricultural lands" (*Ecology* 173). Ray explains that her return to Appling County, the set-up for *Wild Card Quilt*, was motivated by her desire to "rejoin with land, kin, place, history, and neighbors in an attempt to gather the pieces of [her] life" (39). It is not long however before Ray finds that these pieces have been fragmented and scattered, and that there is little differentiation between the decimation of the longleaf forests by commercial logging and the disintegration of social life in communities affected by that industry. "How fragmentedly we live," she writes, "in broken families, crippled communities, landscapes chopped into pieces; we become disconnected from the sources of our survival, the land and each other, alienated from the earth and from things that hold meaning" (118). Having gathered her parts together and returned with the intentions of rejoining her rural Southern community, Ray desires to stitch herself back into the Cracker homeworld from which she feels marginalized as writer and activist. More explicitly than in *Ecology*, she considers how not only her spiritual but her artistic development has been hindered by a culturally deficient homeworld: "Bitterly now I admitted

that I had been torn apart in my homeland, these coastal plains, separated from intimacy, cut off from much of what I knew myself to be, waiting for the chance to flourish, to grow again” (118). Ray regrets in *The Seed Underground* (2012) that “rural places have hemorrhaged their best and brightest children, their intellectuals, thinkers, organizers, leaders, and artists— those who would create change and who would parent another generation of thinkers” (18). In addition to the spheres of traditional morality and family life, Ray bemoans the lack of a public sphere in her home community—a dearth of coffee shops, art galleries, and other hangouts that she had come to take for granted in places like Montana and Vermont:

I missed public dialogue such as I’d experienced other places. I missed depth of connection. Most days I found no one I could talk to about the joy in my life, or the terror.... [T]he loneliness frightened me—an endlessness of mute days where I searched for community, human and wild. I searched for art or for the path that leads to it, searched for the wildness that sustains me. (184-185)

Because her reasoning is based on an environmentalist aesthetic in which culture is intimately linked with nature, Ray considers this epidemic “lack of art,” including the art of storytelling, as a direct consequence of deforestation: “Growing up,” she laments, “I witnessed a fragmented landscape, with only pieces of true forest left here and there. The landscape, I thought, mirrors our lives. For obvious reasons, then, and for reasons not so obvious, I began to associate homeland with loss. Somehow, as the landscape fell apart, so did what bound humans to it” (117). “Perhaps,” she surmises,

what got increasingly lost were the stories we told each other –about the hornet’s nest we found in the woods while walking, or ghostly flutterings through a dark wood that turned out to be phosphorescent moths. . . Perhaps we needed each other less to weather the



vagaries of a life dependent on the world, on rain and trees and sulphur springs, or to help interpret the mysteries of the world as they were destroyed. (117)

Having expressed her concern that Southern literature, in which tradition she is invested as a Southern writer, has suffered from lack of access to a living spring of stories, Ray draws a homology between the landscape that produces life and a Southern literature that reproduces that life through stories.

In one example, Ray recalls a “record-size” sassafras tree that grew in the middle of the field on her grandparents’ farm.

Carefully, year after year, my grandfather and my uncle plowed around it, and when the tractor chopped its roots into pieces, they gathered them and brought them home to my grandmother to make tea, a spring tonic. After my grandfather died and the fields were leased, perhaps the farmer plowed too close to the tree, and whether this was the reason for its death or whether it died of some other, natural cause, I do not know. But die it did, leaving a hole in the middle of the field where it had stood. Some of us had used the tree as one might use a particular mountain, as a landmark. In its dark limbs, the sassafras held the stories of my family and my people. (115-116)

Ray needs the natural landmarks of her home to orient and guide her along the path she treads as a Southern life writer. She is a stakeholder in the land that holds her family stories like a treasure-trove, among other reasons for the practical one that she is a writer who needs to continually return to the well for material. Living in Vermont, the water in her cistern of stories had grown stale, and she needed to drink from the living waters of the Altamaha River for inspiration. Likewise, in her role as autoethnographer of the Cracker homeland Ray “interprets the mysteries” of that world for an outside audience—even when the folkways of the homeland

she chronicles are mysterious, or unhomelike, to her as well.

Ray writes that she when returned to Appling County, “instead of a tribe, what I found in my south Georgia home was an erosion of human bonds—both to each other and to the land. Those elements I sought, such as community and sense of place, had been compromised one way or another. I saw a way of life that once had made sense pitched into failure” (xi). In *Ecology*, Ray dates this fall to the clearcutting and tree-farming that disrupting the natural patterns taken by forests. She suggests that the folkways connected to the forests were likewise disrupted when hostile forces such as sexism, racism, and xenophobia began to characterize rural, small town life. At times, Ray naively implies that a “tribal” identity would be somehow free of these push forces that drive young people off the land. In other moments, Ray connects the exodus from her homeland to the loss or “erosion” of less defensive, more positive narratives rooted in place that reify inclusion and belonging, stories told to make sense of one’s culture:

Perhaps stories keep us as a people in place glued together. As the stories vanish or are lost—as people depart homeplaces, as the landscapes are destroyed—no new stories form to replace them. Without the stories that fasten us each to each, the web that is community commences to unravel, its threads flapping in the wind, finally tearing loose completely and wafting away. (xii)

Soon after moving home, Ray comes to despair in the face of the overwhelming evidence that the vital lifeworld she sought in rural farms and small Southern towns has been compromised by corporate interests like the timber industry and the nuclear power plant in nearby Plant Hatch, Georgia. In the intervening years since she had been away, the timber companies had escalated their colonization of the region. “Clearcutters,” “the forest products industry,” “chip-mill builders,” and “cypress wetland loggers” had descended on most forest

lands not protected by federal wildlife preserves (240). Likewise, in Baxley, Wal-Mart and large chain stores had disrupted the “economics of community based ideally *on local* resources and enterprise” (108). Ray’s tour of downtown Baxley ends at a department store whose wall features a mural depicting the history of Appling County, “from the Creeks through timber rafting down the Altamaha, through tobacco farming and turpentine” (26). This civic/labor history ends, at the far right of the wall, with an image of the nuclear plant built on the river in the 1970’s— “not anything we are proud of, but a fact to be documented” (26). Notably, this mural, a piece of local art, documents the history that Ray would as soon bracket out of her conception of the Cracker homeworld.

Ray comes to abandon the notion that her people had ever enjoyed a golden age characterized by a mutually beneficial relationship with the land, that her Crackers had ever seen hardwood trees purely in their beautiful, natural aspect rather than as “assets at hand” (*Ecology* 87), as building materials for their cabins and fences and fuel for their fires. She resists the temptation to “green” her cracker homeworld beyond the cultural constraints of a “natural” or utilitarian attitude towards the longleaf pines that set the scene early on for the lumber industry to colonize the homeworld of the piney woods, forcing the Southern woodsman into reliance on the companies that exploited and disfigured the hardwood forests.

Ray’s disillusionment with the state of the community she had longed to rejoin causes her to withdraw into seclusion. She prefers the remaining patches of forests and wiregrass to the society of her fellow Crackers, because in the longleaf ecosystem, she writes, “everything is woven together,” in contrast to a human community disrupted and fragmented by corporate interests (37). In her weakest moments, it seems as though Ray has come back home only to find that she has inherited her share of her grandfather’s madness, the same “dark territory” of the

mind. She admits that “many people are more involved in community than I. I like long stretches of silence and solitude” (106). “Yet, when my solitary work is completed for the day,” she continues, “I like to mingle with friends and family, to be an easy part of the whole” (106). In this continual seeking out of an “existential clearing” followed by a return to the embrace of community, Ray frames her central test in *Wild Card Quilt*, concerning whether she can overcome her family pathology, with its chief feature of resignation and retreat from either the social or the natural world, and maintain a “normal” equilibrium between both. She has to fight against her natural tendency toward solitude to develop, in phenomenological terms, a more “personalistic attitude” towards her Cracker culture. The “personalistic attitude,” according to Husserl, is “the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion” (Buckley 12).

One way out of the “wilderness” of solitude involves communicating her love and respect for wildness with others, beginning with her son, Silas. Silas has trouble coping with the boredom of rural, small town life, making him a stand-in not only for the next generation but also for the extended audience of readers with whom Ray wishes to share her aesthetic and spiritual experience of rural Georgia. Silas’s presence keeps his mother from settling into the role of Percyian elegist, pining for a lost way of life, or that of a local eccentric like E.D. McCool, the elderly “picture-taker” who “had lived for years on the margins of our town, documenting its history” (95). Ray seeks out living symbols of natural community that will, like Percy’s mint julep, invoke a wide range of feelings, values, and relationships for her son and help him to encounter the images of a Cracker lifeworld that will cause his heart to open, as hers did in the

presence of the pitcher plant. She takes Silas to visit a cemetery, for instance, in which a giant champion red cedar tree shades every single member of a family who had died during a yellow fever epidemic. The ancient cedar offers Silas a tangible image of the Southern forest that holds life and death, love and belonging in equal measure (175-177).

Another powerful symbol is that of Ray's maternal grandmother's farmhouse, the "Beulahland" of her childhood. An example of Cracker vernacular architecture from the 1920's, the house was "abominably open to the outside world" (211). With no insulation, the house was bitter cold in the winter and sweltering in the summer. There were several places in the house where Janisse and Silas could "look out onto open air" (211), and "field mice and gigantic cockroaches, kindly called Palmetto bugs" entered these portals in the wall and floor, as did "diminutive sugar ants, ladybugs, moths, wasps, and bees" (211). Ray occasionally complains about these intruders, but "the truth was that I loved living with only a permeable screen between us and outdoors. In the open-ness of our house, I didn't feel separated from the rest of life. It was a fine habitat" (214). The old farmhouse serves the purpose of Fisher's "existential clearing" for Ray. Because its "permeable screen" permits open contact with nonhuman others, the house renews her desire and ability to make "good contact" with human others—including Silas and the members of her extended family with whom, she admits early on, she shares very little in common. One of these family members is her great-uncle Percy Branch, who lives on her grandmother's property. Ray initially resents the way Percy scrutinizes her fast-paced lifestyle: "why didn't I eat meat or go to church or have a husband? Why did I drive a truck and let Silas run wild and have long hair? Why didn't I have a normal job?" (45). Janisse likewise marvels at the slower rhythms of her uncle's life, the way he idles away the days in porch-sitting and storytelling sessions with his brother, Bill: "Intrigued, I observed their friendship as closely

as I could. I could see how utterly they respected and loved each other, although they would have never used those words. The words they used were ‘toadstrangler,’ ‘hay-bailer,’ and ‘pigweed’” (46). Ray is charmed by the expressive dimension of her uncles’ speech. She realizes that they, “like our other quiet and unassuming neighbors, possessed a great dignity. Since birth they had been vital and esteemed members of this small society. Here, they had never been anonymous and never would be; they were not only accepted but were highly regarded. They had gained the authority that comes with a lifetime in a place” (47). Ray wants to partake of that authority; she seeks to join these men in their “homeworld” as experienced through a common language, though she has relinquished this authority by leaving home, and though, according to the uncle she claims as such an authority, her departure from local diet, gender expectations, and parenting styles make her as much the representative of a strange, “alienworld” as a homegrown Cracker woman.

Ray’s “simple, inelegant” but mutually accepting relationship with Percy encourages her not to lose patience with Baxley but to participate in the life of her town as she finds it, not as she feels it should be according to her dreams, ideals, or fantasies of a small, rural Southern community. The mutual bafflement between her and her uncle drives home the point that though she claims that “where I come from made me who I am,” as prodigal daughter Janisse had to reclaim her Cracker lifeworld by immersing herself in the local culture and reacquainting herself with its rhythms and its language. The mastery of this language is key to learning how to write as an autoethnographer, as opposed to an ethnographer who writes about a community from the outside. The difference is an important one for Ray, who, again, wishes to speak *to* rather than *for* the Georgia Crackers.

Language is also of singular importance for Ray because she recognizes its importance in binding together the symbolic structure of the lifeworld, by which it is shared, appreciated, and communicated to others. Her intuitive understanding of this relationship inspired her choice of epigraph for *Ecology*: “words rise out of the country,” a line by the poet Ian Crichton Smith. One of the dangers of system is that it alters the symbolic landscape and overwrites the physical one, replacing even the most basic words that its inhabitants had once taken for granted.

Ray describes in *Ecology* how “the land was laid bare as a vulture’s pate, and the scribes came on their tree-planting tractors, driving down new words to replace the old one, *forest*” (125). A “pine plantation” replaces a “forest” or, in another distortion, a pine plantation is falsely called a forest, even though as Ray emphatically emphasizes, a pine plantation is unrecognizable as such (*Wild Card Quilt* 239).

The activist however employs language more precisely to call attention to those endangered elements of the lifeworld. John Sitton explains that “although the lifeworld as a whole can never be placed in question, certain elements of the lifeworld can be and are placed in doubt” (13). In these cases, “the element is ‘thematized,’ made subject to argument as the participants seek to re-establish their mutual definition of the situation, a prerequisite for successful cooperation” (13). “Revitalization” of the lifeworld depends upon sustained efforts at a communicative action that acknowledges those aspects of the lifeworld *agreed upon* to be worth celebrating, preserving, and restoring—which is why Ray stresses mutual cooperation and consensus so insistently in *Wild Card Quilt*.

In an environmentalist context, especially, an objective, revitalized lifeworld can prove a better state of affairs than a taken-for-granted, unquestioned ground of common experience. The subjects of a “rationalized” lifeworld revitalize their community by working towards a common

goal. If they do not acknowledge the reality of their situation, however, the community members cannot propose alternatives to the systems they have legitimated through their lack of communicative rationality. Ray seeks to build upon the sociality that already existed in Baxley, in transitioning from a front porch visit where the neighbors talk about fishing to a town hall meeting where the participants discuss the poisoning of the Altamaha River.

In fostering solidaristic relationships with citizens in Appling and neighboring counties, Ray learns that the fight against greed is not the exclusive province of writers and intellectuals. Her immersion in the life of the community leads her to discover more examples of the kind of action Habermas identifies as the goal of a vital, communicatively healthy society. She participates for instance in the meetings of the Altamaha Riverkeepers, an environmental protection group with members drawn from around the region. The members of this group, Ray was “shocked” to find, “weren’t well-heeled, college-educated, liberal idealists. They were manual laborers, dressed in boots and work clothes . . . They loved to fish. And they were angry. They’d seen too many degradations of the river, they were quick to point out—increased pollution and sediment and algae and exotic species. They were tired of the state’s environmental protection agency not doing its job” (201). A crabber with a ninth-grade education complained that “I am watching my way of living going down the drain” (203). “Used to,” he explains, “I could harvest 1,500 to 1,800 pounds of crabs off 100 crab traps in a day. Now, on a good day, I’m lucky to get 160 pounds” (203). Another member, a commercial shad fisherman who grew up on the Altamaha, tells Ray he is “greedy” in that he joined the group purely out of economic self-interest (*DID* 20), but in working toward common goals, the Riverkeeper group acts not strategically, out of greed, but as stakeholders in their region’s economic and ecological future. The group brings litigation against companies who pollute the



river by clear-cutting along stream-banks and altering drainage patterns (203). At these meetings Ray thrills to hear talk of “point-source pollution”— “erosion caused by clearcutting along stream banks— “agricultural and forestry run-off,” and “altered drainage patterns,” come from the mouths of shrimpers, crabbers, and farmers. She had believed she was “a lone duck, the only person in a hundred miles who cared about wildness” (202). Instead, Ray writes, “I began to collect a community around me, based on a vision I believed in wholeheartedly” (204). She likens this experience to being “scooped up in a beautiful net filled with people who would become good friends . . . Loneliness dwindled” (204).

In another example of community involvement, Ray joins the fight to save the rural elementary school where three generations of her family had attended. “The school defines the community,” she writes. “The teachers know students by name; they know their parents and grandparents” (50). Such a school preserves and reproduces components of the lifeworld through “cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization” (Chan 35). According to education scholar Si-Wai Chan, students “acquire their own competency through symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld....They then acquire competency as a medium of performing purposive activities and take part in the material reproduction of society, or the material substratum of the lifeworld” (35). The instructors at Altamaha Elementary demonstrate the potential for a small, rural school to reproduce its Southern lifeworld by teaching its students to participate in a local, agricultural economy. The Altamaha students grow apples and pears in an orchard on the school grounds so that they, “who paid themselves for their work and then deposited the profits into a scholarship fund, could sell produce to the local grocer to raise money for scholarships” (57). Inspired by what she sees happening at the school, Ray joins a parent-teacher organization named “the Friends of Altamaha and Fourth District Schools,” and

organizes a referendum to stop its forced closing by the state. The successful movement to save the school “amazes” Ray—she had previously thought the townspeople of Baxley “too polite to fight or too scared of ostracism to speak out” (53)—and likewise provides another occasion for her transition from a symbolic or literary reproduction to a “material reproduction” of the lifeworld. “Material reproduction” according to Habermas, “takes place through the medium of purposive activity with which individuals intervene in the world to realize their aims” (Ahn 68).

This goal motivates Ray to adopt what Bart Welling calls a “reinhabitory discourse,” a “bioregionalist author’s attempt to reinhabit not only a place, but the traditional discourses of that place, thereby opening up a genuine dialogue with the people who live there” (21). For Welling, this includes finding “new reinhabitory uses for old discourses” (122). The eclipsed but still extant cultural forms Ray discovers in Appling County demonstrate how *Wild Card Quilt* is as much about reinhabiting as revitalizing her rural community. *Ecology* evokes the Judeo-Christian tradition obliquely in chapters like “Beulahland,” “Hallowed Ground,” and overtly in “Clearcut,” in which she preaches to the community, admonishing that “if you clear a forest, you’d better pray continuously” (123). *Wild Card Quilt*, however, finds Ray participating in the traditions she had previously adopted for rhetorical effect. Her revised attitude toward fundamentalist Southern religion in particular opens up lines of dialogue in *Wild Card Quilt* which remain under-developed in *Ecology*.

Ray’s desire for human connection in rural isolation leads her to attend a Christmas ceremony at the First African Missionary Baptist American church, at the invitation of a church member on the local Arts Council. The preacher’s sermon causes her eyes to fill with tears, “because that is what church does to me; I am touched by people acknowledging spirit, desiring it” (231). In the second part of the service, called the “spiritual interpretation,” a trio of women

“came out and twirled to a song they broadcast from a cassette tape, swooping and turning and reaching their arms heavenward, then sweeping them down, bending at the waist” (232). The performance, Ray recalls, “was nothing less than modern dance” (232.) Serving on the Baxley Arts Council, Ray had sponsored jazz bands and community theater, but this spiritual interpretation presented all these cultural forms in one: “here was theater, music, literature. Here were three dancers using the art forms of their bodies” (233). The service reintegrates art into the lifeworld in a way that was unexpected for Ray, who in her youthful rebellion had separated art from the sphere of religion.

Ray’s experience at the First African Church permits her to reconnect with her upbringing in the church—the Rays had attended a black Apostolic church when she was younger—and also to realize the nature of de facto racial segregation, an acute form of fragmentation, in her home region: “powerfully I have felt the deep wound that divides races here in the South. In my town we say the black community or the black swimming pool or a black church. How in the name of earth and heavens do we continue so divisive?” (231). “I’ve learned,” Ray writes, “that the way to end racism is not through affirmative action or government programs, although those help, but through personal relationships.... When we eat at each other’s houses, spend time together, enjoy each other, no matter the skin color, that’s where real change starts” (231-32).

