1 Reading White Trash

Class, Race, and Mobility in Faulkner and Le Sueur

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "trash" as "a worthless or disreputable person; now, usually, such persons collectively . . . white trash, the poor white population in the Southern States of America," including British usages of "trash" that denote poverty and worthlessness. The American examples, however, include the addition of "white," creating the racialized term "white trash," as in an 1831 usage: "'You be right dere,' observed Sambo, 'else what fur he go more 'mong niggers den de white trash?'" Another usage appears in a white man's 1833 journal entry: "The slaves themselves entertain the very highest contempt for white servants, whom they designate as 'poor white trash.'" Although this example attempts to trace the term "white trash" to slaves, I suggest that whatever the origin of the expression, it was most likely the invention of middle-class whites, who attributed it to slaves and encouraged animosity among slaves and poor whites in order to prevent cross-racial alliances that would challenge white hegemony. Indeed, the *OED* etymology cites a white man's journal entry, in which the term is ascribed *to* African Americans *by* whites, who most benefit from it.

According to Eugene Genovese's history of slavery, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, middle-class whites "explained away the existence of such racial contacts and avoided reflecting on the possibility that genuine sympathy might exist across racial lines" (23). Fear of slave rebellion with the aid of poor whites who resented the planter class fostered the hostile attitudes toward white trash: for example, many Southern states instituted "stern police measures against whites who illicitly fraternized with blacks" and attempted to keep

white and black laborers separate (Genovese 23). Although poor whites and blacks sometimes helped one another, more often animosity prevailed, bolstering the power of the upper and middle class whites. Despite a few examples of cross-racial sympathy in Genovese's oral histories, on the whole "interracial solidarity could not develop into a serious threat to the regime" because of the dominance of racist discourse over class consciousness and the strength of poor whites' desire for upward class mobility (Genovese 24).

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the racial and classed term white trash has peppered American oral and written culture, yet few scholars have seriously questioned how this term functions in American language and literature.[1] The paucity of research on the term is in itself telling: white trash is an epithet whose history is still largely unexamined. In 1990s everyday usage, the term white trash caricatures a group of people—poor whites—implicitly justifying through ridicule their disenfranchisement and alienation from society. A historically informed, critical examination of how the term white trash functions in the 1930s demonstrates how middle-class whites constructed white trash identity to explain the socio-economic immobility of other, less prosperous whites. The discourse of "trash" circulated in connection with claims about genetics and eugenics, adaptability to changing capitalist markets, and gender identity. The term signifies specific racialized class identities contingent on time and place, but always serving to distinguish the trash from upwardly mobile whites, who, no matter how poor, still have the potential for upward mobility that the trash lack. Emphasizing individual biological traits—concerns proper to the private sphere—middle-class whites could evade the fact that poor whites' poverty results from structural problems in the economy—the public sphere of capital and labor, production and consumption. By examining the way the term works in the 1930s, a time of economic crisis when the issue of class took center stage in public discourse and when urbanization and consumer capitalism reached into the private homes of even the

1 Sylvia Jenkins Cook, Nicole Rafter, and Duane Carr have published studies of American "poor whites," but Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray's 1997 *White Trash: Race and Class in America* is the most recent scholarly work to take up the issue. While their anthology signals an increased critical interest in "white trash," the overall content is undertheorized and ahistorical.

poorest states in the South, we can better comprehend how the term operates in contemporary texts and contexts.

Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939)[2] and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) suggest the historically specific ways in which poor whites are read as white trash in 1930s American texts. Reading these two novels together is a response to a current dearth of critical scholarship in two main areas: first, the issue of race in the study of Le Sueur, and second, the need to read Faulkner in terms of class. That is, recent work on Le Sueur has focused on reviving interest in her work and situating it in the context of feminism and the left literary tradition; conversely, while library shelves brim with recent scholarship on Faulkner, especially excellent studies on race, gender, and nation,[3] very few critically examine how class is represented in his fiction. Myra Jehlen's 1976 book, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South*, points to a promising direction in Faulkner scholarship: it considers his novels not primarily in terms of their modernist formal characteristics, but for their treatment of social issues, specifically the ways in which his work represents the poor whites of Yoknapatawpha and engages with the social history of class in Mississippi. Since the 1970s, dozens more Faulkner studies have emerged, but no major study of class since hers. On the other hand, Meridel Le Sueur's work, while nowhere nearly as popular as Faulkner with readers or critics, has received more and well-deserved attention in recent years, especially in Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991) and Constance Coiner's *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995). Both these studies perform the crucial and belated