While *Ecology* profiles a few of Ray’s fellow conservationists and environmentalists, *Wild Card Quilt* shows her in communication with townspeople who do not share always her personal convictions. When a friend asks Ray to judge a Farm Bureau pork-cooking contest for instance, she agrees to judge the cook-off despite her personal qualms as a vegetarian, based on the idea that “the requirements of our place in a community may land us in the middle of odd,

funny stories we never schemed for ourselves....What we are asked to contribute may lie outside the lines of what we can imagine. Some of our participation we can't design" (273). Notably, here Ray writes as a member, not a mere observer, of the Cracker homeland. The writer of *A Cracker Childhood* emphasizes the individuality that separated her from family and community, but the Ray of *Wild Card Quilt* relaxes her personal dietary restrictions to participate in foodways important to the community. In the case of barbecue, pork has served as an essential staple for the Georgia Crackers since the days when hog drovers let their "piney-woods rooters" loose to graze on "roots and berries" (*Ecology* 86). Michael Pollan has emphasized that the rituals, competitions, discussions and debates that surround things like barbecue constitute the very "fabric of [Southern] lives" (52). Food and foodways afford the opportunity to revitalize one's lifeworld where other topics (politics, race, religion) frequently fail. More important than the meal itself, as Ray emphasizes above, is the basic act of sitting across a table from someone, a simple and common way of affirming one's belonging: "In our neglect of the communal, we neglect our humanity" (Ray, 106).

Finally, Ray repairs the bond with her mother through quilting, the Southern ritual that lends itself to her title. Lee Ada and Janisse collaborate on a quilt they had begun when Janisse was a child, before her teenaged years, when she "entered the realm of [her] mother's disapproval" (72). As a teenager, Ray alienated herself from her family by denying "the belief system that guided their lives" (72). In her early twenties, "one particular silence began between us...lasted for three years and ended with the birth of my child" (72). "Making a quilt" however, "is about being able to talk" (72). A "wild card quilt" combines disparate scraps of cloth to form a seemingly mismatched yet organic, composite whole. Choosing which scraps and patterns to include in a quilt requires communication and compromise. Quilting thus offers Ray a potent

metaphor for re-assembling the scattered pieces of family/communal tradition as well as a practical way to involve herself in this tradition. Through her participation in quilting and other Cracker folkways, Ray immerses herself in her family's social and cultural lifeworld. Like the clearing in *Ecology*, the act of sewing together becomes Ray's central metaphor for healing, in the latter case for healing the fragmented landscapes of the South and for stitching herself back into her rural Southern homeworld. In his ethnography of the Yaka of Southwest Zaire, anthropologist René Devisch writes that

The human body is the central device or principal key that opens up and stimulates the system of healing. The process of generating the system of healing itself may be characterized as one of weaving. Weaving, moreover, is an activity that fosters a method of healing. . . The art of healing is a reweaving and interweaving of three bodies, namely the physical body, the family or group, and the life-world. (264)

The quilting metaphor correlates to her proposal for restoring the fragmented Southern landscape as well. Viewed from above, the topographical Georgia landscape resembles a crazy quilt indeed, featuring diminishing "islands" of hardwood forest and massive clearcut pockmarks (*Pinhook* 7). Restoring this physical landscape is an ongoing radical project for Ray, a fierce eco-warrior, but she argues also that the goal of restoring the patterns of sociality, storytelling, and community involvement are in reach for the everyday inhabitants of rural communities and citizens of small towns. She suggests optimistically that "a life constructed of stories can be had. A simple, wonderful existence is possible in the country, one full of beauty and meaningful work and shared resources. It is possible, though many of the forces of the twenty-first century would tear it apart, to live in community" (xii).

The critical concept of the lifeworld might offer one potential means of reconciling a

writer's differences with the place and people who made her who she is. Ray's memoirs never relegate her Cracker culture to the mere background or springing board for her personal story of escape. The first part of Ray's program involves symbolically reproducing the lifeworld and detailing its colonization by the capitalist economic system. The second part involves taking the kind of "purposive action" Habermas describes to revitalize her native community. Ray does not merely look backwards at her Cracker childhood; she sees her Cracker lifeworld in the process of renewal, and her own role as instrumental to that process.

I have elsewhere written on the difficulty for poor whites of writing about one's culture from a perspective removed from that of their families, churches, and home communities. Once a writer garners the education and cultural cache that permits her to write on the Cracker experience, the argument goes, she is no longer a Cracker but an ex-Cracker. Janisse Ray does not wish to see herself in the role of a former poor white who returns from abroad to bestow environmental enlightenment upon benighted people, though the way she narrates her Southern community at times in *WILD CARD QUILT* would indicate that this is precisely the case. If *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* remains Ray's most critically lauded work, *Wild Card Quilt* is also essential to tracking the development of Ray's voice as a life writer working out some of the genre's tensions and problems out in the open, bringing these issues to the surface of the memoirs themselves. The narrative trajectory of *Wild Card Quilt* takes Ray from complaining about local folkways to working within those traditions to achieve communal, environmental goals. When taken together, both memoirs offer a rich fabric of connections between self and community, lifeworld and homeworld, as constituted within the symbolic space of life writing. Lifeworlds are not necessarily idealistic, democratic utopias free from sexism, racism, or xenophobia; indeed, Ray finds she cannot always explain away these factors by reference to a

capitalist system that eclipses existing folkways. Her journey in *Wild Card Quilt* is rather an exploration of the potential of the cultural lifeworld to foster interpersonal relationships that bolster a strong sense of self-identity in turn and that permit her to “revitalize” or make better the world in which she was born, and which she consciously and willingly chooses over all others. The life she has chosen is that of a rural, farming community, where, she asserts, “nowhere in recent human history are our tribal, interdependent natures more fully realized” (106). It is within this context that Ray strives to follow something like Husserl’s version of the categorical imperative: “Always act in such a way that your action contributes as well as possible to the best (the most valuable) you recognize yourself to be able to achieve in your life, given your individual abilities and environment” (Beyer).

## CHAPTER IV

### “A THIRD LOOK:” SELF-ANALYSIS, SOCIOANALYSIS, AND FAMILY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S *TRASH*

Prior to writing her performance piece turned proper autoethnography, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison had already incorporated the insights gleaned from a lifelong practice of self-observation and analysis into her novels and short fiction. Although she does not employ the word “autoethnography” in her writing, Allison would likely have learned the term as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research in New York, where she taught courses in feminist anthropology and discussed the problem of the “mind/body split,” her phrase for describing “the way we compartmentalize our lives to survive” (*Skin* 9).

At her job as a clerk for the Social Security Administration in Tallahassee, Florida during the War on Poverty, Allison hid her own poverty with “glasses donated by the Lion’s Club” and “a dress donated by the Jaycees” (“Conversations” 74). By day she attended training sessions, memorizing “codes, section numbers, and memo formats,” but by night she began writing down stories on yellow legal pads. “I wrote it all,” she recalls, “everything I could remember, all the stories I had ever been told, the names, places, images—how blood had arched up the wall one terrible night that recurred persistently in my dreams, the dreams themselves, the people in the dreams. My stepfather, my uncles and cousins, my desperate aunts and their more desperate daughters” (9). This free-association writing had a therapeutic benefit for Allison. “Writing it all down was purging,” she explains, “putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare



realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them . . . More subtly, it gave me a way to love the people I wrote about—even the ones I had fought with or hated” (9).

These purging stories inscribed on the “yellow pages” saved Allison from unconscious self-destruction by allowing her, in Suzette Henke’s words, to “reconfigure traumatic experience into uncensored, logorrheic prose” (9). “What poured out of me,” Allison recalls, “could not be planned or controlled; it came up like water under pressure, at its own pace, pushing my fear ahead of it” (10). In a motel bed, surrounded by drapes, and then later on the roof smoking pot, Allison wrote the “the hidden stories of my life that lay in disguise behind the mocking stories I did tell—all the stories of my family, my childhood, and the relentless deadening poverty and shame I had always tried to hide because I knew no one would believe what I could tell them about it” (9).

Allison decided to keep these bitter stories tucked away when she joined a lesbian-feminist community in Tallahassee whose cause she took to like a “substitute religion” (“Interview” 74). She continued however to engage her natural talent for storytelling with her colleagues and lovers in the movement, telling “mostly true” stories about her family, stories “made funnier by [her] drawl” (*Trash* 10). These “second look” stories sanitized and reinvented her past until “I believed that all those things I did not talk about or even let myself think too much about were not important, that none of them defined me” (*Skin* 9). “I had constructed a life” she writes, “an identity in which I took pride, an alternative lesbian family in which I felt safe, and I did not realize that the fundamental me had almost disappeared” (9). For years, Allison thought that the concept of the “mind/body split” referred

to the way I had separated my activist life from the passionate secret life in which I acted on my sexual desires. I was convinced that the fracture was fairly simple, that it would be

healed when there was time and clarity to do so—at about the same point when I might begin to understand sex. I never imagined that it was not a split but a splintering, and I passed whole portions of my life—days, months, years—in pure directed progress, getting up every morning and setting to work, working so hard and so continually that I avoided examining in any way what I knew about my life. Busywork became a trance state. I ignored who I really was and how I became that person, continued in that daily progress, became an automaton who was what she did. (8)

Eventually a night came, however, in which:

I woke up sweaty and angry and afraid I'd never go back to sleep again. All those stories were rising up my throat. Voices were echoing in my neck, laughter behind my ears, and I was terribly, terribly afraid that I was finally as crazy as my kind was supposed to be. But the desire to live was desperate in my belly, and the stories I had hidden all those years were the blood and bone of it. To get it down, to tell it again, to make sense of something—by god just once—to be real in the world, without lies or evasions or sweet-talking nonsense. (*Trash* 12)

The realization that she had become an “automaton” putting on a false persona to ease her way through life caused Allison to re-examine her past through the “first look” stories she had kept hidden for years, stories that told the truth about her family in South Carolina and the incest, abuse, and poverty that characterized her childhood. When years later she read the stories, she had buried in the yellow pages, Allison determined that as “whiney and hateful” as these stories read they were not “distraction or entertainment; they were the stuff of my life” (10). She took these sketches and rewrote them into short stories written from a third-person perspective which “wasn't truly me or my mama or my girlfriends, or really any of the people who'd been there”

but nonetheless “had the feel, the shit-kicking anger and grief of my life” (12). The stories that resulted from this “third look” were “not biography and yet not lies”—as apt a summation as any for the practice of autoethnography (12). These are the stories that became *Trash* (1988), Allison’s second publication after her book of poetry, *The Women Who Hate Me*. The unnamed narrators in *Trash*—hereafter identified as “Dorothy”—are so closely identified with their author that they are typically taken to be synonymous with Allison herself.

This chapter differs from previous studies by asking how Allison’s short stories work as a prime vehicle for an intense self-examination gleaned from the various social and psychological fields she navigates in pursuit of what Allison came to call the “fundamental me,” a stable core of identity at the heart of her various identities—including that of the Southern expatriate, radical lesbian feminist, “poor-white trash” and victim of sexual abuse. In her essay “A Question of Class,” Allison addresses the many silences she has had to fill to tell the multifold aspects of her story. Silence reigned in her own family whenever anyone broached the subject of poverty—“within my family everything was lied about, joked about, denied, or told with deliberate indirection, an undercurrent of humiliation or a brief pursed grimace that belied everything that had been said” (10). Likewise, concerning the subject of sexual abuse in the larger context of her writerly life, Allison laments that “I’m not ever supposed to talk about how it comes together—sex and violence, love and hatred. I’m not ever supposed to put together the two halves of my life—the man who walked across my childhood and the life I have made for myself. I am not supposed to talk about hating that man when I grew up to be a lesbian, a dyke, stubborn, competitive, and perversely lustful” (*Two* 45).

*Trash* charts a course toward integrating the “two halves” of Allison’s life that had hitherto forced her into the camps of either Southern “poor-white trash” or radical lesbian-

feminist, a split that amounted to “suicide” for a writer who since she left home had determined to survive the dissolution of her truest identity, her “fundamental me.” “Writing these stories,” Allison asserts, “is the only way I know to make sure of my ongoing decision to live, to set moment to moment a small piece of my stubbornness against an ocean of ignorance and obliteration” (12). This “decision to live” must be continual, outliving the conditions of her childhood into her adult life. Writing is essential to Allison’s survival because it negotiates her sexual and racial crisis through shifting contexts in which one or the other of these aspects threatens to define her whole life, “obliterating” the whole.

But if survival for Allison meant integrating the “trashy” side of her life with her career as a writer and lesbian feminist, the question remains as to whether those trashy elements have a place in the life she made for herself. The stories in *Trash* seek to arrive at a stable core identity for “Dorothy,” the “I of the storm” comprised of smaller “I’s” that swirl around that core, attempting to define it, to speak for it (Varela 59). The survival of Allison’s “fundamental me” however may depend on whether she is willing to claim this irreducible self if she finds it is bound up in the trashy excess that remains after her exhaustive self-analysis is completed—if she realizes that the source of her greatest integrity, her truest and most enduring self, is bound up in that excess.

This chapter draws on the work of psychologist R. D. Laing and the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu to explicate Allison’s search for a lasting, permanent self through the writing of stories born in the crucible of her family life in South Carolina and Florida and that of her “extended family” of lesbian activists in New York and California. These theories are enlisted in the service of an approach that maps Allison’s healing of the mind/body split through the writing of autoethnography and “socioanalysis,” a similar process of critical self-reflexivity exercised in

the midst of life, within the various social fields traversed in her thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction. The first and perhaps most important of these fields is that of the family. As Allison writes in her revised introduction to *Trash*, “there is no story in which my family is not background, even as I have moved very far from both Greenville, South Carolina, and the poverty to which I was born” (2). For Allison then, all autoethnography is essentially family autoethnography.

### **I. The Lived by Family**

Allison’s complex understanding of family as demonstrated in *Trash* might best be explained by John R. Gillis’s dual concept of family: “We all have two families, one that we live *with* and another we live *by*” (15). R. D. Laing goes much further in explaining how this concept works psychologically: the “lived with” family means the “incarnate” family of one’s childhood which sets the pattern for one’s “lived by” family (“Laing” 37). Much of *Trash* finds Dorothy searching for a new lived with family that is somehow free of the traces of her original family, and discovering the impossibility of ever completely bypassing the lived by family structure (37). The lived by family becomes an “internalized system” in which, for instance, “parents are internalized as close or apart, together or separate, near or distant, loving, fighting, etc., each other and the self” (4). This family model is internalized and stays with an individual member long after she leaves the confines of the lived with family, continuing to operate like a blueprint affecting the member’s personal and group relationships throughout her adult life. A family generates its own shared internal scripts that determine the role played by each individual member; one’s self-image is formed by this original social matrix.

Therapist Risa Kaparo elaborates on the potentially debilitating effects of our attachments with what she calls the “family image.”

Most of the time we diminish ourselves to fit with the images reflected to us as children, when we were not seen for who we are, but how we fit our parents' needs and aversions. As children, we were completely dependent on our parents for all the sustenance we needed to grow. In order to sustain connection with our parents we give value to the image they projected on us, carrying forth the hope of belonging. However, often the image was incongruent with the depth of our experiencing. This incongruence leaves us feeling insecure, and we grow dependent on an externally reflected sense of ourselves. Rather than becoming more differentiated as we grow, our navigation becomes increasingly dependent on this externally reflected sense of self, which impedes our differentiation, individuation, and maturation. (75)

The challenge for Allison consists in how to transcend her early self-image, reflected in those early stories which in their rawness expose the very "stuff of [her] life," but to acknowledge it, incorporate it into her later life and identity. Kaparo maintains that the individuated family member can "awaken" from her external self-image and "extricate" herself from the destructive cycles of family history as an individuated, self-determined adult. To move beyond the internalized family structure, however, the subject must develop the insight and emotional strength necessary to survive not only the lived with family—difficult enough in Allison's case—but the dissolution of the lived by family and its "image" as a subconscious force operating behind the scenes in the lives of its members. This force cannot be dissolved by ignoring it, as it will only continue to surface as the blueprint underpinning the alternative families with which Allison, searching for love and acceptance in another context, attempts to replace the lived with family, one that will encourage a healthier and more expansive identity.

On one hand, Allison's goal is to differentiate herself from an internalized family

structure that operates like a stumbling block on her path to individuation and personal growth. On the other hand, Allison clings, at times fiercely, to this same self-image as the realest thing about her—the very “stuff of [her] life.” She identifies as closely as Dunbar-Ortiz, perhaps even more so, with the term “white trash” as a descriptor of her historical and contemporary identity.

Also like Dunbar-Ortiz, Allison laments a general lack of understanding on the subject of poor whites in America, a class misrepresented or underrepresented in the media.

My family’s lives were not on television, not in books, not even comic books. There was a myth of the poor in this country, and it didn’t include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was this concept of the “good poor,” and that fantasy had little to do with the everyday lives my family had survived. The working poor were hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. We were the bad poor. We were men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who 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. My cousins quit school, stole cars, took drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables . . . We were not grateful, not noble, not even hopeful. (10)

Like the previous writers I have discussed, Allison arrives at the “auto” by first exploring the “ethno,” the ethnicity of the poor-white class exemplified by her own family. Autoethnography, or writing about one’s own group, presents an alternative to hiding in the anonymity of the out-group, which for someone like Allison would mean forsaking both her identity and her claim to fame as a writer.

*Trash* is devoted instead to defining the nature of the stumbling block in her path to individuation and then using it for a resource in achieving a more authentic, because more fully

realized, life. This stumbling block may also be considered a blind spot, operating beneath her conscious mind until, after being observed, accepted, and dramatized creatively in writing, it becomes, to use Allison's word, "transfigured." This process involves a kind of alchemy through which Allison discovers that the source of her perceived weakness, her membership in a "trashy" poor-white family, whose "lived by" presence can be discerned in the bodily habits and dispositions with which she deeply identifies, turns out to be the source of her greatest strength. As this chapter will explore, Allison's lived by family constitutes a stumbling block only until she traces its role in creating the body/mind split in the first place, upon which discovery the road to maturation and individuation becomes clearer to her.

"Individuation," put more simply, means differentiating oneself from a group or collective and becoming a self-determined individual (Gray 73). This is not easily accomplished, of course, due to the very nature of collectives like the family that discourage any perceived departures from the interior structure that determines the identity of all their members (40). According to Laing, not only do most of us never think to extricate ourselves from the "shared social fantasy" of the family, indeed we often "tolerate, punish, or treat as harmless, bad, or mad those who [do] try to extricate themselves, and tell us that we should also" (25). The trajectory of *Trash* observes the blueprint of the lived by family, revealing its operation, and finally replaces that blueprint with a healthier model for family functioning.

The first quarter of *Trash* uncovers this blueprint as outlined in Allison's other autobiographical work. In "A Question of Class," Allison claims that "the central fact of my life" is that "I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me" (*Skin* 7). After Dorothy's



father was killed in a car crash her mother, Ruth Gibson, married her stepfather, a volatile, unstable man who raped Dorothy at eleven and continued until she was fifteen and able to defend herself. Although Ruth knew of the abuse she continually returned to him for financial support and, failing that, for love. This pattern of loving abusive men was prevalent among Ruth's sisters and was passed down to their daughters as well. The Gibson women, "bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt," married men who most often treated them like beasts of burden (*Two* 32-33). Pregnant before marriage and old before their time, Ruth and her sisters resemble the kind of women "you see in photographs of mining disasters" (102).

In *Trash*'s inaugural story, "River of Names," Allison offers an extended meditation on her family that enumerates the many aunts, uncles, cousins who have fallen prey to the accumulated weight of their violent relationships and desperate choices. Story after story becomes conflated in the narrator's memory until she visualizes her family narrative as a river flowing inexorably towards violence and death. Somehow, she recalls of her cousins, it was always made to seem like they killed themselves: "car wrecks, shotguns, dusty ropes, screaming, falling out of windows, things inside them" (14). By way of contrast, Dorothy's girlfriend, Jesse, would tell her stories from her childhood, about "her father going off everyday to the university, her mother who made all her dresses, her grandmother who always smelled of dill bread and vanilla" (13). When Jesse asks Dorothy what her grandmother smelled like, she lies to her "the way I always do, a lie stolen from a book" (13). "Like lavender," she replies, while her stomach churns "over the memory of sour sweat and snuff" (13). Dorothy crafts these little fictions not necessarily because she fears that her lover will catch her in a lie—a moment that never comes as Jesse is only too glad to accept her "funny" stories at face value—but because she won't believe the truth when she hears it (39). This fear of rejection and worse, disbelief, often prevented the

young Dorothy from telling the truth about her family. As Allison writes in *Two or Three Things*, “behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear” (39). She explains that “I grew up trying to run away from the fate that destroyed so many of the people I loved, and having learned the habit of hiding, I found I had also learned to hide from myself...I did not know who I was, only that I did not want to be they, the ones who are destroyed or dismissed to make the real people, the important people, feel safer” (*Skin* 12-14). Upon leaving home however, Allison soon learned that she could hide from anyone but the internalized voice of her mother, the voice that, like no other, expresses the crystallized form of her lived by family.

Bourdieu supposed that one’s personal history amounts to “an ongoing set of likely outcomes,” and that by extension that history is experienced as a series of “subjective expectations of objective probabilities” (80). In other words, “what is likely becomes what we actively choose” (Maton 57-58). Dorothy’s mother, Ruth Gibson, exemplifies this idea:

Watching my mama I learned some lessons only too well. Never show that you care, Mama taught me, and never want something you cannot have. Never give anyone the satisfaction of denying you something that you need, and for that, what you have to do is learn to need nothing. Starve the wanting part of you. In time I understood my mama to be a kind of Zen Baptist —rooting desire out of her heart as ruthlessly as any mountaintop ascetic. (43)

Here the idea of “subjective expectations of objective probabilities” is given a devastating female poor-white voice.

Allison explains that she wrote “Mama,” the third story in *Trash*, to “talk about how deeply intertwined love and resentment can be in a family in which violence and sexual abuse

are the norm” (4). If, as Sarah Aguiar has suggested, Ruth corresponds to the literary type of the “terrible mother” because she would not or could not protect her daughter from her husband’s advances (71), Ruth was “terrible” because she had been hardened against the world by her straitened circumstances and her need for love and security that kept her invested in the family “fantasy” against an uncaring and misunderstanding outside world. Dorothy sees her mother, who had survived a car wreck, in which she flew through the windshield, and both breast and uterine cancer, rather as the embodiment of perseverance and survival. Ruth rises in her daughter’s imagination like “bats out of deep caverns, a gossamer woman—all black edges, with a chrome uterus and molded glass fingers, plastic wire rib cage and red unblinking eyes” (42). In her daughter’s description, Ruth’s long battle to survive and adapt to the “central facts” of her life had hardened her into a cyborg woman of glass and metal (42). Dorothy’s relationship with her mother is characterized however by a flesh-and-blood love and tenderness, demonstrated in “Mama” by her nightly ritual of rubbing lotion on her mother’s feet, softening them after she had been on them all day at the diner. Even when she is “twelve states away,” Dorothy recalls, “our mother’s body is with us in its details. She is recreated in each of us, strength of bone and the skin curling over the thick flesh the women of our family have always worn” (34). The stumbling block develops as a defensive position that hardens like a wall around a Gibson woman’s heart, and to soften that heart, the way Dorothy softens her mother’s feet, is to make it vulnerable, to risk its getting hurt all over again.

Ever-present in social situations, her mother’s voice warns and advises Dorothy on how to dissemble and charm the strangers she was taught to distrust. In “Working on My Charm” Dorothy attends a party for her co-workers in the Social Security Administration, one of those parties in which “everyone pretends to know everyone else” (73). Moving through the

partygoers in a “borrowed blouse,” Dorothy feels “dizzy,” and is “overcome with the curious sensation of floating out of the top of my head,” and as she listens to their conversations, she hears her mother’s voice rising from within her neck, hissing the word “*Yankees!*” (73). Dorothy affects a Mississippi drawl at the party because her mother had told her that “for some reason Yankees got strange sentimental notions about Mississippi” (79). She switches effortlessly between accents, choosing the image of a genteel Mississippian over the “white trash” image with which she secretly identifies, and receives the vapid but pleasant compliments of her colleagues as a reward for accommodating their expectations. “It’s so wonderful that you can be here with us,” one woman tells her, “some of the people who have worked here, well . . . you know, well, we have so much to learn from you—gentility, you know, courtesy, manners, charm, all of that” (73). So successful is Dorothy’s dissembling that she is credited with all the qualities that Southern trash are thought to lack.

Beneath the framing story of the party, the remainder of “Charm” is devoted to Dorothy’s rumination on the year she worked with her mother waiting tables at a diner in Greenville, where the servers all played a game in which they gambled on how much they could expect in tips from patrons before they even placed their order. If a waitress guessed high, she had to place the difference in a jar behind the counter to be distributed among them all. Working at the diner taught Dorothy a lesson her mother knew “intuitively” (27). As Allison recalls in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, her mother taught her “the use of charm, the art of acting, the way to turn misery into something people find understandable or sympathetic” (27). “Theater,” she continues,

was what Mama knew and I learned . . . Theater is standing up and convincing people you know what you’re doing—eating oysters with a smile when the only fish you’ve known

has been canned tuna or catfish fried in cornmeal. Theater is going to bars with strangers whose incomes are four times your own; it's wearing denim when everyone around you is in silk or silk when they're all wearing leather. Theater is talking about sex with enormous enthusiasm when nobody's ever let you in their pants. Theater is pretending you know what you're doing when you don't know anything for certain and what you do know seems to be changing all the time. (27)

More significant than Allison's social success at the party is her realization that the people she wishes to impress are themselves all put-on manners and pretense. The partygoers are the people she grew up thinking of as the "real people," the kind of people she grew up watching on television and the ones for whom people like her were "destroyed or dismissed" to make them "feel safer" (*Skin* 7). It follows that Allison thinks of her people, Southern white trash, as more authentic than the fake partygoers, who provide a nice encapsulation of the "Illusio," Bourdieu's term for the social "game" that people play in order to "maximize their positions" (53).

"Illusio," devolves from the Latin *ludus*, or "game" (142). Bourdieu writes that "the value of culture, the supreme fetish, is generated in the initial investment in the mere fact of entering the game, joining in the collective belief in the value of the game" ("Legacy" 52). To unconsciously adapt what Bourdieu calls the "the feel for the game," is to play by the rules of the social game until one forgets one is even playing at all. This kind of forgetting of the arbitrariness of the rules of the social game is impossible for the self-consciously marginal Dorothy, however, who feels acutely the sense of "hiding" beneath the window dressing of the genteel Southerner, knowing that she comes from another people altogether. Her mother's daughter, she is "tougher than kudzu, meaner than all the ass-kicking, bad-assed, cold-assed, saggy-assed fuckers I have ever known" (39). The "charming" Dorothy strikes the posture of a disillusioned agent who

successfully navigates the social field, knowing its stakes and playing to win without getting “caught up in the game” (Pilario 143). She recognizes the game as worth playing, to be sure, and plays to win for the prize of economic, social, and symbolic capital essential to her escape from her lived with family, yet the family from which she would escape provides her with a sense of authenticity derived from being a member of the “they” who are “destroyed” by the “we” represented by the partygoers. As Allison observes in “A Question of Class,” one sure way to “destroy” the problematic poor is by denying that they exist, making them invisible, and another is by encouraging them to destroy themselves (7).

In “A Question of Class,” Allison explains that in the rigid class structure that dominated the Carolina Piedmont, “everyone knew my family, knew we were trash, and that meant we were supposed to be poor, supposed to have grim low-paid jobs, have babies in our teens, and never finish school” (9). When they moved to Tallahassee, where her stepfather worked in a factory, Allison’s family presented something of a rarity to middle-class Floridians, and the “myth of the poor settled over and glamorized” her and her sisters, who were only too happy to hide the shame of poverty under the mythology of the “noble” working-class Southerner (9). Here again, Allison posits an authentic core of trashy identity beneath the layers of unreality or “mythology” accrued from her changing social fields.

Allison also describes the equally powerful desire to start over completely, to begin again as new people with nothing of the past left over: “I wanted to run away from who we had been seen to be, who we had been” (11). This is what Allison refers to at the “geographic solution”—“change your name, leave town, disappear, make yourself over” (11). “What hides behind that impulse,” she continues, “is the conviction that the life you have lived, the person you are, is valueless, better off abandoned, that running away is easier than trying to change things, that

change is not possible...Sometimes I think it is this conviction—more seductive than alcohol or violence, more subtle than sexual hatred or gender injustice—that has dominated my life and made real change so painful and difficult” (11). Like the habit of hiding, running away is an ultimately unsatisfying expedient because it denies, represses, and conceals the authentic self. Hiding and running away from one’s trashy past are acts only too happily approved by the middle-class arbiters of taste and distinction. “I’m Working on My Charm” thus has everything to do with Allison’s internal struggle to remain in touch with the “fundamental me,” a stable center of identity that holds amid the fluid, changing boundaries of the various “social fields” she navigates (*Distinction* 21).

Throughout the party, Dorothy never loses contact with the matrix she locates below her head, just beneath her conscious thought. Ruth Gibson’s voice grounds her in her body and keeps her from “floating out of the top of her head,” from losing contact with that “fundamental me” among the people who “only pretend to know everyone else” (73). “Charm” thus establishes the pattern for Allison’s kind of autoethnography, which works like a double-sided arrow pointing both outwards, towards the observed, and inwards, back towards the observer (*Self Remembering* 44).

Such a practice of self-observations leads to the uncovering of what Bourdieu calls the “habitus,” the habits, skills, and bodily dispositions we acquire as a result of our life experiences (Hayward 37). Karl Maton explains that “because its dispositions are embodied, the habitus develops a momentum that can generate practices for some time after the original conditions which shaped it have vanished” (58). “Moreover,” he explains, “primary socialization in the family is for Bourdieu deeply formative and, though the habitus is shaped by ongoing contexts, this is slow and unconscious—our dispositions are not blown around easily on the tides of

change in the social worlds we inhabit” (58). Changing social landscapes offer the autoethnographer a prime opportunity to observe how her own “habitus” corresponds to a larger “group habitus” within the “ongoing contexts” of her life, a skill that becomes still more useful for Allison in her next story, set during her time at Florida Presbyterian College where she received an education drawn outside the lines of a four-year degree (58).

In “Steal Away,” the emotional pain Dorothy had successfully hidden from others is experienced in terms of a voracious “hunger” that cannot be filled with “biscuit-fat” alone but drives her instead to shoplifting for its satisfaction. Sometimes she steals food like “grapes and oysters from the Winn-Dixie,” but many of the items she pockets are also invested with a classed significance, like wine glasses and ashtrays from hotel conference rooms that she would take and throw off a pier just to hear them break (82). Dorothy’s apparent kleptomania in this story is merely the symptom of a greater dis-ease, a compulsion akin to her need for hiding and her resentment at having to do so—her sense of being a spy in the enemy’s camp.

On campus, a divorced female sociology professor compounds Allison’s sense of hidden shame when she takes an interest in her and invites her to her house for dinner. There she furtively touches Dorothy and has her talk intimately about herself, eventually asking her, or rather proclaiming, “your family is very poor, aren’t they?” (83). In response, Dorothy’s face “froze and burned at the same time,” and she lies characteristically: “‘not really,’ I told her, ‘not anymore’” (83). That this prying question comes from a sociology professor, who would presumably possess an acute understanding of class structure and conflict, only sharpens the barb. The professor awkwardly attempts to pursue a lesbian relationship with Dorothy, demonstrating her simultaneous attraction and repulsion by scheduling off-the-books appointments that she breaks at the last minute. Instead of running away from her situation as a



sociological object of curiosity and sexual interest, Dorothy plays the professor's game, knowing only too well her rhythm of attraction and aversion. "For all that it could terrify and confuse me," Allison writes in *Two or Three Things*, "sex was something I had assimilated. Sex was a game or a weapon or an addiction. Sex was familiar, but love—love was another country" (55).

Dorothy begins taking books from her professor's vacated office, inscribing her own annotations in the margins, and returning them to the shelves. One of these books is Malinowski's *Sexual Life of Savages*—a clever revenge considering the sexual tension between Dorothy and the teacher who seems to associate her pitiable student with the "savages" of the title (84). Notably, Malinowski's study is an ethnography of the natives of the Trobriand Islands whose title reveals the Eurocentric bias of its author. This oblique reference to ethnography contrasts with Allison's autoethnography, written to better understand her position as the member of a tribe of "savage" poor whites.

The Dorothy of "Steal Away" only initially corresponds to Bourdieu's "dominated subject" in the way that she "became what was always expected of [her]—a thief" (81). Yet by returning the book with her comments inscribed in the margins, demonstrating that the marginalized have their own voices, Dorothy rather proves the opposite—that her identity is not limited to her social inferiority in the eyes of interlocutors perceived or imagined. She does not reproduce these annotations for the reader but does one better in transferring her observations on sexuality from the margins of the "expert's" book to her own. From that day, she begins studying her professors more than their subjects, observing "their words, gestures, jokes, and quarrels to see just how different they were from me" (84). The point of this clever "socioanalysis" of sociologists is not merely to learn how to adapt to the habitus of a superior academic class which she intends to join. The principal aim of Bourdieu's socioanalysis is a

measure of social autonomy for the subject who is no longer the “victim” of societal processes. It is not to assimilate to the demands of the habitus, but rather to “objectify the mental structures associated with the particularity of a social structure” (xvi).

At the end of “Steal Away” Dorothy walks at her college graduation ceremony, where she takes a degree in anthropology. Her mother and stepfather are uncomfortable at the ceremony, but are amused when afterwards their daughter stops by the dormitory basement and steals “a vacuum cleaner and two wooden picture frames I’d stashed behind the laundry room doors” as well as the “commemorative roses off the welcome sign” (85). Her stepfather laughs and her mother seems tacitly to approve, and the three-ride home, presumably back to Greenville, in her stepfather’s truck. Dorothy “steals away” in two meanings of the expression, both to leave unnoticed and to steal university property on her way out.

If this ending initially reads more like a failure than a success for Dorothy, the commencement ceremony marks a milestone of a still more personal kind—her graduation from a life vainly ascribing to the pretensions of another class. Allison’s return home with her mother and stepfather to South Carolina, the country of her “dreams and nightmares” (*Two* 6-7), is not a failure for a writer who, looking back on this period in her life, equates life outside the only family she had ever known with “obliteration” (12).

“Steal Away” is framed within an overarching “family habitus” revealed in the “trashy” behaviors of family members who “drive, smoke and get drunk, dance, steal and punch, lie [and] fuck” across the pages of her fiction (Tuthill 154). Bourdieu observes that the *habitus* only manifests, however, in relation to a given field, and I would add, in contact with symbolic violence (Pilario 138). Another of Bourdieu’s concepts, violence is “symbolic” when an agent uses economic, social, or symbolic capital against someone with less capital in a manner which

attempts to conceal the power differential between the two (179). Dorothy's sociology professor employs symbolic violence against her by initiating an inappropriate lesbian relationship under the guise of a mentor-student relationship. Her statistics professor, appropriately, fails to acknowledge her individuality at all. Standing by the door at commencement, he praises Dorothy to her mother: "quite something, your daughter" (85). Dorothy later hears him repeat the same line to another parent: "quite something, your son. We're expecting great things of him" (85).

If such slights might appear trivial to a woman who has survived physical and sexual abuse, symbolic violence also features in *Bastard Out of Carolina* when the county clerk refuses to change Bone's "bastard" status on her birth certificate. To understand how Allison survived not only her volatile childhood but the loss of her individuality in later life is to understand how someone who has experienced actual, gnawing hunger would describe a potent metaphorical hunger—a persistent hunger that is finally satisfied at the end of "Steal Away," in a reunion with her lived with family she describes as "the best moment I'd had in four years" (86). Dorothy is relieved of her insatiable hunger for the familiar family context, within which her bodily appetites, compulsions and dispositions make more sense and in which others view her behaviors as appropriate to her situation. Within the social field of the university, however, these trashy behaviors are something left over from childhood, in excess of what is needed in the present moment.

Dorothy's trashy, self-destructive and even criminal behaviors fit the familiar patterns of her family habitus. In her family stories, fictional and autobiographical, some thefts are excused while others are vilified, as in *Bastard*, when Bone observes that her cousin, Tommy Lee, who steals everything from candy to cars, crosses a line when he steals from his own mother (44).

Within the context of the lived by family, Dorothy's embodied habits are formulated from a defensive posture that protects her sense of self against perceived threats to its integrity. As an unconscious stumbling block, the lived by family precludes conscious observation and exposure of these habits, but the illumination of this blind spot reveals its utter, unshakeable integrity as the most constant, unyielding presence in her life, whose presence is explained by the protective function it serves (*Self Remembering* 61).

According to R. D. Laing, the preservation of the lived with family is likewise "equated with the preservation of the self and world," while "the dissolution of the internalized [lived by] family is equated with death of self and world-collapse" (14). As Leigh Gilmore contends, "home" for Allison is "the site of violation but also return...Home marks out the location of a stepfather's violence, neighbors' scorn, and officials' contempt, but also the love among generations of mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts" (62).

One way of incorporating Bourdieu's "family habitus" and the language of the lived by family is to understand the latter as one of the objective social structures among which the habitus develops its dispositions. As both an objective structure (a "structuring structure") and a mental or subjective or "structured structure" (Reed-Danahay 114), the habitus "results from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized" (Swartz 103). On the other side of this equation, the habitus, as an "embodied history of bodily dispositions . . . remains a potentiality until it encounters an appropriate circumstance in which to reveal and actualize itself" (Pilario 138). Dorothy's habitus is revealed in contact with her social and academic structures, in which context her lingering lived by family structure constitutes a stumbling block on her path to a career of the mind, a path which would presumably offer her a way out of a life lived on autopilot—characterized in "Steal Away" by her habit of petty theft,

formerly a solution to a practical problem in her past that no longer exists in her present circumstances.

Dorothy is only “hiding” in “Charm” and *Steal Away*,” only pretending to have overcome the stumbling block of her lived by family while her most difficult inner work is yet to be done. She is only half involved in the social “game” described by Bourdieu, because to believe in that game unquestionably, to take it for granted as *doxa*, or common sense, is to lose oneself, and to lose herself, for Allison, is tantamount to committing suicide. Thus, returning home, even the home of one’s nightmares, is preferable to the loss of a sense of belonging that leads to the perceived “dissolution” and “death” of the self. Dorothy is not yet ready, at the middle-point of *Trash*, to venture into the “unknown country” of a love and self-determination drawn outside the lines of family, beyond “my mother’s stubbornness and my own outraged arrogance” (9). Even though she is no longer physically hungry, something about her college experience remains impoverished or undernourished, leaving her holding on to the known patterns of her old rough-and-tumble, day-to-day survival. She does not consciously cling to the dangerous rhythms of life in Carolina, yet the relative safety and predictability of university life leaves her wanting. Her lived by family structure is in danger of dissolving too early, before she can explore it and reincorporate it into her evolving sense of selfhood.

As in “Working on My Charm,” the aim of “Steal Away” is not only to demonstrate that Dorothy has achieved a temporary success through assimilation into a professional sphere, but that she has indeed become a canny social agent in her own right, having acquired through education not only a degree but the knowledge capital necessary to maneuver the treacherous fields of personal and professional relationships while maintaining her hold on her fundamental center, albeit a center defined by anger and class-based resentment. These stories chart Allison’s

development as a skilled socioanalyst, who explores the nature of her objective structures by examining the dynamics of her subjective, inner life amid the social world.