2 Although it wasn't published in its entirety in the 1930s, I still consider *The Girl* a 30s novel, as do Le Sueur scholars Coiner, Foley, and Rabinowitz. One obvious reason is the fact that Le Sueur published three chapters in *Anvil* and *New Masses* during the 30s. Additionally, *The Girl* is a 30s text in proletarian content, formal experimentation, and Le Sueur's Marxist feminism, also evident in her nonfiction published during this period. In fact, even if the "feminist" elements were revised or expanded (with 70s feminist hindsight) for the 1978 publication, given the 1930s preoccupation with class politics, this proletarian novel occupies a 1930s radical literary space along with Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, also not published during that decade.

3 See Clarke, Ladd, Roberts, Saldívar.

tasks of taking up neglected women writers of the left and documenting the conditions under which they produced their work and under which their work was (poorly) received or suppressed altogether; both read Le Sueur's work in the context of proletarian and women's writing. This chapter continues and extends Rabinowitz's and Coiner's projects by taking up the issue of racialized class identity in Le Sueur's proletarian feminist novel. Faulkner and Le Sueur, although very different in many integral ways, round out a picture of white trash during the Depression.

The trope of movement, both geographical and socioeconomic, plays a crucial role in these representations: the privileging of industrial over agrarian and the modern city over the antiquated countryside marks trash subjects as deficient in geographical capital. These subjects occupy a low position on an axis of class and geographical privilege in what Pierre Bourdieu calls "socially ranked geographical space" (124). For the characters in these two novels, attempting to move from private to public sphere, from country to city, and from working to middle class involves difficult and often unsuccessful movements across those geographical and socio-economic boundaries. The first section of this chapter demonstrates how white trash characters are treated as classed and racialized others by urban whites. The second section examines the ways in which white trash characters read their own bodies as natural resources and as commodities. The third section historicizes the term in the context of studies of class and whiteness, particularly the work of Evan Watkins and George Rawick. The final section maps the position of poor whites, in racializing and commodifying tropes as well as tropes of movement and stagnation, as trash along the road to modernization in the urbanizing nation, and often as obstacles to modernization. The hope that geographic movement will lead to class mobility permeates the two novels, and the failure of that hope for mobility marks the characters as white trash in the racialized and classed sense of the term.

"LIKE THEY DO": THE BUNDRENS AS CLASSED AND RACIALIZED OTHERS

The construction of the Bundrens as white trash in *As I Lay Dying* serves a crucial purpose in the racialized class ideology that undergirds the narrative: Anse Bundren is figured by Faulkner's text as lazy, dishonest, self-

righteous, duplicitous trash, and many observers in the novel attribute various of these characteristics to his children as well. Anse as white trash allows the other white farmers to see themselves as hard-working, honest white men somehow constitutionally or biologically different from the white trash. The white men who live in Anse's county may be only marginally better off than he, but they are more socially adept and ambitious; for them, Anse functions as a classed white other, in a different category from their own, even though they, like Anse, live in the country and function as part of the antiquated agricultural mode of production in the Depression-era New South.

The function of geography in the white trash identity is also central: town whites must "other" the rural whites to preserve their own class and racial identity as white capitalists. As Raymond Williams demonstrates in *The Country and the City*, the country is represented as the site of backwardness, inefficiency, and ignorance at precisely the point in history when national participation in consumer capitalism picks up steam; for these rural whites in the New South, that point is only now arriving. With the changes in production and consumption come changes along other social axes, including relations of geography and race. The Bundrens suffer condescension and discrimination from town- and city-dwellers because of their roots in the rural poor. Certainly, as Williams argues, the overdetermined categories of country and city have been invoked historically to signify not simply geographical difference but also differences in morals, modes of production, and stages of capitalism. These white trash characters from the rural United States are perceived by the other characters as "country" and therefore obsolete, primitive, and stupid.[4] Marking the Bundrens as trash obviates the need to explain their lack of mobility in the "land of opportunity" the middle classes need to believe exists. When country-dwellers travel to town, they face the prejudices of the townsfolk at every turn, particularly in their uneasy role as consumers with very little purchasing power. Simultaneously threatened and reassured by the presence of poor country white trash, the townspeople distance themselves from the trash by emphasizing their difference via their rural customs and by racializing the white trash as somehow biologically or genetically inferior to themselves.