What remains for Dorothy however, the autobiographical character, is to uncover that stumbling block that inhibits her personal growth and maturity along with her love life—the blind spot that hides her fear, self-doubt, and distrust of loving adult relationships: “sex was the country I had been dragged into as an unwilling girl—sex and the madness of the body” (*Two or Three* 55). Dorothy remains in need of a conscious program of self-analysis that will allow her to gain some measure of control, to observe and “objectify” her own subjective, mental structures and dispositions before determining how they relate to the external structures of her South Carolina and her new “extended family” of lesbian-feminist activists. Following this goal, her secondary aim is to cultivate and preserve her relationships with the latter until that group becomes a family that she can love, trust—live with.

## **II. The Portable Laboratory**

*Trash*'s next story, “Monkeybites,” creates a clever analogue for this kind of objective analysis, returning to Allison's college years for another attempt at self-knowledge beyond the hiding, lying, and “theater” emphasized in her previous stories. Dorothy has recently changed her major from English to Biology and has been working nights in an animal laboratory in a “cinder-blocked building set away from the campus” (87). Contemplating a career in biology, she has traded in the subjective world of creative writing for the “hard, hard,” science of life explored at the cellular level. It is a matter of her choosing between alternate methodologies for studying a biological “life” or a “life writing” that explores her own life as a source of psychological insight. Because that story, the story of the phenomenal body of the poor-white woman, is still too painful to study closely, however, Dorothy opts for the isolation of the

laboratory.

Dorothy's girlfriend, Toni, is dismayed at the change of major, viewing it as the latest in a line of previous phases or "acts" she has watched her go through. "Girl, girl," she teases, "you act like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. Wearing those silly-assed sandals and damn fool embroidered denim blouses. Always telling those drawling lies about all your cousins, granddaddies, and uncles" (89). Toni visits Allison in the laboratory where she has been spending all her nights alone and reminds her of the reception she received for her short story, in which a monkey features prominently. In this embodied story, Dorothy's stepfather takes her and her sister on a fishing trip, where they visit a caged monkey placed near the lake as an attraction. When her sister gets too close to the cage the monkey grabs her by her hair, prompting Dorothy to free her from its grasp. The monkey then drops Dorothy's sister and springs at her, grabbing her hand and beginning "happily to chew off my little finger while grinning into my eyes" (90). In class Dorothy had passed the story off as fiction, but Toni can touch the fine scars still present around her little finger from the monkey's teeth (91). The more usual dialogic relationship between Dorothy and an emotionally distant girlfriend or lover/interlocutor is reversed in "Monkeybites," as Toni helps Dorothy tease out the raw emotional, autobiographical content in her story-within-a-story. "I bet you got that monkey in your mind all the time," Toni tells her friend, implying that her past has left scars that cannot be erased (93). She is ready to take the next step in their relationship, moving the two of them into a cozy apartment in the city with a "door we could lock against the world" (93). Dorothy, however, envisions this proposed love nest as a "locked cage," and wakes up one the night "shuddering, feeling [Toni's] arms around me like the wires that trussed the monkeys" (87).

Intimacy is equivalent to captivity for the Dorothy of this story, who at this point in her

life needs to sequester herself in her private laboratory, a self-imposed confinement in a cinder-block prison, to gain a measure of clarity. Left alone with the monkeys, she speaks aloud, viewing objectively the truth of the couple's situation: "All I want from Toni," Dorothy complains, "is just a little piece every now and then. A little controlled piece that she won't mind giving me... You understand? I don't want to need her too much. I don't want to need her at all" (95). Dorothy's language here suggests that she treats her personal relationship as another experiment, with Toni as the control and herself as the independent variable—not dependent on another.

Dorothy admits her fear of intimacy and avoidance of relationship, while for Toni, "sex was a matter of commitment; making love was a bond itself" (88). "She had her own cage," Dorothy muses, "her own need for expiation, and she hated the way I could go away into my own head, the distance between us that she could not cross. She wanted a bridge across my nerves, a connection I could not break at will" (88). If a caged monkey presents an unflattering metaphor for a lover, Toni wants to be the one who spurs Dorothy into bold action out of love, as Dorothy had acted for her sister; she wants Dorothy to risk being scarred by or for her. Dorothy makes it clear, however, that more than a lover, at this point in her life she needs precisely to "go inside her own head," to utilize her space and time at the observatory for self-analysis. She does not yet realize that her head is a kind of cage which traps the real "monkeys" (her lovers and family members) that she needs to study to gain perspective into her "embedded, situated life" (Varela, "Laboratory")

While her career proceeds along a horizontal axis, putting distance between her and her Carolina family, Dorothy's inner life moves along a vertical axis that proceeds from her mind to her body and back again. It is fear that occasions the flight from mind to body, as when her



mother's voice, full of anger and distrust, rises from her neck to re-orient her beneath her head, just when her mind is tempted to accept the "illusion" of polite society and the potentially harmful fantasy that she could ever fully join this society, which would likely betray her in some way. It is her fear of closeness that drives her from bodily intimacy to the laboratory. Enfolded in the habit of hiding self-doubt under the guise of cool indifference, Dorothy tends to prefer the defensive posturing of the mind to the matrix of the body because her body has historically proven to be anything but a safe place. Her body is the place where she was trapped as a girl while under attack by her stepfather, while her mind fled to fantasies of destruction and revenge, and thus the illusion of empowerment and control.

The cage of her mind sequesters Dorothy's consciousness from the bodily matrix which has known love and attachment as well as abuse and betrayal—all the subjective experiences which generated the dispositions, attractions and aversions she would attempt to manage via her adoption of a hard-scientific viewpoint. In privileging objective over subjective experience, Dorothy is caught in a limbo between the two that cannot be maintained indefinitely, and so must eventually give way to a middle path (or "third look") between the two. Bourdieu considered the antinomy between objectivity and subjectivity to constitute an intellectual limbo of this kind, a false dichotomy whose lines must be blurred before qualitative, introspective work can take place (Jenkins 48).

Likewise, Dorothy's laboratory is analogous to biologist/philosopher Francisco Varela's "portable laboratory," in which the mind becomes the prime site for "human discovery and transformation" ("Portable" 9). Varela argued that, as all one needs for a proper *laboratorium* are a "topographical place" and "a set of procedures or gestures (the methods, the experiments)," human beings "in their embedded, situated life" can serve the purpose of a laboratory

(“Portable”). Varela encouraged his students to “note specific manifestations of mind as if they were data.” Interestingly, Allison places “Monkeybites,” exactly midway through *Trash* (the story begins on page 87 of 174), as though the story itself constitutes a laboratory at the heart of the text, a centralized, objective consciousness that scientifically observes, tests, and verifies Allison’s inner world. Like Bourdieu’s socioanalysis, Allison’s portable laboratory collapses the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, public and private, inner and outer. What “manifests” in her laboratory in “Monkeybites” is both her need to gain a measure of clarity and control over her emotional life outside the context of relationship with others and the unlikelihood of this ever happening.

The insights of the portable laboratory into the mind/body split do not occur under carefully managed conditions, in the confines of a controlled, safely sealed environment, but during life. The persistent Toni appeals to her girlfriend’s potential as a storyteller, placing her “monkey story” in the same Southern literary tradition as Flannery O’Connor’s grotesques and William Faulkner’s family dramas (92). “Monkeybites” proves Toni right, of course, as Allison the writer’s clever metafictional monkey story acknowledges the truth that Dorothy the character has yet to realize, that just as she will always return to storytelling as a means of self-knowledge, so will she continually return to the women in her life for validity, for love and understanding. The life writer “observes” what the scientist does not—the blind spot in her own perception. The objective science of biology can only yield so much knowledge about “life” as lived experience; writing is the way to engage self-reflexivity, and writing family autoethnography means returning to the past conditions that, as Janisse Ray more confidently proclaims, “made me who I am.” If the writer will not revisit the past, the past returns with a vengeance.

Allison’s next story, “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” drives this point home. In this

story Dorothy's Aunt Alma drives to California to visit her in the apartment she shares with three roommates. When Alma shows up at the apartment Dorothy thanks God that her roommates are absent; at this point in her life (between college and graduate school), she still desires and thinks it possible to keep the "two halves" of her life separate. Alma, however, has come with a message about Dorothy's mother, who had become depressed in her daughter's absence and who "hated her life and wouldn't say shit about it to nobody" (107). Alma insists that Dorothy's lesbian companions "might be close, might be important to you, but they're not family" (103). Her eyes "threw the word 'family' at me like a spear . . . All the longing, all her resentment of my abandonment was in that word, and not only hers, but Mama's and my sisters' and all the cousins' I had carefully not given my new address" (104).

Remaining unspoken but obvious to Dorothy is Alma's entreaty for her to return to Carolina and play her part in the re-generation and renewal of the Gibson family, whose hope is perennially embodied in a newborn baby—a hope Allison likens to "some goddamned crazy religion" (106). The knowledge of the title, which surely Alma "knows" as well as Dorothy, is that this is a vicious cycle, in which children exist to fulfill the needs of their parents. If she lived her life by this pattern, Allison muses to herself, she would be expected to "make babies. Grow a garden. Handle a man like he's another child. Let everything come that comes, die that dies; let everything go where it goes" (104).

Aunt Alma, who likely corresponds to Allison's real-life Aunt Dot, remains the most willful of the Gibson women and a formidable force wherever she appears. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Ruth Gibson fails to protect her daughter and either forgives or turns a blind eye to the man who abused her to maintain a measure of family stability, and out of her desperate need for a man's love. Alma seemed unlikely to fall into such a trap, swearing that she would never

return to her cheating husband, Wade. Alma breaks down, however, and appeals to Wade to give her another child after the death of their young daughter, Annie. He refuses and insults her, and after Bone goes to live with Alma in the wake of her breakdown, “Daddy Glenn” rapes Bone in her aunt’s home. Blinded by her need to perpetuate her family, Alma fails to protect the member who needed it most.

In “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” Aunt Alma appears as the personification/ enforcer of the Gibson women’s lived by family structure and all the fierce love and guilt that this entails. Alma wields mother-love and guilt like a weapon to enforce the directives of the lived by family structure that has directly caused her so much personal tragedy. She is the lived by family returned with a vengeance. In response, Dorothy unleashes the “unpredictable, automatic anger” that has estranged her from the women whose destiny she cannot accept.

If Dorothy had inherited an image/identity from the Gibson women, she also inherited a venereal disease from her stepfather that rendered her infertile and thus prevented her from joining her mother and her aunts in their child-centered cycle of regeneration and perpetuation of the damaging relationships that produced them. Dorothy’s inability to have children is both legacy and symptom of the abuse sustained by the Gibson women, even while it sets her apart from the fantasy of child-birth that her mother and aunts observed, in her view, “like a terrible fable from a Sunday morning sermon” (98). Dorothy explains all this to Alma in a devastating harangue that cuts straight to her heart and to the heart of the matter:

Some people never do have babies, you know. Some people get raped at eleven by a stepfather their mama half hates but can’t afford to leave. Some people then have to lie and hide it ’cause it would make so much trouble. So nobody will know, not the law and not the rest of the family. Nobody but the women supposed to be the ones who take care

of everything, who know what to do and how to do it, the women who make children and believe in them and trust in them, and sometimes die for it. Some people never go to a doctor and don't find out for ten years that the son of a bitch gave them some goddamned disease. (107)

Dorothy is brought to tears at the idea that “there was no justice for my aunts or my mama. Because each of them to save their lives had tried to be strong, had become, in fact, as strong and determined as life would let them. I and all their children had believed in that strength, had believed in them and their ability to do anything, fix anything, survive anything” (108). Like all the Gibson women in their time, Dorothy had learned only too well that “strength is not enough,” and that life had “rolled us all around like balls on a pool table” (9). To save their lives, her mother and aunts had to bring children into the world characterized by the same dependence on men only predictable in their chaotic violence and instability. Dorothy's barrenness is thus a blessing as well as a curse: because she cannot perpetuate the family she will not continue the patterns of dependence on abusive men that seems inevitably to override the strongest maternal instincts like a virus. She had been spared the fate of supplying another daughter for the mill of incest, sexual abuse, and an accompanying silence more grinding than poverty.

The continual unwanted intrusion of the lived with family benefits Dorothy because it makes it difficult to deny, repress, or hide the impact of the lived by family on her current life and relationships. The confrontation with Alma clears the air and Dorothy's mind, removing her doubt that she could ultimately resist her family's self-defeating, self-destructive patterns. Laing phrases the doubt and anxiety of the rebel family member as follows:

A crisis will occur if any member of the family wishes to leave by getting “the family” out of his system, or dissolving the “family” in himself . . . To destroy the “family” may

be experienced as worse than murder or more selfish than suicide. Dilemmas abound. If I do not destroy the “family,” the family will destroy me. I cannot destroy the “family” in myself without destroying “it” in them. Feeling themselves endangered, will they destroy me? (14)

There is however an alternative to leaving or dissolving the family structure or “destroying” the aspects of oneself bound up intimately with one’s whole self-image. The writing of “family autoethnography,” whether in fictional or autobiographical form, encourages the writer to expose the patterns of the lived by family to the light. Dorothy’s confrontation with Alma clears the air and Dorothy’s mind as well. The processes Laing describes tend to work unconsciously, operating in the dark. Here a concept from the objective sciences comes into play. According to Werner Heisenberg’s observer effect, the act of observation changes what is being observed. The writing of family autoethnography cannot change the conditions of the lived with family, but it becomes possible to alter the patterns that manifest continuously— “on autopilot”—throughout one’s unobserved life.

According to Carolyn Ellis et al., field researchers write autoethnography by “retrospectively and selectively writing about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (“Overview”). Allison’s epiphany in “Don’t Tell” brings home the realization that the individuation she has been seeking all her life will remain subordinated to her lived by family structure as long as she remains under the unquestioned influence of her mother and aunts, the very women she loves most dearly in the world. Therefore, she must leave home, to seek her own destiny apart from the women who know so many things but nothing for sure. “Don’t tell me you don’t know” is thus Dorothy’s challenge to her aunt as well as herself; she refuses to believe that Alma does not

share the acute self-awareness that comes at the high price of attachments, hopes, dreams, and fantasies misplaced in child-like, volatile men. Dorothy was supposed to be the daughter who was different, whose queerness has nothing to do with her homosexuality—Alma assures her “I don’t care if you take puppydogs to bed”—but with a dangerous, unpredictable anger associated more with the men in their family than with the women. Dorothy was the girl who slept with a knife under her pillow and “refused to step aside for [her] uncles,” an attitude that “made me more than queer; it made me crazy” (100). What “queers” Dorothy among the women in her family is not her sexuality but her ability to stand up to men—a strength considered “crazy” and an affront to family cohesion. More to the point, her anger and aggressiveness, turned against her stepfather at fifteen when he tried to beat her for the last time, is more reminiscent of the men themselves than the women (*Two or Three*). Allison’s anger is both a resource and a stumbling block to individuation because it shields her from further physical harm without displacing the gender dynamic at the heart of her lived with/lived by family.

Dead set on differentiating herself from the Gibson women’s weakness for unfulfilled love, Allison had eventually to admit to herself that her very epistemology, or way of knowing the world, was just as limited by her unconscious family fantasy. As long as she remained ignorant of her own psychological drives, she would only travel further along a lateral axis endlessly recapitulating the same destructive relationship patterns as those of her mothers, sisters, and aunts. As she puts it in “The Women Who Hate Me,” “sucking cunt stroking ego, provoking/ manipulating, comforting, keeping/ Plotting my life around mothering/ other women’s desperation/the way my sisters/build their lives/ around their men” (14). “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” demarcates another crucial turning point in Allison’s inner life, in which she has encountered the fierce rage and desire seething beneath the surface of her conscious

attention or control but has yet to understand her own penchant for violent, distant women as opposed to men. The problem, Dorothy comes to realize, is that she had permitted both lovers and family members to recreate her in their own image, according to their own psychological need for belonging. Her lovers had, in effect, become her new lived with family, and the traces of the violent relationships between the Gibson women and their men stretch across the lines of her class, gender, and sexuality to map onto her adult relationships.

“Her Thighs” highlights Allison’s relationship with the kind of dangerous, distant, and outright abusive lover who left her in the condition in which she begins *Trash*’s preface, limping into her mother’s kitchen bearing the marks of a fight with a girlfriend—two cracked ribs and a pulled muscle—while her mother looks on in alarm. “I remember that morning in all its details,” she writes:

the scratches on my wrists from my lover’s fingernails, the look on my mama’s face while she got ready to go to work—how she tried not to fuss over me, and the way I could not meet her eyes. It was in my mama’s face that I saw myself, my mama’s silence, for she behaved as if I were only remotely the daughter she had loved and prayed for. She treated me as if I were already dead, or about to die—as unreachable, as dangerous as one of my uncles on a three-day toot. *That* was so humiliating, it broke my pride. (8)

“Bobby loved to beat my ass,” Dorothy recalls of a lover in “Her Thighs,” “Bobby love to fuck me, but it bothered her that we both enjoyed it so much” (119). Dorothy’s imperious lover in this story refuses to have sex with her outside of her bedroom, and first makes her wait through two hours of television during which she finds excuses to fumble between Bobby’s thighs while the other’s eyes never leave the screen. Dorothy recalls that “Bobby loved that part of it, like she



loved her chintz sofa, the antique armoire with the fold-down shelf she used for a desk, the carefully balanced display of appropriate liquors she never touched—unlike the bottles on the kitchen shelves she emptied and replaced weekly” (121). Bobby “loved the aura of acceptability, the possibility of finally being bourgeois, civilized and respectable,” but Dorothy was “the uncivilized thing in Bobby’s life,” the subconscious embodiment of “savage” love as Dorothy herself had been for the sociology professor in “Working on My Charm.” She is Bobby’s own “savage” side—the repressed content beneath her exterior that she keeps in the dark and limits to only one room in her life. “You’re an animal,” Bobby tells her, “in the dark with her teeth against my thigh” (122). As in the story in which she protects her sister, Dorothy risks getting bitten, in this case by a woman who treats her like she is the monkey.

Having invested too much in the trappings of culture and wealth, Bobby does not reciprocate Dorothy’s vulnerable, generous, oblivious love-making but treats her instead like a lover she has collected in much the same manner as she acquired her couch. Sex with her lacks intimacy or mutual respect, and comes at the cost of Dorothy’s self-knowledge and self-esteem. “I paid a high price to become who I am,” she explains (122). Dorothy realizes that the problem inherent in all her relationships is that in seeking sexual oblivion she has become the kind of lover she perceives that others want at the high cost of her hard-won self-awareness. Repeating the internalization of her lived with family with a lover takes a form more insidious because of the illusion of choice: she clings to the idea of her “determined independence” that Bobby finds both alluring and infuriating at a softball game that frames their relationship dynamic, in which Dorothy talks with other women while Bobby “grinds her thighs together in impatience” (119). Making the familiar mistake of believing herself independent, Dorothy invests herself fully in her lovemaking because her blind spot is circumscribed by sex. She is all caught up in this

game, played on an unequal field. “Bourgeois” Bobby blurs the distinction between actual and symbolic violence: “she believed lust was a trashy lower-class impulse, and so she wanted to be nothing like that. It meant the one tool she could have used to control me was one tool she could not let herself use” (118).

The cost of this self-forgetting is one Dorothy becomes less and less willing to pay, however. When she looks in the mirror after sex with Bobby, “contempt” and “terror” are “the first things I saw...until I became unable to see my true self at all” (122). The stakes in this relationship may be high for Bobby, who clings to her “respectable” middle-class persona, but they are much higher for Dorothy, who loses her “true self” and ultimately Bobby as well, who runs away when “the lust I made her feel got too wild, too uncivilized, too dangerous” (122). Dorothy is left feeling discarded, like the bottles on Bobby’s shelves, and disgusted by “what I did. What I was. What I do. What I am” (122). “I will be sex for you,” she would tell Bobby, but she never once asked her “what will you be for me?” (122). By the end of “Her Thighs,” however, Dorothy has learned to assert herself with her lovers— “I keep Bobby in mind when I stare at women’s thighs. I finger my seams, flash my teeth, and put it right out there,” asking them “what will you let yourself be for me?” (122).

### **III. “The Two Halves of My Life”**

Allison’s process of self-discovery and assertion, followed by a conscious program of self-organizing, is mirrored in the trajectory of *Trash*. In “The Muscles of the Mind,” for instance, Dorothy keeps a journal, because her guidance counselor told her “it was a way to keep control of your life, to look back and see your own changes” (134). This inner work of tracking one’s changes has a physical correlative in the bodily discipline of karate, the martial art Allison recounts learning in both “Muscles” and *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Allison

describes how, when she first entered her campus *dojo* for a training session, her movements exposed the awkward, painful awareness of her lack of coordination of mind and muscles, an embarrassment compounded by the audience of all-male students (*Two or Three* 62). Her *sensei* in “Muscles” notes this lack of concentration, impatiently yelling “you’re just a passenger here, going through the motions. You’re not thinking about what you’re doing. You’re not in control. Come on. Get into your body. Feel it, feel what you’re doing” (139). To recall Allison’s admission in her introduction, prior to engaging in a more disciplined kind of writing, she had been an “automaton,” preferring to remain enclosed in the known patterns of love and betrayal rather than face the unknown.

The Japanese word *Kata* refers to the fundamental series of kicks and punches performed by the student, but more specifically to the spiritual purpose behind the technique, which can “refer to any basic form, routine, or pattern of behavior” (“Kata”). The discipline of karate helps its practitioner to recognizable “patterns of behavior and clear expectations,” makes it easier for her to “recognize abnormalities (problems),” and serves as a “basis of improvement—setting and attaining higher standards” (“Kata”). The “secret of all karate,” Dorothy’s *sensei* tells her, “is the disciplined belief in yourself” (135). In “Muscles” the demanding physical discipline of martial arts is analogous to the mental discipline of self-analysis undertaken with the purpose of achieving the integration of body and mind. Dorothy had thus far associated her mind with the surface-level activities of acting, assimilating into polite society, and regarded her body as so freighted with her personal history of “trashy” sexuality as to be considered equally misleading and untrustworthy.

At the end of “Muscles,” Dorothy emerges from a dive bar, the kind of place where she would sneak away to date “butch” lesbians, women she knew her colleagues would neither

understand nor approve of. Her sensei's words are instructive in this light: Dorothy had been "going through the motions" of pursuing sex, blindly following women (*Two or Three* 50) with only the illusion of "control" over her relationships. At the same time, she had not been "going into [her] body"—the opposite of her earlier ability to "go away into [her] head" (88). She had not claimed that body as her own, as the core of her identity mapped over by family habitus and her personal history. She had found a safe place in her mind because her besieged body seemed the farthest place from matrix, a place of sanctuary. The bodily discipline of karate helped Allison achieve a balance of mind, body, and spirit—a third quality that she found lacking in a life fragmented and unaligned. The concept of "inner muscles" blurs the dichotomy of internal and external, objective and subjective. Dorothy seems to find a real self, her "fundamental me," precisely in this convergence of inner and outer strength.

Practicing alone on a hill alone outside the science building on campus, Dorothy stretches herself to the limit while repeating her teacher's injunction: "I'm just a passenger here. I've got to do something about the muscles of the mind." She sees her face reflected in the mirrored surface of the glass wall in front of her, "the dizzy image of window after window reflecting figure after figure" (139). "I watch myself," she explains,

the way I saw myself last night in the bathroom at the Overpass, reflected in the ammonia-stained tiles, my wrists coming up to face-punch the mirror. The morning sunlight was brighter than the fluorescent lights in the bathroom had been. I had been wavery and indistinct in the tiles. Now I was crisp and sharp in the mirrored windows. There were dozens of me up there, all open-mouthed and sunlit, bleached nails in the ground, not rising up, being hammered down. (139)

As does the observatory in "Monkeybites," the science building in this story provides a moment

of clarity for Dorothy that contrasts with the mirror in the smoky pool hall to which she usually gravitates. She is surrounded not by reflections of the other, as in the rows of caged animals in “Monkeybites,” but by her own multiplied image, inescapably clear in the morning light. Only after viewing herself as fragmented in these “externally reflected” images—in need of gathering and ordering the pieces of her life—and viewing this fragmentation honestly and with clarity can she proceed to free herself of the image/attachments that have accumulated in her body/mind (Kaparo 20). Conspicuously absent in the closing pages of “Muscles” are the voices of Dorothy’s mother, her aunts and cousins, and her expanding cast of friends, lovers, and colleagues. Here Dorothy’s fractured self-image, reflected in the mirrors above her head, outside her bodily axis (thus symbolizing the unreality of this self-image) is brought down and “hammered down,” nailed to the ground.

Karate unlocks Dorothy’s bodily potential for free, unrestricted movement, which in turn evolves a concomitant mental shifting of inner images to make room for a healthier self-image that will stand over and against her previous fantasies and “self-limiting beliefs” (Kaparo 31). In contrast to the impossible fantasies of functional families with lavender-scented grandmothers that characterized Dorothy’s earlier self-mythologizing, these deeper, mythical images represent her attempts to “dream herself new” by finding the imagery to express the fragmentation of her personality and the shattering of old self-images (*Trash* 134).

Earlier in “Muscles,” Dorothy envisions herself as a powerful, avenging love-goddess who protects and defends the women she loves. “I do not *have fantasies*,” she insists:

Fantasy opens me up; I become fantasy. I am the dangerous daughter, thigh-stroking, soft-tongued lover, the pit, the well, the well of horniness, laughter rolling up out of me like gravy boiling over the edge of a pan. I become the romantic, the mystic, the one

without shame, rocking myself on the hip of a rock, a woman as sharp as coral. I make in my mind the muscle that endures, tame rage and hunger to spirit and blood. I become the rock. I become the knife. I am myself the mystery. The me that will be waits for me. If I cannot dream myself new, how will I find my true self? (134)

Through poems, drawings, and journaling, Dorothy attempts to take on a collective role attuned to her lovers' needs for sex, love, and spiritual nourishment. These attempts remain unfruitful, however, because, despite her protestations, this is a fantasy role, unearned through diligent self-analysis on the proving ground of her new lived with family.

When her friend Judy asks her, for instance, "do you have fantasies?" Dorothy cannot articulate this rich inner world to the women she would have understand her. She replies, "not much, not really" and immediately curses herself as a "chickenshit," comparing herself to Peter in the Gospels, who "denied Christ three times before cockcrow" (134). She laments that her "inner muscles" fail the moment she attempts to translate her powerful (but too subjective) dream-images into words, and to translate her dreams of personal power into reality, an experience that leads her to write in her journal:

We are under so many illusions about our powers, illusions that vary with the moon, the mood, the moment. Waxing, we are all powerful. We are the mother destroyers, She-Who-Eats-Her-Young, devours her lover, her own heart. We are the outlaws of the earth, daughters of nightmare, victimized, raped, and abandoned in our own bodies. We tell ourselves lies and pretend not to know the difference. The only magic we have is what we make in ourselves, the muscles we build up on the inside, the sense of belief we create from nothing. (135)

Dorothy explains how her mother, the "Zen Baptist," was stripped of her illusions at a young

age, and so learned “to hold off terror with only the edges of her own eyes for a shield” (135). Thinking, as she so often does, of her mother, she realizes that inner strength will not come from fantasies, “Illusions” whose strength fails in the light of day (“at cockcrow”), but from strengthening her “inner muscle,” “building up layers of strength inside” as she “waxes and wanes through her life” (135).

Allison learns karate to strengthen her “inner muscles” that fail and leave her at the whim of her emotions and those of her friends and colleagues. She has learned to practice in solitude what she had previously only felt during sex with the women she meets in the dark, smoky pool hall, when she would “rise up” out of herself (133). “I’m happy then in a way I never seem to be otherwise,” she asserts, “sure of myself and not afraid” (133). While performing her series of kicks and punches she visualizes a series of lovers, whom she no longer views as “enemies” or as obstacles to her self-knowledge, but as women for whom she feels compassion and empathy, seeing herself in them and them in her. She pictures the way a friend, Roxanne, “kept dropping her head so her hair fell across her face, the same posture I have in every picture I’ve got from high school” (139).

By contrast, in the *kata* stance Dorothy’s body loosens its hardened, defensive position formed by a lifetime of fear and self-consciousness, and the resultant ecstatic feeling causes her to declare that “goddamn, I love my life” (140). As she goes into her stance for a third, then a fourth time, “liquid and gold, my knees come up and my fists punch out. The kata, the dance, takes me up, makes me over.... I come back into my stance, with my hair loose and damp on my neck, the smell of my own body like wine in the morning sun” (140). Here sweat, formerly a source of shame or disgust, as when Dorothy’s stomach churned over the memory of her grandmother’s “sour sweat” (13), is turned to “wine” in the language of an alchemical

transformation, as when her muscles melt into “liquid and gold” (140). The disciplining of the “inept female body in which I was imprisoned” leads to what Allison calls “the transfiguration of the flesh” (*Two or Three* 71), an alchemy by which she learns not only to enjoy but to trust her body for the first time since childhood: “I took my sex back, my body. I claimed myself and remade my life. Only when I knew I belonged to myself completely did I become capable of giving myself to another, finding joy in desire, pleasure in our love, power in this body no one else owns” (69).

Since childhood Allison had viewed her body as a problem, to be overcome, repressed, or denied moving beyond her family and ahead in life. This attitude towards her body, however, site of sexual trauma, caused her to suffer from a separation anxiety in which her mind was driven from its matrix in the body she had been taught from childhood to think of as ugly (*Two or Three* 35), “inept” (63), and “perverse” (45). Such a condition induces a state of sorrow and terror, in which the suffering, feeling “abandoned in their bodies” (*Trash* 135), seek annihilation, death through murder or suicide, as in *Bastard* when Bone dreams of burning down the house, killing her stepfather and herself (63).

What Allison objects to most in her writing is not merely that her bodily dispositions mark her as poor-white trash to detractors outside her lived with family, but that her identity has been limited to *only* her female, victimized, lesbian body by those who deny “the spirit it houses” (66). Again, Allison sees her body as an essential core of her identity that has been mapped over by her own personal history and by the familial scripts that limit her sex and gender, as well as by the cultural scripts about the poor that either mock or mythologize her poor-white class, that she experiences as graphed onto and inseparable from her own body. As she writes in “A Question of Class,” “I pressed my bony white trash fists to my stubborn lesbian mouth” (6).



That Allison recounts her experience with karate in both “Muscles” and *Two or Three Things* indicates the importance of the lessons gleaned from that discipline in learning to reincorporate her mind and inspire her body. During karate, Dorothy feels her muscles go “loose and fluid,” a “feeling more like sex than anything” (133). She asserts that “I lose all my self-consciousness, my fear of saying or doing the wrong things. My fear goes out of me, my grief,” leaving her to wonder, “what did I imagine was wrong with me anyway?” (133). In the morning sun Dorothy sheds her illusions, building up her outer and inner strength until the two become indistinguishable.

Following the healing, solitary meditation of “Muscles,” Dorothy re-emerges to reapply these insights to her “alternative family” of lesbian-feminists in California. “Violence Against Women Begins at Home” begins at a lunch with members of her women’s group at a diner, in which Dorothy broaches the subject of their waiter, a gay man whose “behind” she perceives as oriented flirtatiously toward male patrons. She then considers her own “taste in behinds,” which runs “significantly larger than the social standard” (143). This leads to a discussion of Dorothy’s own sexual predilections and dispositions. One group member, Paula, is a therapist who specializes in alcoholism and sees symptoms in her friends who all drink alcohol to anesthetize their emotional pain. Paula calls Dorothy “disgustingly predictable,” characterizes her tastes as “addictions,” and dismisses them as a “product of modern advertising” because she smokes cigarettes and is the only member of the collective to subscribe to *Playboy* magazine (143). “I’m not as predictable as you think,” Dorothy tells Paula, noting that Paula herself only dates “tennis players” and “bodybuilders,” women who conform to a bodily aesthetic that corresponds in turn to a certain class standard of which she remains unconscious (143). Allison’s purpose in staging this conversation at the diner is to examine a “group habitus” delimited by unspoken standards of

taste and appropriate expression. The insights gained through self-analysis, or “strengthening the muscles of her mind,” allow her to see past her own habitus, brought out in the open and discussed candidly and honestly, and better understand that of the other individual members of her group and the “group habitus” it creates.

This discussion also reveals the high price to be paid for running afoul of the standards set by Dorothy’s new lived with family when it turns to an absent member, Jackie, whose house was recently ransacked by two other members of the collective named Fawn and Pris. The two vandals were apparently offended by Jackie’s drawings of “warrior women,” which featured “women with knives, women with swords, in leather clothing, on motorcycles, wrestling, running naked down city streets, fucking” (147). Fawn and Pris burned all Jackie’s drawings, broke her dishes and furniture, and painted the phrase “violence against women begins at home” on her wall—confirming their own slogan. Jackie’s friends now discuss the advisability of taking Fawn and Pris to court for damages, though they know that neither has enough money to compensate the victim. When one member suggests raising money to help Jackie, Paula insists that they only raise money for “community things” (148). Dorothy reminds her that Jackie is herself a part of the community, but finds little compassion from a group whose membership is supposedly predicated on a minority experience based on the tolerance of sexual difference, but which nonetheless ousts a friend for artwork they perceive as sexually explicit or objectifying, and thus inappropriate and embarrassing. Dorothy defends her friend, but Paula insists that because Jackie is an artist, she somehow must “work her stuff out in her own way” (147).

Every community draws lines around itself that individual members cannot transgress and stay in the good graces of the group. At its worst, the group in “Violence” operates as merely an extension of the kind of lived with family whose members pair off against another,

choosing sides and forming sub-alliances. When one member pushes the boundaries of artistic or sexual expression, the others respond in the way family members would respond to perceived threats to their group cohesion—with both symbolic and actual violence. Men are more usually understood to be the perpetrators of the “violence against women [that] begins at home,” but it is women who act out violently in the stories that comprise *Trash’s* second half. The friends Dorothy had described as her surrogate “family” to her aunt Alma proves to be as dysfunctional in their way as the family she left behind in South Carolina. At stake in Dorothy’s group is its self-image as a close-knit family, an antidote to the traditional patriarchal, male-dominated family structure. The group’s cohesiveness breaks down, however, along lines of sexual propriety and public perception, and it succumbs to external pressures amplified for a social movement in the public eye.

Dorothy’s friends in the collective are reluctant to play “feminist evangelist” to the “pool-hall set” she frequents in secret, full of butch lesbians who engage in “competition games, swinging those sticks like they were holding swords, carrying knives” (131). “It’s a cesspit of violence in there,” Judy exclaims, “and they all get off on it” (131). Jackie’s drawings recall the images of “violent” warrior women that emerge throughout Allison’s work. Also like Jackie, Allison served as the *bête noire* of her collective’s collective unconscious when her “perverse” sexuality, which included a preference for s/m and leather fetish, led her to defend pornography in the feminist “sex wars” of the 1980’s, partly because she herself engaged in many of the practices depicted in the hardcore porn that most feminist groups decried as degrading to women (“Interview” 47). Significantly, while Allison came out fairly early as a lesbian to her family, she had also been outed as “trashy,” by other feminists and lesbians—a queer among queers (“Introduction”). She recalls of her time in a lesbian collective in Tallahassee:

I did not talk about class, except to give lip service to how we all needed to think about it, the same way I thought we all needed to think about racism. I was a determined person, living in a lesbian collective—all of us young and white and serious—studying each new book that purported to address feminist issues, driven by what I saw as a need to revolutionize the world. (“A Question of Class”)

When all the members of a group are “young and white,” other distinctions come into play in the group’s dynamic, especially the uncomfortable class elements that Allison did not pry too deeply into. As Matt Wray explains, poor-white trash have long been thought of marginally as “not quite white” by those in the white upper and middle classes (43). A descendent of “linthead” cotton mill workers of the Carolina piedmont, Allison is “many generations trash,” as she told an interviewer in 1992. Her sense of being Southern white trash extends for several generations into the past, an aspect of her identity she grew up acutely aware of, even before she realized her lesbian identity. As far as she is concerned her sexuality grew as organically, or more so, from her poor-white background as it did from the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. Thus, Allison foregrounds the linkage between poor-white class and sexual behaviors labeled as aberrant or trashy, acknowledging that even her preference for a certain type of woman is inflected by class:

My sexual identity is intimately constructed by my class and regional background, and much of the hatred directed at my sexual preferences is class hatred—however much people, feminists in particular, like to pretend this is not a factor. The kind of woman I’m attracted to is invariably the kind of woman who embarrasses respectably middle-class, politically aware lesbian feminists. My sexual ideal is butch, exhibitionistic, physically aggressive, smarter than she wants you to know, and proud of being called a pervert.

Most often she is working-class, with an aura of danger and an ironic sense of humor.

(*Skin* 23)

Allison's fellow feminists did not want to concede that her sexuality could develop organically from either her class background or from her equally troubling patriarchal family structure. Their denial reinforced, not healed, Allison's mind/body split, further separating her mind, which read every feminist tract she could get her hands on, from her body which was driven underground, seeking its pleasures in "dyke" clubs and bars.

Allison explains that when she joined the lesbian S/M community, she was impressed by the way the women shared information regarding "who the abusers are, and what they will come to you for" (*Skin* 63). Her lesbian colleagues as portrayed in "Violence" seem by comparison not merely repressed concerning their sexuality but themselves the repressive enforcers of an unspoken code concerning a lesbian identity deemed too transgressive. Worse, they close ranks to reject the most vulnerable member of the group, who also happens to be its most artistically daring. Allison identifies with her character Jackie as a creative writer who for years felt herself "caught in this trap of not being able to write about sexuality, or not being able to write about my actual lived sexual experience" (64).

The attack on Jackie eventually leads Dorothy and her friends to an honest summation of their personal follies which have been accepted in the name of group cohesion. "Come on, Paula," Dorothy admonishes, "you lecture your friends, Margaret works too hard, Jackie lets herself be pushed around, and I flirt. It's our natures. In all the time we've known each other, none of us has changed a bit" (145). If its subject reveals the potential of the collective to break down in individual grudges and judgement, the diner conversation pushes past the enforcement aspects of the lived by family and attempts to heal the breakdown in interpersonal relationships

and group solidarity that led to the violence and the “dirt,” “gossip,” “simple cruelty and self-righteousness” based on “all the things we know about each other” (149).

Again, however, Allison presents individual and collective self-knowledge as an antidote to coercive group violence. Journaling provides Dorothy with a conscious program of self-analysis that will allow her to “objectify” her own mental structures and physical dispositions before determining how they relate to the objective structure of her lesbian-feminist group, with the corollary goal of learning how to live with this new family instead of continuing her habit of running and hiding from relationships and the conflict they bring.

Journaling provides her with one way of recording the observations that lead to the kind of increased self-awareness that prevents her from being, in Karl Maton’s phrase, “blown around easily on the tides of change in the social worlds we inhabit” (58). Allison is not as “predictable” as Paula thinks because she calls attention to the group habitus’s more unfortunate effects on individual expression. She observes the others with an edge of self-knowledge they seem to have lost. She knows for instance what Paula is going to say before she says it, and while Paula is speaking observes that she “never seemed to notice how predictably her judgments peel off when she’s acting like the feminist therapist, like so many layers of toasted onion, each clinging delicately to the lower layers” (146). Journaling permits Dorothy to observe the group habitus without judgement, seeing past what Bourdieu phrases as “the self-induced myopia which makes it impossible to observe and understand everything that human practices reveal only when they are seen in their mutual relationships, that is, as a totality” (xvi).