4 Cook has illustrated how these attributes have been ascribed to poor whites since the 1700s.

The importance of geographical capital in *As I Lay Dying* comes up frequently. For example, the youngest son Vardaman's obsession with a toy train in a shop window illustrates how geography is implicated in capitalism even in the rural counties of Mississippi. He wonders about commodity consumption and its relation to the town/country binary as he worries that a town boy might have bought the train: "When it runs on the track shines again. 'Why ain't I a town boy, pa?' I said. God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country. If He can make the train, why cant He make them all in the town" (66). Later in the journey, as Dewey Dell entertains him with stories of the train, he worries again about a town boy buying the train: "Dewey Dell says it wont be sold because it belongs to Santa Claus and he taken it back with him until next Christmas. Then it will be behind the glass again, shining with waiting. [...] She says he wont sell it to no town boys" (100-102). Even as a very young child, Vardaman has internalized the devalued geographical capital associated with rural whites, and his anxiety troubles and intensifies his position as a consumer, "shining with waiting" for the toy he desires.[5]

The family's perceived geographical and cultural capital plays out differently for Vardaman's father, Anse. Anse Bundren's racialized class position is articulated in the novel through others' perceptions of him. To the townsfolk and better-off neighbors, Anse's personality flaws and his poverty are cause and effect. With little or no regard for the physical toll of poverty and hard work, Anse's character is consistently perceived by other whites as lazy, greedy, and deceitful, characteristics historically attributed to white trash to justify their lack of social mobility. Tull, a white man who lives on a farm near the Bundrens but who is significantly more socially skilled and financially stable, alludes to Anse's financial situation as rooted in greed, suggesting that Anse would withhold information if he stood to profit from it: "I'd believe him about something he couldn't expect to make anything off of me by not telling" (23). The easy morals of white trash Anse are here thrown into relief by Tull's implication that he and Anse differ in this moral realm; as Anse would behave dishonestly for financial gain out of greed, so Tull would not. The implication is that Anse is greedy because he is poor, poor because he is lazy, and lazy because he lacks ambi-

5 Susan Willis and John T. Matthews provide provocative readings of Vardaman's consumerism.

tion. Tull's circular logic in his assessment of Anse relies on the class-specific semantic difference between ambition and greed: ambitious people desire success and achieve it through hard work, while greedy people desire material wealth and achieve it through dishonest means. Unaware of this class bias, Tull sees himself as ambitious and Anse as greedy.

Even if Tull's stated opinion of Anse were true, he doesn't mention any possible motives Anse would have outside of greed, his family's poverty, for example, or his own inability to work. Although many townsfolk believe a natural, racialized difference separates them from the Bundrens, none acknowledge the physical results of the class differences manifested in Anse's body. Duane Carr aptly points out that, amidst the neighbors' and townsfolk's casual condemnation of Anse's laziness, only Darl mentions his father's work-related disabilities due to a previous bout with heatstroke and bad shoes as a child laborer. Anse's refusal to work up a sweat stems from the fact that "as a young man he had been a hard worker who fell deathly ill 'from working in the hot sun,' a reality that gives credence to his otherwise superstitious belief that if he works up a sweat he will die" (Carr 83). And although numerous characters remark upon Anse's custom of working his children as he rests in the shade, only Darl observes that his father's feet are "badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy" (11). The narrative gives the reader examples of how Anse's body is scarred by his life of work, but few notice the physical explanations for Anse's "laziness," seeing him simply as shiftless white trash.

As for his neediness, Anse is seen as part of a specific group of people. After Anse trades his son's horse for a mule team without permission, Armistid vents his frustration over Anse's neediness. He describes Anse returning from the trade looking "kind of funny: kind of more hangdog than common, and kind of proud too. Like he had done something he thought was cute but wasn't so sho now how other folks would take it" (189). Armistid sees Anse as a disingenuous and manipulative individual, but also definitive of his class—rural white trash. Like Anse, Armistid is a farmer in rural Yoknapatawpha county, but he and his wife Lula have a barn, a mule team, and apparently more middle-class sensibilities than the Bundrens, who can't afford false teeth and who must barter and mortgage for most of their necessities. Distinguishing himself from Anse, Armistid contemplates

his annoying qualities: "durn if there aint something about a durn fellow *like* Anse that seems to make a man have to help him, even when he knows he'll be wanting to kick himself the next minute" (192; my emphasis). Armistid is talking about a "fellow like Anse"—not just Anse himself, but a group or class of fellows like him, of his type, who need help from Armistid, "a man" who will angrily regret it "the next minute." Here Anse is rhetorically lumped together with needy, seemingly humble people who share his attributes such as laziness, deceit, and reliance on others, who appear to need help from "a man" but, Armistid believes, are really angling for their own gain. Anse and other white trash take advantage of the generosity of others, especially white middle-class men, just as the racialized discourse about class still resonates today in representations of "welfare mothers." Foregrounding a similar representation of idle poor that recurs throughout English literature and histories, Williams notes that it is "not only the recurrent and ludicrous part-song of the rich; but the sharper, more savage anxiety of the middle men, the insecure," who have a greater stake in denouncing the poor and demarcating the lines of distinction between the trash and the middle classes (44). In *As I Lay Dying*, those who have the greatest stake in marking Anse as a white trash other are those who occupy positions closest to his, socio-economically and geographically: farmers and townsfolk who want to be perceived as "modern" and middle class and who see in the Bundrens' backwardness evidence of their own progress, whether literally progress to town or toward the class status that town represents.

Changes in the New South were slow in coming in the 1930s and not always met with glee. Anse's resistance to change, perceived as stubbornness or simply inertia, provokes Samson, a farmer, to comment on Anse's unswerving attempt to get Addie's body to Jefferson:

> I notice how it takes a lazy man, a man that hates moving, to get set on moving once he does get started off, the same as he was set on staying still, like it aint the moving he hates so much as the starting and the stopping. And he would be kind of proud of whatever come up to make the moving or the setting still look hard. (114)

While Anse is usually lazy, when he does "get set on moving" he defies all logic in pursuit of his goal, which is seen as somehow consistent with his laziness. A slave to inertia, Anse at rest remains at rest while Anse in mo-

tion remains in motion. Like the backward country folk he represents, Anse resists change even in the face of enormous human and financial costs. As Duane Carr points out, Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* around the time Southerners realized that the "progress promised by advocates of a New South had not come to pass, that instead the South had acquired industrialization without prosperity, becoming [...] simply a poverty-stricken replica of the North" (81). In the context of the New South's economic upheavals, Anse and his class of poor rural whites are perceived by striving and middle-class whites as "trash" whose obsolescence is hastened by rapid economic changes to which they are struggling to adapt; the Bundrens are the debris that must be cleaned up for moral reasons and to enable social and economic progress.

In their attempts to distance themselves from the Bundrens, other more successful town whites read them as biologically inferior white trash, particularly in terms of their consumption, thus linking race and class identities. The teenage girl character, Dewey Dell Bundren, is consistently perceived as racialized white trash when she attempts to purchase an abortifacient in two different drug stores: both male storekeepers see her as "a country girl" who would "as soon put a knife in you as not if you two-timed her" and neither of them sells her what she seeks (242). The first druggist, Moseley, measures her potential as a consumer based on her demographic group, judging from her appearance (she wears a gingham dress, straw hat, and no shoes) that she "would maybe buy a cheap comb or a bottle of nigger toilet water" (199). In Moseley's description of Dewey Dell's entrance, he conveys the subtle way in which he categorizes her: "she kind of bumbled at the screen door a minute, like they do, and came in" (198). His "like they do" immediately groups Dewey Dell with rural white trash, perhaps more specifically white trash women, who behave in similar ways when they venture into the drugstore. Not only do "they" hesitate at the door, "they" also often buy "cheap" goods—Moseley estimates Dewey Dell has "a quarter or a dollar at the most"—such as a comb or some toilet water (199). The druggist's demarcation of Dewey Dell's likely purchase, toilet water, as somehow signifying "nigger" conveys the ease with which discourse about class, i.e., a poor white girl, slips into a complementary discourse on race signifying white trash. Dewey Dell's predicted "choice" signals that her tastes will run close to the tastes of African Americans, in the druggist's estimation.