Jackie by contrast tells Dorothy that “she felt like her friends were the only record she had of what had happened in her life” (146). She asks Dorothy if she still keeps a journal, because she has “always imagined that I might sit down and read all those journals you kept, see

what happened that I wasn't keeping track of" (146). "Keeping track" of her friends' lives in this way may not have prevented Jackie's falling out with Fawn and Pris, but it might have allowed her to track the changes and lines of divergence in their relationships that led to their conflict. As Richard Jenkins explains, "the nature of habitus is inferred from the consequence of action" (82). Unless the self-aware socioanalyst sees this loop at work within the group dynamic, the individual subject is doomed unconsciously to repeat internal structures that operate unconsciously to the detriment and destruction of personal relationships. For this reason, psychological breakthroughs may be revealed in calm isolation, as in the laboratory/observatory model in "Monkeybites," but they are complemented by the insights that come through contact with fractured families and fraught communities.

In "A Lesbian Appetite," Allison seems to have found a mutually nourishing relationship with a woman who on one hand recognizes how far she has come and on the other acknowledges and reincorporates her native world in a way that seemed impossible in earlier stories like "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know." Allison's most potent memories revolve around Southern food, in times of scarcity or comparative abundance. "Steal Away" begins with a description of emotional pain in the form of a relentless hunger: "my hands shake when I am hungry, and I have always been hungry. Not for food: I have always had enough biscuit-fat to last me" (81). This is a reference to her Aunt Alma's table, where the Gibson women would always be fed on chicken gravy and biscuits and from the well of "love and outrage" (102). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu supposes that "it is probably in tastes in *food* that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it" (71). "The native world" he continues, "is above all, the maternal world, the world of primordial tastes and basic foods, of

the archetypal relation to the archetypal cultural good, in which pleasure-giving is an integral part of pleasure and of the selective disposition towards pleasure which is acquired through pleasure” (71). In *Wild Card Quilt*, Janisse Ray writes that “I have been told it is the sweetness of mother’s milk that causes our sugar craving” (*Wild Card Quilt* 69). In this sense Allison’s life writing, like Ray’s, also describes a return to a lifeworld much like the “native world” described by Bourdieu, a matrix of maternal love characterized by the communal act of eating. The pleasurable aspects of the lived by family, its most primordial vectors, can be the most difficult to observe and uncover precisely because they reside in the blind spot, affecting one’s existing relationships and determining which relationships are deemed worth pursuing in the first place.

In “A Lesbian Appetite” eating and love-making are so intimately related that Dorothy finds she cannot relate physically or conversationally to a lover who does not eat (151). She reflects on a series of girlfriends, defining each in terms of her characteristic diet. One girlfriend prepares a vegetarian dinner for a feminist conference Dorothy insists will “only want donuts and coffee” (158). Another girlfriend puts her on a microbiotic diet. “I remember women,” Dorothy writes, “by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we’d made love for hours” (151).

By contrast, Dorothy’s current girlfriend in the story, Lee, is a tall, kind woman who takes karate lessons and, like Dorothy, is “always hungry” and responds to her need for physical and spiritual nourishment, inviting her to “tell mama exactly what you want” (162). Here the mother returns not in her “terrible” but in her nurturing aspect, reincorporated into the body that hungers for love and nourishment. Reuniting with her mother satisfies Dorothy’s region- and class-inflected hunger in a way that is both healthier and more satisfying than her previous relationships.



Lee fries eggplant for Dorothy, a Southern dish she says tastes like “fried okra,” the kind of Southern food—or as Dorothy puts it, “poor-white trash food”—she indulges in dreams “flooded with salt and grease” and the “crisp fried stuff that sweetens my mouth and feeds my soul” (152). The trashy Southern cooking Allison prefers may be both nourishing and “terrible” for you, but Lee patiently explains that one must “sweat out the poisons” in an eggplant and “salt it up so the bitter stuff will come off” (154). Southern food and Southern stories salt the wounds to bring out the bitterness of maternal memories, which Dorothy then brings out of her mind and down into her body, down below the neck, to the place where they can be consumed and digested and their energies released instead of repressed or destroyed. These are “transfigured,” or transferred, from destructive to regenerative energies. “A Lesbian Appetite” soothes much of the recurrent violent imagery in *Trash*. The knife that Dorothy hid under her pillow as a girl she now wields in the kitchen chopping onions with a lover who reciprocates her affections. The avenging goddess is “tamed” into a domestic one, in the kitchen where she is finally able to “tame rage and hunger to spirit and blood” (134). The kitchen, the space where Daddy Glen rapes Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is converted from a space of nightmare and shame to the place where Dorothy and Lee talk, tease, and finally break down and have sex on the floor, emphasizing this space as the site of a shared love-language of food that translates directly to love-making. Here Allison’s drives and appetites for food and sex are converted from a source of nightmare and shame—the stumbling block of her personal history—to the road out of hell, the way to a healthier, more integrated life.

Dorothy and Lee’s relationship shows no trace of the hiding and dissembling that characterized Dorothy’s previous erotic and familial relationships. The lying, anger, and resentment in previous stories have all but vanished entirely. The idea that Allison has achieved

a balance in her life is reiterated by a dream she relates in the story's coda of a dinner party, to which she invites "all the women in my life," who each bring a dish to the table. Lovers and aunts mingle, share recipes, and argue over the size of biscuits while "children run through sucking fatback rinds" and her uncles recline on the porch, "telling stories and knocking glass bottles together when they laugh" (165). "I walk back and forth from the porch to the kitchen," she dreams, "being hugged and kissed and stroked by everyone I pass. For the first time in my life I am not hungry, but everybody insists that I have a little taste. I burp like a baby on my mama's shoulder. My stomach is full, relaxed, happy, and the taste of pan gravy is in my mouth. I can't stop grinning. The dream goes on and on, and through it all I hug myself and smile" (165).

Allison's dream brings together the lived with and the lived by family, the previously disparate aspects of her life with a gathering that overcomes the dualisms and separation anxieties that had defined her life, integrating Southern and Northern, small town and city, man and woman in a common matrix of food, love, and strength, complete with "pan gravy," flowing in abundance. By helping her to dream herself and her family anew, Allison's writing draws the "bitter stuff" out of her life like a poison, giving her "a way to love the people she wrote about, even the ones I had fought with or hated" (9), leaving the image of a healthy family to replace the lived by family image that has dominated her relationships to this point. In her introduction, Allison describes her dreams as repressed content resurfacing unbidden and unwelcome. When she finally comes to accept and forgive her poor-white Southern family, memories activated by food are transfigured into more hopeful dreams, indicating that the stumbling block has become a resource, the rock on which she will build a new family—perhaps that family formed when, at 42, Allison adopted a child, Wolf, with her partner in northern California.

In “Lupus” however, Allison appropriately concludes her collection with Dorothy’s return trip to Greenville, South Carolina, “place of my dreams and nightmares,” to visit her Aunt Temple, the most fiercely independent of her aunts, who was widowed young and never remarried. Temple sits on the porch and watches her grandchildren playing, “sugar thickening the blood in her veins, pressure pinkening her skin” (173). She is pre-diabetic and hypertensive in addition to suffering from lupus, which Allison footnotes as “any of various skin diseases; especially a chronic tuberculosis disease of the skin or mucous membranes; a particularly dangerous disease of metabolic origin...that exhausts the energies of its victims and necessitates an extremely careful and restricted life” (167). She also glosses the linguistic origins of “lupus” as “a wolf, from eating into the substance of; cancer” (174). High blood pressure is commonly thought to result from repressed anger and bitterness (Rhoden 216). One of the aims of autoethnography, in the words of performance artist Tami Spry, is to “turn the internally somatic into the externally somatic” (169). The linkage between the interiority of psychic damage and the exteriority of the body is present in Temple, whose name may evoke the Spirit, that third aspect of one’s being which Allison suggests is the part of the self that comes from taming one’s “rage and hunger” (134).

Temple married late among her sisters and owned a roadhouse with her husband, Robert, a “steady boy” who died suddenly and left her with three children and a house on Greenville’s Old Henderson Road. Described by her cousins as a “hard-assed, cold woman” who “thinks more of herself than a woman should,” Temple is Dorothy’s favorite aunt, “the most remarkable, the one who lived with us the year I was seven, the year mama almost died, the year she first had cancer and I fell in love with the very idea of red-headed women” (174). Sitting on her flaking front porch, Temple is the kind of woman Dorothy might have been had she never left

Greenville—a hardened woman who has known great suffering but who remains determined to live life on her own terms. Temple and Dorothy are connected through the figure of the wolf which links her aunt’s dis-ease with the metaphorical “wolf” which lies curled in Dorothy’s neck, beneath her conscious mind, crouched and ready to attack in an instant:

The wolf in my neck bares his teeth, stretches, lays one paw on the other, dreaming of fire and sparks raining down, myrtle leaves blackening in the heat. I fight him with my love for Temple, hug to myself the warmth and stillness of her porch, the certainty that she does not fear the wolf in her, the wolf who hides her teeth but watches, watches out of her eyes. (174)

In her aunt Temple Allison finds a model drawn from her own family for holding this wolf at bay.

The name “Temple” possesses symbolic linguistic relevance as well. The Latin *temperare* translates to “a model, guide or pattern used in creating something according to a specific design” (Starbird 20). A “temple” is thus a spiritual template for life on earth, and to temper is to “mix in due proportion,” or to harmonize or balance in proportion” (Partridge 184). As historical “temples” harmonized or “tempered” powerful conscious and unconscious forces, Aunt Temple provides a pattern for Dorothy’s path of individuation that incorporates mind, body, and spirit, a model drawn from her original lived with family that reincorporates fierce love and loss, arrogance and attachment.

Although it tilts and flakes in the heat, Temple’s porch provides a safe space analogous to the heart, the place where contrary forces are harmonized, and also a third model of the observatory, one much closer to home than either the laboratory in “Monkeybites” or the science building in “Muscles.” The aim of Allison’s “third look” stories is to reach this place, where she

can observe the passing thoughts and emotions associated with family and home, thoughts and emotions that come precariously close to her, without letting them take her for a ride. Sitting on the porch drinking tea “like she never left home,” Dorothy watches traffic as the porch tilts and flakes in the heat and is shaken by trucks that turn the corner so close to Temple’s lot that they “shear the leaves” off the myrtles. Nonetheless, Temple sits confident and defiant on the porch; ignoring the waving truckers, she “strokes the soft worn wood like the lover she barely remembers” (168). Like her aunt’s porch, Dorothy’s heart is a deeper place of “warmth and stillness,” a place from which to observe the mind and to feel the body. A temple, or place of reconciliation, Dorothy’s heart waits calmly and patiently beneath the rage she locates in her neck, menacing just below the surface.

My purpose in reading *Trash* within a sociological and psychological framework is not to circumscribe Allison with the aim of yielding results somehow unavailable to the writer herself—as she recalls of the young men and women of the Gay Rights movement, “we were going to say what our lives meant, not let sociologists and psychiatrists diagnose us” (*Skin 2*)—but rather to point out how she incorporates these observations in fictions indistinguishable from her nonfiction in terms of the insights they offer into her inner work. In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison insists:

I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and what it means. I knew that as a child. It was one of the reasons not to tell. When I finally got away, left home and looked back, I thought it was like that story in the Bible, that incest is a coat of many colors, some of them not visible to the human eye, but so vibrant, so powerful, people looking at you wearing it see only the coat. I did not want to wear that coat, to be told what it meant, to be told how it had changed the flesh beneath it, to let myself be made

over into my rapist's creations. I will not wear that coat, even if it is recut to a feminist pattern, a postmodern analysis. (71)

Allison explains that “for most of my life I have been presumed to be misguided, damaged by incest and childhood physical abuse” (*Skin* 11). The bright “colors” of the coat are the readily seen psychological effects, woven or created by her stepfather/rapist and viewed by commentators, represented by “experts” like her friend Paula in “Violence,” who would claim that they know her better than she knows herself. Instead of simply “recutting the cloth” of her writing to match the patterns recognized and imposed upon her life from the outside, however, Allison takes life writing to unexpected places, namely by rejecting the confessional stance of the ex-poor white as surely as she has resisted the solutions of hiding and running, the “geographical solution,” as the only option available for leading the life she wants. Instead, Allison relentlessly exposes the most irredeemable aspects of her poor-white trash family and class, then makes a still braver statement in explaining that such a family has undeniably shaped her most “fundamental” self. Allison refers to herself as a “Zen Redneck,” a way of preserving her Southern roots, and has claimed the label “trash” as a badge of honor, having internalized the term and come to view its meaning as indicating someone who is unwilling to subordinate her individuality, her desires for love, for sex, music and food to any group habitus or family structure (“Introduction” xv). The path mapped out in these stories leads not toward Ruth Gibson’s “bitter, thin” philosophy, a hardened belief system based on the denial of desire and attachment, but towards the freedom to follow lines of desire drawn outside a heteronormative, class-structured society.

The “third look” represented in *Trash* is undertaken with a view towards defining, through writing, that part that remains, that has survived the people in Allison’s life who would

sanitize her, make her over to suit their purposes, and has also survived her own self-analysis—the process of separating her life into its constituent elements. In this sense, the title *Trash* is not a term of derision so much as a proclamation of victory. Allison resists both the inner pressure to elude, repress, or conceal her “white trash” identity, and the outer pressure from lovers, friends, and colleagues to change it. Instead of either, she changes the genre of life writing itself, revealing its potential for scandalizing consensus views about poverty, Southern-ness, sexual identity and victimhood, and for defying the structures, whether the family, the academy, or the feminist movement, that would take credit for shaping its form and content.

## CHAPTER V

### “OPERATION BOOKSTRAP” THE FAILURE OF THE GEOGRAPHIC SOLUTION AND JEANNETTE WALLS’S SUCCESS IN *THE GLASS CASTLE*

Thus far, the writers covered in this dissertation have pursued a trajectory towards racial enlightenment, ecological insight, and sustained self-analysis as an antidote to lives lived on the margins of polite society and as an alternative to following unconscious life patterns destructive to self, family, and the environment. The autobiographical texts I have discussed all double as qualitative studies, whether life histories, autoethnographies, or autoecographies, that also advance the literary careers of their writers. Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*, however, differs significantly from the previous poor-white autobiographical statements in its comparative lack of interiority and flat narrative style. Walls’s more understated approach foregoes the epiphanies and revelations common to autoethnographic methodology, downplaying the explicit aims of self-analysis, healing, and reconciliation with family, class, and region in favor of a story of success and escape drawn outside the lines of her lived with family.

*The Glass Castle* tells the story of a dysfunctional, itinerant family that unreels like a film across California, Nevada, and Arizona, east to West Virginia, and, finally, north to New York City. Walls’s childhood was characterized by nomadic wandering, homelessness, and some of the most abject poverty I have discussed so far. Yet, her narrative style never belabors the emotional impact of its passages, no matter how outrageous the situation in which she is placed by her parents, Rex and Rose Mary Walls. In an interview with *The Gothamist*, Walls explains that she “made a conscious decision not to extrapolate or comment on the events” described in



*The Glass Castle.*

I wanted readers to project their own feelings into what was going on. Some people have said that's the book's greatest strength, but I've also been criticized for it. [My sister] doesn't give her opinion on the situation of childrearing or the homeless issue. It was a conscious decision because whereas I couldn't be completely objective, I think part of the reading experience is to put your own experience into it. (Bussel, "Jeanette Walls")

Walls thus adopted an approach to life writing that sidesteps many of the issues of race, sexuality, and class identity more explicitly addressed by Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, and Allison, while foregrounding matters of self-representation that emerge, not from an entrenched or embattled class position, so much as from her desire as a professional writer to tell an American story.

One essential difference between Walls and Dorothy Allison, for instance, concerns Walls's more secure position, both financially and ontologically, at the time she wrote her memoir. Walls had a degree from Barnard, had worked as a reporter and columnist for MSNBC, and had already written her first book, *Dish*, about the gossip industry, before she determined whether writing a memoir about her poor-white past was an acceptable risk for her personal and professional life. Along with Allison, however, Walls admits that the shame of growing up poor was exceedingly difficult to overcome before telling the truth about her upbringing:

The worst thing about being homeless is the shame, the embarrassment and the humiliation. There was no doubt in my mind that if people knew the truth about me that I was going to be ostracized, that people were going to throw rocks at me. And I realize now that part of that was taking these old fears and experiences from my childhood when people found out how poor we were. (Bussel, "Jeanette Walls")

She recollects the conversation with her future husband, John Taylor, that finally led to the

conception of *The Glass Castle*:

I hadn't told people about my past, when people asked, I'd demur or lie a little bit. [John] took me to Central Park and said, "You're lying to me about something. Every time I ask you about your family, you change the topic and it's insulting to me. You know everything about me and I don't know anything about you." I said, "I'm not going to tell you because I don't think you'd want to be my friend anymore." And he said, "I'm not going to be your friend, forget it." So I told him everything, and his first reaction was, "That would make a great book." (Bussel, "Jeanette Walls")

Following this conversation, Walls spent five years working on a draft that she felt did her story justice, keeping the project a secret from her agent. She recalls that "the first version was too distanced. I was writing it as a journalist. It wasn't emotionally raw enough" (Bussel, "Jeanette Walls"). This early account veered so far on the objective side of the spectrum as to risk stretching the credulity of a readership who would expect a hotter, more emotionally loaded account of her childhood.

By contrast, Dorothy Allison suppressed her "raw, whiney, hateful stories" for the opposite reason: she thought they were too subjective and unforgiving in their treatment of her family. Allison characterizes *Trash* as an essential act of truth-telling in fictional form, and each story therein an act of self-discovery crucial to her fight for the survival and preservation of a "fundamental me" she saw as endangered. Walls, however, shelved her memoir for years as a literary side project, an interesting and thus marketable story.

Notably, Walls composed the final draft for her memoir in her own "glass castle," a high-rise New York City apartment building on the Upper East Side—a place of predominantly white, upper-class privilege. At the same time, her mother was living homeless on the Lower East Side,

where she and her husband had squatted for years in abandoned tenement apartments. Walls explains that the proximity of her lived with family finally inspired the current version of *The Glass Castle*: “What happened is, the opening scene in the book pushed me into thinking, ‘I should really write this’” (Bussel, “Jeanette Walls”).

In the opening scene she describes, Jeannette, dressed to the nines, leaves her apartment for a party. On the cab ride over she sees her mother, Rose Mary, on the street in the East Village, digging garbage out of a dumpster. Jeannette slides down in her seat and asks the driver to take her back to Park Avenue. “The emotion that seized me at that moment,” she told Oprah Winfrey in a 2005 interview, “was fear that she’d spot me and my secret would be out . . . I went home, paced around my apartment, and I looked in the mirror and didn’t much like the person looking back at me” (Walls). Walls’s was a complex guilt, because she had tried to help her parents financially, and they always refused. “I fretted about them,” she explains, “but I was embarrassed by them, too, and ashamed of myself for wearing pearls and living on Park Avenue while my parents were busy keeping warm and finding something to eat” (*The Glass Castle* 4). Jeannette took her mother to lunch the next day and asked her how she was supposed to explain this situation to her readers. “Tell the truth,” her mother replied— “as though it were the easiest thing in the world” (Walls).

Wall’s lack of interiority as compared to the previous writers is a narrative strategy on her part that permits her to elicit surprise and outrage from readers while suspending her own judgements and conclusions. She never tips her hand but instead invites readers to treat her memoir as a “Rorschach test” for their feelings about parenting, alcoholism, poverty, and homelessness. The cover of *The Glass Castle*’s first edition speaks to this idea of open interpretation, featuring a photograph of a young girl with her hand pressed to her face, in

anguish perhaps, or in prayer. Upon opening the cover however, the extended photograph reveals that the girl is whispering a secret or something funny to a grinning boy standing beside her.