Moseley's perception of Dewey Dell is shaped by the process of class-inflected "distinction," in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu uses the term. As Bourdieu has shown, emphasis on taste and consumer preferences (i.e., she'll choose "a cheap comb") rather than economic limitations (i.e., she can only afford cheap goods) allows those in slightly higher class positions to explain away the class differences that distinguish them from the poor as merely differences in taste. Bourdieu's study interprets contemporary French class structures, but his point clearly applies to different national and temporal contexts: "A class is defined," he writes, "as much by its being-perceived as by its being, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous to be symbolic—as much as by its position in the relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former)" (483). Dewey Dell's class is defined by the townspeople's perception of it and by her (imagined) consumption as much as by her place in the relations of production, i.e., daughter of a poor farmer. The additional tactic of racializing her further distances Dewey Dell from Moseley in his perceptions of her. The association of white trash like Dewey Dell with African Americans—assumed to be poor by definition, but with the added stigma of supposed biological inferiority—allows the middle-class townsfolk to distance themselves from the trash in socio-economic terms and simultaneously to view them as inherently different.

"THEY DON'T NEED US TO REPRODUCE OUR KIND": RACIALIZED POOR WHITES IN *THE GIRL*

In modern biological taxonomy, "class" denotes a group of genetically related organisms; it is a term of nomenclature that distinguishes one set of living things from another based on physical and hereditary traits. In the field of social science, on the other hand, "class" signifies membership in a socio-economic group, which, as Bourdieu points out, often also shares cultural and regional similarities such as "taste." In the literature of the American eugenics movement at the turn of the century, however, "class" emerges as a term signifying both biological and socio-economic status, clumsily conflating the two meanings. A Eugenics Record Office report from 1913 explains the "manifest function" of the science of eugenics in terms that conflate genetics and socio-economic class: its purpose is to "devise some

plan for cutting off the supply of defective and degenerate social misfits, and for promoting the increased fecundity of the more sterling families" (Laughlin 8). The dangers posed by this attitude within social service and public health institutions is evident in the words of Joseph DeJarnette of the Western State Hospital of Virginia: "In the case of a farmer in breeding his hogs [...] he selects a thoroughbred, [...] but when it comes to our own race any sort of seed seems to be good enough, and the rights of the syphilitic, epileptic, imbecile, drunkard and unfit generally to reproduce must be allowed" (qtd. in Hasian 27). These eugenics proponents are quite clear about their aim to curtail not only hereditary disease but the reproductive rights of whole segments of the population: indeed, poverty is a hereditary disease. That women were most often the site of institutional intervention is unfortunately no surprise:

> poor women were characterized as the carriers of 'germplasm' and those afflicted with this disease became the targets of massive publicity campaigns to cleanse America of the dysgenic [...] These narratives attracted an enthusiastic audience among welfare workers, criminologists, and members of the reading public, who saw in them proof of the claims of the hardline eugenicists. (Hasian 81)

Meridel Le Sueur's novel *The Girl* confronts the biological and sociological meanings of class in hazardous encounters with newly professionalized social workers who strongly resemble the welfare workers Hasian mentions.[6] These encounters between poor women and middle-class professional women exemplify the direct influence of the eugenics movement on social institutions and on public perceptions of class in the 1930s.

The nameless main character in *The Girl* experiences the social welfare system in its early stages in Depression-era Minneapolis when she applies for relief. The Girl's relationship with the middle-class female social worker is textually constructed to emphasize the class differences that prevent the two women from being allies and, indeed, cause the Girl to be forcibly detained by the woman who pretends to be her friend during their interview. The social worker racializes the Girl as white trash, although she never uses the term—her actions and attitudes toward the Girl demonstrate this perspective. The institutional view of the Girl as white trash becomes

6 For a fascinating study of the professionalization of social work, see Kunzel.

clear as she learns first-hand that forced sterilization and shock treatments are the primary forms of "relief" for sexually active single poor women like herself and her friend Clara. The Girl's case file reads: "The girl is maladjusted, emotionally unstable, and a difficult problem to approach. [...] She should be tested for sterilization after her baby is born. In our opinion sterilization would be advisable" (114). As an unemployed single pregnant poor woman, the Girl represents the people the eugenics discourses mark as dysgenic. Because the social worker sees the Girl only in terms of her purportedly dysgenic properties, she cannot make the feminist connection that Le Sueur's other female characters make across the lines of age, experience, politics, and sexuality. Whereas the Girl is seen as trash and treated as such by the social worker, she is also seen by the reader as "not trash" but as a character struggling to come to terms with her class and gender identity in the politically charged atmosphere of the Depression. This woman-reading-woman within the narrative demonstrates Le Sueur's commitment to the necessity of feminist connections along with class consciousness and workers' struggle even as it complicates the role of middle-class professional women in bureaucracies that oppress poor women.

Le Sueur's attempt to short-circuit or critique a middle-class woman's "reading" of the Girl as white trash has specific implications for 1930s middle-class readers who might wish to erase their class differences and identify only with the poor women's gendered oppression: the novel shows that you can't ally on the basis of gender without also taking into account class.[7] Amelia, an activist for the Workers' Party, provides a class-conscious reading of the social worker's racializing recommendations, which clearly mark the institution as subscribing to eugenicist policies informed by the E.R.O. studies of white trash: "it's because they don't need any more children from workers. They don't need us to reproduce our kind" (124). After admitting to the caseworker that she has had sex outside marriage and is now pregnant, the Girl is involuntarily committed to a relief

7 As Paula Rabinowitz argued in her recent talk, representations of the working class depend on descriptions of bodies, which, whether they are ravaged and dehumanized by a life of hard work or idealized as work-hardened and hypermasculine in left literature of the 30s, are always gendered and usually male. Representing the female working-class body is one of Le Sueur's triumphs: the Girl is both emaciated from poverty and explosively alive in her sexuality.

maternity home where she meets dozens of women in her situation, guarded by police matrons and electric window alarms, awaiting sterilization after delivery. The novel suggests that policies controlling the reproduction of poor whites in the 1930s are motivated not simply by a class-based assumption that they are too poor to support children; the white women in the welfare home are racialized and biologized in much the same way recent European immigrants were marked as unfit. Hasian writes, "[l]ong before the Immigration Restrictions Acts of 1924, foreign men and women who came to America found themselves being depicted as parasitic carriers of tainted germplasm that threatened the purity of native Americans" (49). The public discourses about eugenics in the 1930s heavily inform Le Sueur's novel, in a time when scientists targeted poor women, among other groups, for "eugenic" interventions (i.e., sterilization); Le Sueur's critique of these interventions registers in terms of both the gender and class identity of the victims—women treated like trash.

The novel's representations of poor men and women group them together as a class without eliding the significant differences in their oppression based on their gendered experiences. Whereas the women in the novel are physically exploited and abused as sexual and reproductive bodies, the men are physically exploited as labor, while both women and men are figured as dehumanized commodities. The women's gendered oppression is manifested in the Girl's sexual experiences with her boyfriend, on the job, and in her friend Clara's decline from prostitution into illness, shock-treatment-induced vegetative state, and finally death. But the narrative structure of this crucial chapter insistently associates the physical destruction of men with that of women: the mutilated male body of a murdered Wobbly is described along with the forced sterilization and shock treatments to which poor women are subject. Moreover, the men's roles are also gendered: the Girl's boyfriend Butch's masculinity surfaces in the text via constant references to sports such as baseball, his desire to act as breadwinner, and his conflicted feelings about the Girl's pregnancy, signifying his struggles with a strongly embodied, socially coded, classed masculinity.

Butch is torn between the ideology of the heterosexual nuclear family and the economic realities of extreme poverty: on the one hand, social constructions of masculinity call for him to be a working father, with a domestic wife and a well-fed baby. On the other hand, he faces the impossibility of fulfilling that construction during the Depression without a job or a

home. Butch's character has bravado but is gradually beaten down by the Depression, starting when his brother Bill is killed and concluding with his own death. His arrogant tirades sound increasingly plaintive as his circumstances grow more desperate: "I know what it takes for winning. I'm a natural winner" (15). Butch is a complex character, brutal and unsympathetic but with moments of tenderness that win the Girl's affections. For example, he beats the Girl when he learns she slept with the gangster Ganz for money, even though Butch himself had pressured her into it. His jealous rage stems from his sense of betrayal, that Ganz has threatened Butch's bourgeois ownership over the Girl, but his own pressure on her to prostitute herself for money conflicts with his feeling of ownership as well as with his imagined patriarchal role as breadwinner. His financial situation never allows Butch to fully play the role he so badly wants: middle-class husband and worker. The conflict between the idealized family that Butch wants to head and the reality of unemployment and destitution defines his character. Since he can't resolve the conflict by achieving legitimate class mobility, he is killed trying to get rich illegally.