Walls explains that she wrote *The Glass Castle* from the perspective of a child contemporaneous with the events she describes, reliving her memories not to achieve a post-traumatic catharsis, but rather to do justice to those events out of a sense of journalistic fidelity to the facts as she recalled them. The fact remains however that writing a memoir permitted Walls a therapeutic confrontation with the shame of her past as a poor, frequently homeless person in a wealthy country. Walls labored in secret over her family story because of her fear of revealing that she was somehow not who she claimed to be; she suffered from the “imposter syndrome” that can dog formerly poor people who achieve a large degree of success. Eventually, however, Walls let go of the secret shame and guilt that constituted her biggest impediment to a memoir calculated as a gamble, a high-risk disclosure that could potentially jeopardize her career and social status. She was rewarded when that memoir paid dividends for both, selling over 2.7 million copies and spending over seven years on the New York Times Bestseller list. Of all the autobiographical works discussed in this dissertation, *The Glass Castle* most exemplifies for reviewers a “bootstrap” narrative of self-willed triumph over poverty and homelessness in sharp contrast to its author’s poor-white family.

This chapter considers the way Walls constructs her narrative, first examining how her family believed in an intensified version of the “geographic solution” outlined by Dorothy Allison. The Wallises’ nomadic lifestyle helped them avoid confronting either the fact of their poverty or the inner pressures that contributed to this condition in favor of a “frontier” narrative that demanded the family continually light out for new territory. A family prefers to write its

own autoethnography, its own script that governs how it views success or failure relative to its own authority. More so than any attachment to a particular place, that diehard meterstick for Southern writing and identity, the Walls maintained a family image that insisted upon its *sui generis* quality.

Secondly, points of comparison with the previous writers will illustrate how Walls eschews their alchemy of inner work and deep autoethnography for a surface-level narrative that invites “bootstrap” readings with its depictions of various trials that made her stronger even as they destroyed the dysfunctional family that occasioned them. I will also explain how certain objective experiences recounted in *The Glass Castle* echo more subjective experiences described in the previous works, and how this is Walls’s way of working out surface-level solutions to the problems of the lived with, as opposed to the lived by, family.

Finally, I will consider how Walls represents herself as an escapee from her parents and their horizontal path towards inevitable collapse, differentiating herself as a successful New York writer, though one who acknowledges the debt she owes to her family for providing her most successful subject. In the process, Walls, unlike Allison, Ray, and Dunbar-Ortiz, furtively dodges the encumbrances of sexuality, race, and class in her construction of an ex-poor white subject.

### **I. The Cactus and the Tumbleweed**

*The Glass Castle* highlights the failure of the “geographic solution” of running and hiding to escape one’s poor-white past. To recall, Allison defines the geographic solution as the idea that one can “change your name, leave town, disappear, make yourself over” (*Skin* 11). “What hides behind that impulse,” she continues, “is the conviction that the life you have lived, the person you are, is valueless, better off abandoned, that running away is easier than trying to change

things, that change is not possible” (11). In the Walls’ version of this imperative, however, the exact opposite was the case: escape was an adventure, change was always possible with the right shift of terrain, and their family was strong enough to sustain itself across the lines of geography and community. This belief that would be severely tested by the Wallses’ life on the road, the proving ground for Jeannette’s emergence from the poverty and peripatetic rambling perpetuated by her dysfunctional family dynamic.

Jeannette’s father, Rex, was a “dramatic storyteller” who always “fought harder, flew faster, and gambled smarter than everyone else in his stories” (24). All Jeannette knew about Rex’s childhood in Welch, West Virginia was that “his dad had worked as a clerk for the railroad, sitting every day in a little station house, writing messages on pieces of paper that he held up on a stick for the passing engineers” (26). Rex “had no interest in a life like that,” so he “left Welch when he was seventeen to join the air force and become a pilot” (26). Rex determined that Welch would not be his terminus, that he would not spend his life watching other people coming and going. Jeannette remembers her father as continually on the move, a man who “was going places” (194). Those places however were typically “dusty little mining towns in Arizona, Nevada, and California” (19). Rex had no interest in “getting caught” in any one job or town, and he frequently uprooted the family to evade local authorities and bill collectors. Jeannette would overhear her parents talking about “henchmen” and the “gestapo,” supposedly “FBI agents who were after Dad from some dark episode that he never told us about because he didn’t want to put us in danger, too” (19). The Wallses lived in so many places during Jeannette’s childhood that it caused her to question what was meant by the phrased “lived” itself:

“How many places have we lived,” I asked Lori [her sister]. “That depends on what you

mean by ‘lived,’ she said. “If you spend one night in some town, did you live there? What about two nights? Or a whole week?” I thought. “If you unpack all your things,” I said. We counted eleven places we had lived, then we lost track. We couldn’t remember the names of some of the towns or what the houses we had lived in looked like. Mostly, I remembered the inside of cars. (29)

Jeannette’s father promised to build her the titular “glass castle,” a structure that would include a glass ceiling, glass walls, and a glass staircase (25). Jeannette defended Rex as an engineer and inventor, though he was more realistically characterized as a grifter and a con man. Rex’s plans for his fantasy home gave him a way of bonding with Jeannette, and fostered her hope through hard times in the most desperate locales.

The Wallises continually sought a new start in locales so rugged their poverty would hardly be noticed. This strategy backfired, however, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where the family slept in their car on an empty street and woke to find “a bunch of people surrounding the car, little kids pressing their noses against the windows and grown-ups shaking their heads and grinning” (129). An embarrassed Jeannette pulled a blanket over her head, but Rose Mary, with characteristic humor, joked that “you know you’re down and out when Okies laugh at you” (129). Dunbar-Ortiz’s “Okies” were, in Alexandra Ganser’s description, a “para-nomadic group of poor whites driven to the road by economic necessity rather than wanderlust or adventurousness” (34). The Wallises also fit this definition, but Rex taught the children to view their parents’ nomadic lifestyle as part of a “grand adventure” (17). On the road, the family sang Woody Guthrie songs like “Don’t Fence Me In” and “This Land is Your Land” songs that celebrated the freedom of the open road and their ability to “pull stakes” and leave the latest “shit-hole” behind (18).

Having grown up the daughter of a rancher and “pioneer woman” in Arizona, Rose believed she could survive anywhere, and particularly in the desert, where the family subsisted on edible plants and slept on blankets under the stars (39). “Your father and I are pioneers,” Rose Mary told Jeannette, “just like my great-great-grandfather, who helped tame the Wild West” (266). Rose Mary inherited her unflappable personality from her mother, Lily Casey Smith, a school teacher, cattle rancher, and bootlegger from Arizona. Walls writes from her grandmother’s perspective in her second book, *Half-broke Horses*, a “true-life novel” based on her life. Lily Casey spent her childhood in a one-room dugout built into the bank of the Hondo River in Texas, and from time to time, “scorpions, lizards, snakes, gophers, centipedes, and moles wormed their way out of [her] wall and ceilings” (9). In her twenties, she rode five hundred miles from Santa Fe to Arizona to teach in a one-room schoolhouse, and managed a cattle ranch during the Great Depression. Lily’s free-spirited daughter, Rose Mary, inherited her mother’s indomitable frontier optimism, though seemingly none of her more practical traits.

Recalling her time in the desert, Walls employs two competing images for describing her lived by family dynamic. “We were sort of like the cactus,” she writes, “we ate irregularly, and when we did we would gorge ourselves” (22). On the same page, however she recalls that when a strong sandstorm came rolling across the desert, “it knocked you down like you were a tumbleweed” (22). R. D. Laing writes that the “family image” describes the way a particular family functions: “the family may be imagined as a web, a flower, a tomb, a prison, a castle” (6). One of Laing’s patients described her family as a flower, for instance: “Mother was the centre and we were the petals. When I broke away, mother felt like she had lost an arm. They [siblings] still meet round her like that” (6). Reviewers have identified the glass castle as the metaphor at the heart of Walls’s memoir, but I contend that her “family image” more closely resembled the



tumbleweed, a plant that never puts down roots but rather rolls across arid ecologies. The visible outer tissues of the tumbleweed are dead, enabling them to blow effortlessly across the landscape in search of a wetter climate for its seeds or spores, which fall to the ground upon absorbing water.

The cactus on the other hand is patient, resilient, capable of putting down roots in the most inhospitable environment and defending its territory with its spines. The Wallses rather resembled the tumbleweed, in blowing across the desert and frequently leaving their children to fend for themselves. The tumbleweed is not a protective structure for its seeds so much as a vehicle for transporting spores, that grow independently of the mother plant. This describes Rex and Rose Mary's parenting style, a tough love approach that encouraged grit, independence, and mobility above security and stability.

Rex and Rose Mary never stayed in one place long enough to put down roots, refusing to be nailed down to any one homeworld, Janisse Ray's prescription for healing the wounds inflicted upon the land and the poor-white families who live on it. Likewise, in "The Muscles of the Mind," Dorothy Allison "nails down" her fantasy images to the reality of her body, to repair the relationship between her body and mind and to heal in turn the rift between her and her family. The Wallses, however, were reminiscent of Ray's Uncle Pun, who would say "never take more on your heart than you can shake off on your heels" (*Ecology* 103).

Walls often employs wild botanical and animal metaphors for her parents who attempted and failed to adopt to their changing environments. According to Francisco Varela et al.,

Mutually enfolded organisms and environments engage in a process of "natural drift," exploring a vast range of possible lines of development. Those possibilities do not have to be the best (Survival of the *fittest*) but simply good enough. The evolutionary process

is *satisficing* (taking a suboptimal solution that is satisfactory) rather than optimizing, and it proceeds via bricolage, the putting together of parts and items in complicated arrays, not because they fulfill some ideal design but simply because they are possible. (*The Embodied Mind* 199)

Janisse Ray's father, Franklin, corresponds to the figure of the bricoleur who adapts to his environment, however "suboptimal," and the Ray family structure corresponds to the pitcher plant, which puts down roots and flourishes in a nutrient-poor environment (*Ecology* 215). The grifter, however, does not stay in any one place long enough to adapt. Rex's petty criminal lifestyle prevented him from thriving or even "satisficing" in environments more conventional for raising children, driving him instead to seek out marginal, impoverished places that grew in the shadow of extractive gold, barite, and coal mining industries.

Unlike Ray or Dunbar-Ortiz, Walls does not pursue certain opportunities to overtly critique capital, though the places where she "lived" as a child gave her ample opportunity to do so. Like Dunbar-Ortiz's Okies, who are blown about "with a gust from transnational capital" ("Bloody Footprints" 76), the Wallises dwelled in the little pockets of poverty created by communities colonized and sometimes abandoned entirely by capital. The people attracted to such places were much like Rex himself:

Some of the people who lived in those towns had been there for years. Others were rootless, like us—just passing through. They were gamblers or ex-cons or war veterans or what Mom called loose women. They were old prospectors, their faces wrinkled and brown from the sun, like dried-up apples. The kids were lean and hard, with calluses on their hands and feet. We'd make friends with them, but not close friends, because we knew we'd be moving on sooner or later. (*The Glass Castle* 20)

The Wallises enjoyed their most conventional home in Phoenix, where Jeanette's grandmother let the family stay in one of her properties, an old mansion which her mother told her "had been built almost a hundred years ago as a fort...The outside walls, covered with white stucco, were three feet thick" (94). "These walls would stop any Indians' arrows," Jeannette told her brother, Brian (94). This "fort," however, left the children exposed and vulnerable to the outside world, as Rex and Rose Mary left all the doors and windows open for air, so that drunks would walk in and sleep in their living room (102). One night, Jeannette woke up to a neighborhood pedophile molesting her in her bed. She and her brother chased the man into the street, and when they told her parents about the incident, they still refused to close the house at night—"we needed the fresh air, they said, and it was essential that we refuse to surrender to fear" (103).

Rex, in particular, seemed to view the raising of fearless children as his chief mission as a father. In one instance, he took the family to the zoo, where he fixated on a caged cheetah. He stepped over the chain fence with Jeannette and had her pet the cheetah's head through the bars, while the animal licked the butter and popcorn salt from her hand. In Allison's "Monkeybites," Dorothy is scarred by a caged monkey when she acts to free her sister from his claws. The danger posed by Allison's volatile stepfather is transferred to the vicious monkey while the stepfather vanishes from the story altogether, leaving Dorothy to rescue her sister from disfigurement (*Trash* 90). In Walls's story, however, Rex leads her into a situation ostensibly more dangerous, but remains present to pacify the beast and to show his daughter that it was nothing to fear to begin with—even though, of course, this is not entirely true.

In this way, Rex strengthened Jeannette's defenses against the world because he knew he would not be around to protect her. Jeannette's nickname was "Mountain Goat," because of her

sure footing on rocky terrain. Janisse Ray laments that her overprotective father would not permit her to roam the woods like a young colt; it was only after returning to Georgia as an adult that she was able to experience the freedom Jeannette felt as a “mountain goat” roaming the desert. For a trade-off, however, Walls had parents who were completely unreliable when it came to meeting their basic needs for food and shelter. She cannot claim, like Dunbar-Ortiz, that she “never went hungry” (*Red Dirt* 224). While “neither of my parents ever struck us in anger,” Walls tells *The Gothamist*, “it was almost like they were wild animals; I gave birth to you, now find your own food. Mom was like, I’ve got my own needs, you take care of yourself” (Bussel, “Jeanette Walls”). Later, in the depths of their hunger in West Virginia, Jeannette discovered Rose Mary in bed eating a family-sized Hershey bar. “I can’t help it,” she sobbed when confronted by the kids, “I’m a sugar addict, just like your father is an alcoholic” (174). In another instance, Jeannette and Brian found a two-carat diamond ring. When they presented the ring to their mother and suggested that she pawn it to buy groceries, Rose Mary acknowledged that, while it could purchase a lot of food, the ring “could also improve my self-esteem, and at times like these, self-esteem is even more valuable than food” (186).

## **II. The Crucible of the Lived with Family**

Jeannette incurred many scars as a result of Rex and Rose Mary’s “sink-or-swim” parenting philosophy, but these same scars incurred from one dangerous situation helped get her out of another. One night Rex took Jeannette to a roadside bar, where he beat a man named Robbie out of eighty dollars playing pool and let him dance with his daughter for consolation (211). While Rex waited outside in the car, Robbie took Jeannette upstairs to his apartment, where he pushed her on the bed and began forcing himself on her. Robbie paused however when Jeannette unbuttoned her dress and showed him the scar on her side. “For all he knew,” Walls

writes, “my entire torso was one giant mass of scar tissue . . . Robbie looked uncertainly at his friends. It was like seeing a gap in a fence” (213). Jeannette writes this incident, which amounts to an attempted rape permitted by her father, as a “tight spot” narrowly avoided by quick thinking (213). “We make a good team,” Rex said when Jeannette handed him Robbie’s money in the parking lot, “I’m sure he just pawed you some. . . I knew you could handle yourself” (213).

Reviewers have assumed that Walls must indeed be “one giant mass” of inner scars from such experiences, but her scar tissue also marks the formation of the “inner muscles” required to defend herself and her siblings in the dangerous environments in which they were left alone at an early age. Walls presents one of these places, Battle Mountain, Nevada, as a travesty of the natural lifeworld:

There were no trees to speak of in Battle Mountain, but one corner of the dump had huge piles of railroad ties and rotting lumber that were great for climbing and carving our initials on. We called it “the Woods” . . . Toxic and hazardous waste were stored in another corner of the dump, where you could find old batteries, oil drums, paint cans, and bottles with skulls and crossbones. (60)

Jeannette and Brian arranged a “laboratory” in a shack, where they mixed up something they called “nuclear fuel” by pouring different liquids in a can, then tossing in a match. The ensuing fire knocked to them their feet and burned down the shack. Rex, who “happened to be nearby” rescued Brian from the burning shed, and as the three stood by watching the fire, Rex “pointed to the top of the fire, where snapping yellow flames dissolved into an invisible shimmery heat that made the desert beyond seem to waver, like a mirage” (61). Rex told them “that zone was known in physics as the boundary between turbulence and order. It’s a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven’t figured ’em out yet . . . You all got a little too close to it today”

(61).

As discussed in chapter two, coming perilously close to death and being returned to safety can produce a considerably psychological benefit for children, particularly if the danger is mitigated by the presence of a protective adult. In *the Glass Castle*, such dangerous situations are ramped up to emphasize how Jeannette learned to navigate the “tight spots” occasioned by her father, supposedly for this very reason. In *A Cracker Childhood*, Franklin Ray dives into the Altamaha River to save Janisse from drowning; Rex Walls, however, would be as likely to toss his daughter in the water himself.

In Battle Mountain, Rex taught Jeannette to swim at the Hot Pot, a “natural sulfur spring in the desert north of town, surrounded by craggy rocks and quicksand” (65). Rex pushed her into the middle of the spring, helped her out when she choked on the hot, stinking water, and threw her back in once she had caught her breath. He then hung back until Jeannette swam to the side and crawled up the calcified rocks. Afterwards, Jeannette remembers, “Dad kept telling me he loved me, that he would never have let me drown, but you can’t cling to the side your whole life, that one lesson every parent needs to teach a child is ‘if you don’t want to sink, you better figure out how to swim’. . . Once I got my breath back, I figured he must be right. There was no other way to explain it” (66).

Walls’s youthful pyromania channels Dorothy Allison’s work, in which fire figures more as a metaphor for exploring what in alchemical terms is called “personal calcination,” an intensive process of inner work that turns up the fire of consciousness in one’s inner laboratory, where she observes her thoughts, fears, habits, judgements, and grudges (Hauck). This alchemical process burns Allison down to the bone, or the Bone as it were, revealing her truer, more authentic self. This inner process is dramatized both in Bone’s fantasies of fire and its

destructive, cleansing power in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and in Dorothy's "portable laboratory" in *Trash*, where she burns away the "impurities" corresponding to her lack of self-knowledge.

What Walls had instead of an "existential clearing" or a portable laboratory was a proving ground, a set of circumstances that launched her into a mature adulthood. Jeannette undergoes more literal trials by fire in *The Glass Castle*, externalized in her "laboratory" where she mixed volatile substances in a dangerous alchemy whose aim was the removal of fear, a bar to self-knowledge. Walls dates her pyromania to a kitchen fire that burned her when she was three—"in my first memory," she writes, "I was on fire" (9). Left alone to boil hot dogs in the kitchen, Jeannette caught her dress on fire, burning her body so badly that she underwent skin grafts that left a scar "the size of [her] outstretched hand" on her ribs (191). This is the scar that may have saved Jeannette from sexual assault in the pool hall, and the same scar that would later prompt her boyfriend to inquire into her past, which led her to write a memoir. In another childhood incident, the Wallises' San Francisco hotel room caught fire. A few nights prior, Jeannette had been in the bathroom, lighting tissue and dropping the flaming pieces in the toilet. "I was torturing the fire," she explains, "giving it life, and snuffing it out" (33). Standing outside the hotel watching the blaze, Jeannette wondered "if all fire was related . . . if the fire that had burned me that day while I cooked hot dogs was somehow connected to the fire I had flushed down the toilet and the fire burning at the hotel" (34). "I didn't have all the answers to those questions," she writes, "but what I did know was that I lived in a world that any moment could erupt into fire" (34). Walls thus encourages the idea that her inner strength and integrity was formed in the crucible of her lived with family, which boiled at just the right temperature to reform her into a stronger substance without consuming her entirely. Bathed in a sulfur spring, equivalent to the sweat box or sealed vessel of alchemy, she emerges a harder body, calcined like

the rocks around the spring (Hauck 132). The Hot Pot may have taught Jeannette to swim, but it seems also to have ended her childhood obsession with fire, suggesting that, as an alchemist transmutes base metal into gold, Rex's extreme methods accomplished his aim of raising a tough, courageous woman who could handle anything life could throw at her.

Another of Walls's stories about her father models how introspective techniques in Allison become outer tests of character in *The Glass Castle*. When, as a child, Jeannette feared something was under her bed, Rex, instead of assuring her there was nothing there, told her it must be a demon, the same that once hounded him until he fought it off in hand-to-hand combat, "a big old hairy sonofabitch with the damnedest-looking teeth and claws" (36). Father and daughter then went "Demon Hunting" with a knife and pipe wrench, and when they came up empty-handed Rex told Jeannette that "the thing to remember about all monsters" was that "they love to frighten people, but the minute you stare them down, they turn tail and run . . . All you have to do, Mountain Goat, is show old Demon that you're not afraid" (37). After her molestation in Phoenix, Jeannette went "Pervert Hunting" which was "just like Demon Hunting except the enemy was real and dangerous instead of being the product of a kid's overactive imagination" (103).

Rex thus taught Jeannette to confront her fears head-on, but was unable to face down his own externalized inner "demons," particularly the alcoholism that caused him to spend all the family's money, led to raging fights with Rose Mary, and kept the family from settling into any semblance of a stable life. On the lam from persecutors within more so than the authorities without, Rex refused to revisit his Appalachian past, discouraging the dual autoethnographic aims of determining who you are by where you come from and healing the damage done in the past. Rex's trajectory, however, determined by the pressures of his alcoholism, ensured that he,



along with his family, would eventually wind up back in Welch, West Virginia. *The Glass Castle* sets up this creeping certainty for readers paying attention to certain signs posted along the way. In Battle Mountain, for instance, the family dwelt in an old railroad station, “so close to the railroad tracks that you could wave to the engineer from the front window” (51). Rose Mary dressed up the station as “one of the oldest buildings in town, with a real frontier quality to it,” but Walls’s description echoes that of the railroad station where Rex’s father had worked as a clerk. Viewed in this light, the unconventional home which Rose Mary viewed as a symbol of their freedom and mobility was merely a way station on the road to despair. Although they liked to think of themselves as frontiersmen lighting out for new territory, the Wallses’ frontier script was undercut by their unspoken, lived with family dynamic, according to which Rose Mary considered her alcoholic husband “a cross we must bear,” went along with all his plans and pipe dreams that placed the family in increasingly outlandish situations, and would then thrive on the chaos that ensued when Rex would disappear for weeks on drunken benders, leaving the family rudderless (105).

Rose Mary held little hope that her husband would ever dry out, and made the decision to live in West Virginia with Rex’s parents, who, she believed, would be able to take better care of him. Rose Mary pitched Welch to the children as a pastoral idyll of woodland creatures and quaint mountain folks. She promised the kids that “we’d love it in West Virginia . . . We’d live in the forest in the mountains with the squirrels and the chipmunks. We could meet our grandma and grandpa Walls, who were genuine hillbillies” (123). Upon arriving in Welch, however, Jeannette found that her father’s family was composed of some of the most grotesque Southern poor whites outside the pages of an Erskine Caldwell novel, and that, far from the quaint, kindly hillbillies Rose Mary imagined, they embodied some of the worst stereotypes of mountain

Southerners, including alcoholism, racism, and an incestuous sexuality.

Rex's father, Ted, was as bad an alcoholic as he, and his mother, Erma, cooked horribly and kept the shades drawn in the house, declaring that "the reason I have not gone out of this house in fifteen years is because I do not want to see or be seen by a nigger" (143). Rex's brother, Stanley, pawed at Jeannette on the couch while watching the Hee-Haw honeys (184). Jeannette thought that "Dad must have arranged for the weirdest people in town to pretend they were his family" (131). Although she spent most of her teenage years in West Virginia, Jeannette continued to view Welch as an outsider, most often presenting the townspeople and her "weird" Southern relatives ethnographically as opposed to autoethnographically. Narratively, Welch serves the purpose of explaining the source of Rex's alcoholism and the push factors that caused him to leave West Virginia for a life on the road. One such factor, Jeannette determined, may have been sexual abuse.

Jeannette and Lori walked in on Erma attempting to molest Brian in her bedroom. When they told Rex what had happened, he reacted furiously, insisting that "Brian's a man. He can take it. I don't want to hear another word of this" (148). When Jeannette commented that Rex's reaction to their account of Erma's attempted molestation of their brother was "really weird," Lori replied, "you'd be really weird too, if Erma was your mom" (148). Here again, Walls makes the characteristic choice of condensing prolonged commentary into a terse conversation between her and her sister. Rather than confront his own past abuse, however, Rex left the kids with their grandparents, placing his own children in danger of experiencing the same abuse and conditions which drove him to leave Welch in the first place. Welch lies at the crux of *The Glass Castle* (Part III of V), as the place where Rex's horizontal road and his daughter's vertical path converged at an impasse before parting ways. Or, as Jeannette would put it, Welch was the place

where her family had stopped “skedaddling” and finally “gotten caught” (29). Rex moved the family to a “rustic” rent house in town with no indoor plumbing, insulation, furnace, or air units. The Walls struggled more in the house on Little Hobart Street than in any previous locale, despite the presence of local agencies that helped poor coal-mining families, including the food stamp program President Kennedy inaugurated in Welch in 1961 (Hampson 105). The family avoided all government agencies, particularly the child welfare agent who came to the door one day while both parents were away. Jeannette knew that the state of the house was such that if she let the man through the door he would “launch an investigation and end up sending me and Brian and Lori and Maureen off to live with different families” (194). This prospect prompted Jeannette, Rex’s “last defender,” to try and convince her mother to leave him, so that, without an able-bodied husband, the family would be eligible for government assistance (188). “Half the other people on Little Hobart Street” she recalls, “got food stamps and clothing allowances. The state bought them coal and paid for their school lunches” (188). Rose Mary, however, refused to apply for government assistance even when the children were bathing in the run-off from icicles. She warned that “welfare would cause irreparable psychological damage to us kids . . . Once you go on welfare, it changes you. Even if you get off welfare, you never escape the stigma that you were a charity case. You’re scarred for life” (188).

The hardship of life in Welch finally caused Jeannette to abandon the tumbleweed structure that had kept them drifting near the brink of destruction and work to replace it with a stronger family structure that would protect all of its members. “Head of the household” at thirteen (209), she assumed the responsibility for parenting her younger siblings and her childlike parents as well, doling out money from their scant budget to Rex. When her mother worked as a substitute teacher, Jeannette would nag her to go to school as though she were one of her

elementary students. Meanwhile, Jeannette and Lori developed a plan to leave Welch for New York City, where they would find work and save up enough money to bring Brian and Maureen along.

Jeannette was encouraged in this endeavor by her high school teacher, Jeannette Bivens, who supported her writing career by appointing her editor of the high school newspaper. Mrs. Bivens had also had taught Rex Walls in the eighth grade and persuaded him to submit a poem to a statewide poetry competition (203). When the poem won first prize, “one of Dad’s other teachers wondered aloud if the son of two lowlife alcoholics like Ted and Erma Walls could have written it by himself” (203). Rex was so insulted by the comment that he dropped out of school until Mrs. Bivens “convinced him to return and earn his diploma, telling him he had what it took to be somebody” (203). Rex later named Jeannette after Mrs. Bivens. Jeannette’s inclusion of this story indicates her deeper understanding of what went wrong in her father’s life, and how she might avoid those same pitfalls and fulfill his squandered potential as a writer. In the 1960s, Welch city councilmen W. R. “Pop” Baley instituted “Operation Bookstrap,” a coordinated effort among local schools “to have indigent mountain children improve their lives by enhancing their educational situation” (Kiffmeyer 34). If she arrived in Welch a little too late to benefit from this program directly, Jeannette, in effect, pulled herself up by her “bookstraps”—as good a way as any for describing her path to writerly distinction.

Another aspirational influence on Jeannette was provided by Ken Fink and Bob Gross, two young filmmakers from New York who “had been sent to Welch as part of a program to bring cultural uplift to rural Appalachia” (*The Glass Castle* 222). Fink and Gross told Jeannette to move to New York City, “a place of energy and creativity and intellectual stimulation the likes of which we had never seen... filled with people who, because they were such unique

individuals, didn't fit in anywhere else" (222). Convinced that they would never flourish in the stultifying atmosphere of West Virginia, the two sisters pooled the money they made from their after-school jobs until they could move to New York City. If Welch was the place where her tumbleweed family came to a halt, the town provided Jeannette with a launching point from which to initiate her vertical narrative of escape from her vagabond family and success by her own lights.

### **III. The "Noble, Hardworking Poor": Walls's New York Story**

Although Walls had experienced the most abject poverty of any of the writers considered in this dissertation, she also managed to effect the smoothest transition to the next phase of her life. In some ways, Walls's New York story confirms the success of the geographic solution, whereas her parents had proved its spectacular failure. Jeannette's arrival in New York reads a bit differently than the more typical account in which a Southerner gets beaten down by the city, then gets up and tries again until she ultimately becomes a success story. By comparison with Jeannette's rough-and-tumble upbringing, New York City hardly presented a challenge.

Upon first arriving in the city, Jeannette looked in the mirror at the bus station restroom and wondered if New Yorkers would see "an Appalachian hick, a tall, gawky girl, still all elbows and jutting teeth" (245). On her first day in New York City, however, Jeannette demonstrated the hard-won confidence of a survivor. She was met at the bus station by a friend of Lori's named Evan, described as a "pale guy with thick, black-framed glasses that made his eyes look tiny" (245). Looking more the part of the stereotypical city slicker than Jeannette did the "Appalachian hick," Evan offered to help Jeannette with her bags but could hardly lift them.

After one block, Evan put down my suitcase. "This is heavy," he said. What do you have in here? "My coal collection." He looked at me blankly. "Just funning with you," I said

and punched him in the shoulder . . . “You West Virginia girls are one tough breed,” he said. “You got that right,” I told him. (246)

Jeannette moved into Lori’s apartment in a rough neighborhood in the South Bronx, where she was periodically mugged but, against conventional wisdom, always fought back. In one instance, Walls writes, “as I was getting on the train, some guy tried to grab my purse, but I jerked it back and the strap broke. He fell empty-handed to the platform floor, and as the train pulled out, I looked through the window and gave him a big sarcastic smile” (248). Walls explains that her upbringing instilled in her a fighting instinct that she never lost: “I honestly do believe that some of us kids who had tough childhoods are in some ways at an advantage over the more privileged kids of this world. We’re fighters, we know how to make a situation work for us. The trick is knowing when to stop fighting, and I think that’s something I’m just starting to learn” (Hinojosa).

Seven pages into Part IV, “New York City,” Jeannette has waited tables at a restaurant, answered phones at Wall Street firm, written for an independent newspaper in Brooklyn, received an internship at Columbia, and been accepted to Barnard. By the end of page seven, the four siblings are all together in the city, meeting for dinner on weekends, in which they make pork chops or heaping plates of spaghetti and meatballs and sit around talking about Welch, “laughing so hard at the idea of all that craziness that our eyes watered” (251). If this happy ending seems too facile, it is because the siblings’ lives are complicated anew when Rex and Rose Mary decide to join their children in New York, so that they “could be a family again” (253). The move, Walls explains, is also motivated by necessity when her parents’ van breaks down on the turnpike after a visit, making New York City simply the place where, in the context of Rose Mary’s frontier narrative, their wagon loses a wheel. The return of the lived with family

however, blowing into the city like an incongruous, invasive tumbleweed, exerts a constant reminder for Jeannette to raise herself to a higher standard of living.

The other Walls siblings found it more difficult to cope with their parents' intrusion into their new lives: they could not laugh away their family past when it was out on their street digging through garbage. Brian became a police officer, a representative of the "gestapo" and a different set of "laws" than those valued by Rex, the armchair physicist. The troubled Maureen had embraced Pentecostal religion in Welch, but turned to hard drugs in the city. Maureen had moved into Rose Mary's apartment and stabbed her mother when she kicked her out on the street, revealing again the weakness of the family structure, which could not protect its most vulnerable member. If Jeannette was Rex's "Mountain Goat," Rex, in a fight with Maureen, told her she was "the runt of the litter, who should have been drowned at birth" (274). Jeannette's New York stories thus make clear her position of comparative privilege within the same family, as her relationship with her father differed greatly from Brian's, Maureen's, or Lori's. This dynamic is recapitulated in her novel *The Silver Star*, complete with an absent father and an eccentric artist mother who abandons her two daughters with an uncle who lives in a dilapidated plantation. "Dysfunctional families are what I know," Walls tells an interviewer, describing the driving idea behind *The Silver Star*: "I'm fascinated by the dynamics between siblings and how it plays out in a dysfunctional family, where the elder siblings take on the responsibilities of a parent so that the younger sibling can have a childhood. Also, every sibling who has ever compared notes from their childhood knows that one sibling's fondest memories can be another's most bitter, that a beloved parent to one can be a cruel monster to another" (Brodeur). Walls considered an alternate title for her novel, *Tender Shoots*, from Job 14:7: "for there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender shoots thereof will not

cease.” When asked how her novel speaks to the idea of family, Walls answers, “let’s keep it simple and say that family is a mixed bag, a bundle of contradictions, the worst and the best, your heaviest burden and your biggest source of support, the cause of complete sorrow and utter joy” (*Real Simple*). Thus, Walls’s childhood narrative sets up her transition into a stable, responsible adulthood set against her parents’ arrested development, while also developing the notion, planted like seeds throughout her memoir, that her success as a fearless reporter and writer would not have been possible without the many trials by fire she endured as a scion of Rex and Rose Mary, as the “tender shoot” that survived to grow into the family’s strongest branch.

Since the publication of *The Glass Castle*, readers and reviewers have debated the question of whether Walls prospered because of or despite her family. At times, Walls’s memoir fits only too well the “bootstrap” narrative that reviewers gloss over it and which Walls has not expressed much interest in contradicting. A *Kirkus* reviewer, for instance, lauded *The Glass Castle* as a “pull yourself up-by-the-bootstraps, thoroughly American story.” *The Chicago Tribune* congratulated the memoirist for her lack of “whining,” which, evidently, has no part in an “American story” such as hers. The success of *The Glass Castle* inspired Walls to become a motivational speaker who, according to the Keppler Speakers website, “explains in detail the effects of poverty and tells the tale of her emergence from it.” “Walls,” her bio continues, “shares an inspiring message of triumph over obstacles and encourages audiences to face their fears, confront their past, and understand that our flaws can be our greatest assets.” Although, in effect, Dunbar-Ortiz, Ray, and Allison have all turned the stumbling block of their poor-white families into a resource for their lives and careers, Walls is the writer who has achieved the most commercial success for a memoir that is, oddly, by turns the most outrageous and the most palatable to a broad readership.



Another difference between Walls and Dorothy Allison in particular lies primarily in Walls's self-representation as a member of what Allison would call the grateful, "noble, hardworking poor" (10). As discussed in my last chapter, Allison considers this notion to be so far from her own experience as to constitute a mythological version of the poor white, preferred by the media to the scandalizing reality of white trash:

There was a myth of the poor in this country, and it didn't include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was this concept of the 'good poor,' and that fantasy had little to do with the everyday lives my family had survived. The working poor were hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. We were the bad poor.... We were not grateful, not noble, not even hopeful. (*Skin* 10)

Allison willingly accepts a white trash identity she finds preferable to a whitewashed myth so reductive as to threaten the authentic self she so painstakingly recovers in narrative form. If Allison hails from the "un-grateful poor" (10), Walls on the other hand has remained more than willing to express gratitude for her adult success, as well as a lack of bitterness regarding her former poverty:

The first time someone accused me of being a Park Avenue snob it was like "Yes." Part of me carries that with me, of me being a gawky, ugly dirty kid. My great indulgence is I take a shower and a bath every day, the fact of running water, I just love that I can just get clean, it's such an indulgence and a luxury . . . I've never really felt bitter. I'm a really lucky person, I've got a great job, I've got a wonderful husband, I've got a great life." (Bussel, "Jeanette Walls")

Much as Walls enjoyed a position of relative privilege within her dysfunctional family, she demonstrates a similar position within her cohort of female writers from a poor-white

background. This position has to do with other factors of difference besides relative poverty. Dunbar-Ortiz for instance describes the stigmatizing of her “half-breed” racial identity and her “red” political legacy in her particular place and time (mid-century Oklahoma) where these markers of identity were considered dangerous. Allison’s lesbian sexuality similarly demarcates a difference in experience that could not be glossed over by a professional exterior or the jump into a new tax bracket.

For her part, Walls demonstrates a reluctance to define the family she would not have define her, a narrative strategy that ostensibly allows her to tell her family story while artfully dodging the burden of representing an entire class, gender, sexuality, or region. More so than the deep autoethnography of Southern poor whites presented in *Red Dirt* or *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, *The Glass Castle* offers an autoethnography of the homeless, who, like the Walls themselves, are difficult to pin down as a group, as their identity inheres in a set of circumstances that are more often temporary than historical. A transient, marginal state, contingent upon factors like mental illness, gambling and addiction, as well as the precariousness of the labor market, homelessness is a condition, not an identity; the homeless resist classification on the basis of race or class. “Everyone on the street has a story,” Walls suggests in her *Gothamist* interview, “and everybody has a reason that they’re there” (Bussel, “Jeannette Walls). She tells her family’s unique story about homelessness, but remains reluctant to provide any but the broadest generalizations about the homeless as a group, perhaps because of her lingering reluctance to identify herself too closely with that group.

When the subject of the homeless was broached in her political science class at Barnard, for instance, Jeannette explained that if the homeless “were willing to work hard and make compromises, they might not have ideal lives, but they could make ends meet” (*The Glass Castle*

257). Her professor, “trembling with agitation,” asked her, “what do you know about what the underclass faces?” “You have a point,” Jeannette replied (257). Jeannette would also demur when her friends told her that the homeless were “scam artists” and that she should not give money to them on the street. “The truth was,” she admits, “I just didn’t have it in me to argue Mom and Dad’s case to the world” (256).

Jeannette Walls represents her family with a series of sliding poor-white signifiers, including the grifter, the pioneer, the hillbilly, and the Okie. *The Glass Castle*, however, does not present a sustained sense of identity tied to the trashy, poor-white class elements that the other writers do not have the luxury of leaving behind, or would not deny, conceal or reject even if they could. She rather takes the stance of the ex-poor white, who does not identify with poor whites as a race, class, or cohort. Walls prefers to think of herself, in the words of Fink and Gross, the representatives of “cultural uplift” in her text, as “a unique individual who didn’t fit in anywhere else” (222). Walls subscribes in her own way to the notion of difference perpetuated by her mother and father, elevating herself above the circumstances of her childhood in a way that Allison, Ray, or Dunbar-Ortiz would never claim. This is certainly understandable, given the stigma attached to being poor in America to the present day, but it makes Walls the odd woman out among the writers discussed in this dissertation, and throws into relief their efforts to resist the temptation of the ex-poor white stance.

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## VITA

Joseph Aaron Farmer was born in 1980 and grew up in the Extra community in Hamburg, Arkansas. He majored in English at the University of Arkansas, Monticello. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English in 2004. From 2004-2006, Farmer took classes in literature, writing, and rhetoric while teaching at Western Illinois University. After a brief academic hiatus, Farmer began the doctoral program at the University of Mississippi in 2008 where he pursued a major field of twentieth-century American Literature with an emphasis on Southern Literature. He will receive his Doctorate of Philosophy in American Literature in August 2017. Farmer was a Graduate Instructor of Record at the University of Mississippi from 2008 to 2011, where he taught freshman composition. In 2011, he moved to Oklahoma when his wife, Suzanne, accepted her tenure track position at Northeastern State University. He has been teaching freshman composition, American literature surveys, and upper-division courses at NSU since 2011. In August 2017, he will accept a tenure-track position at NSU.

Farmer has presented his research at a number of regional and national conferences, including the South Central Modern Language Association, Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Southern American Studies Association, and Southern Writers, Southern Writing. Farmer's research was also highlighted at the University of Mississippi when he presented his original research at the annual English Department Graduate Student Colloquium. This fall, Farmer will continue to present his research at the South Central Modern Language Association.

Farmer's conference presentations have dealt with representations of the poor white in Southern fiction and nonfiction as well as with memoirs and autoethnographies written by denizens of the Rough South. He has also presented papers on the novels of William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Louise Erdrich, Donald Harington, and Robert Montgomery Bird.