The Girl loses Butch in a violent battle for control over capital, namely a bank robbery—for Butch it represents not just money for survival during the Depression, but specifically start-up capital, since he wants to use his share to open a service station. The impossibility of upward mobility crushes the Girl's hopes in an especially thorough way in her narration of her experience in the bank robbery and on the lam from the law. She drives Butch, who is bleeding to death from a gunshot wound, away from the scene of the crime and stops for gas. They have fantasized about operating a service station along a modern highway, but in their conversation with the worker-owner of the station, that dream evaporates even from their fantasies. The man tells them that although he and his wife saved up for years they will lose everything when the oil company repossesses the business.

When Butch and the Girl hear the service station owner's story they realize that even hard work doesn't guarantee a decent living, even the illusion of ownership doesn't pay off for the working class as it does for the tycoons. During Butch's death scene he shouts in his delirium:

> What have they done to us, what have they done to this now? Where are the oats, the wheat, I was sure they were planted. Look [...] the wealth of the country, the iron-ore-wheat-with-my-body-I-thee-wed, with my worldly goods I thee endow [...] What

are they doing to you now honey? They own the town. They own the earth and the sweet marrow of your body. (95)

In his confusion of married love and the commodities exchange, the body and the gross national product, Butch laments the fact that he and the Girl can only aspire to the ideal middle-class heterosexual marriage, just as they can only dream of owning their small gas station. Butch's language echoes Marx's in the first volume of *Capital*, which illustrates his theory of the commodity with an extended example of iron and corn:

A commodity, such as iron, corn, or a diamond, is therefore, so far as it is a material thing, a use-value, something useful. [...] Use-values become a reality only by use or consumption; they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth. (303)

Butch's conflation of his body and "worldly goods" with the commodities iron and wheat not only references Marx; the chain of signifiers also implies that the worker's body, represented in the speech as Butch's own body ("with-my-body-I-thee-wed") and the Girl's body ("sweet marrow of your body"), itself is a commodity. The connection between the worker's body, the Marxian commodity, and Butch's own wealth ("my worldly goods") suggests that it is a use-value insofar as the use-value is, in Marx's words, "the substance of all wealth." Indeed, the novel provides ample proof that the bodies of the workers are valuable only "by use or consumption." In the economic crisis of the Depression, fewer workers are needed and thus become expendable trash, for sterilization and layoffs. The consumption of the worker's body slows as its use-value decreases, making its labor still less valuable.

The form of that consumption becomes allegorical in Butch's lament: "They own the sweet marrow of your body" suggests ownership of the human being both as a worker and as an organism of flesh, blood, and bones. The image of "sweet marrow" takes the association farther, suggesting cannibalism: someone or something owns the body and can crack open the bones and suck out the marrow, finding it sweet. Elsewhere in the novel, Amelia brings up cannibalism in a Swiftian moment, railing against the often fatal lack of prenatal care for poor women: "it's too bad they can't kill our babies and eat them like suckling pigs! What tender meat that would

be! Stuffed babies with mushrooms. Why not?" (120). The motifs of devouring the bodies of the poor and the commodification of the worker's body operate as metaphors for the Depression-era capitalism that devastated so many lives in the 1930s; at the same time, these views of the poor body as a commodity obviate the workers' roles as consumers and producers. For women, the commodification takes the form of sexual and reproductive objectification as well as alienated labor. Clara, a prostitute, dies after the shock treatments she received on the relief workers' orders, prompting the Girl to echo Butch's language in his final speech:

> Clara never got any wealth. She died a pauper. She never stole timber or wheat or made poor flour. She never stole anyone's land or took it for high interest on the mortgage. She never got rich on the labor of others. She never fattened off a war. She never made ammunition or guns. She never hurt no one. Who killed Clara? *Who will kill us?* (130)

The Girl's questions are more pointed than Butch's, however, and she names specific injustices departing from his more poetic lament. Clara is innocent because she was poor, she "never got any wealth." Moreover, she never resorted to the criminal and legal methods that wealthy people use to acquire and maintain their wealth: stealing commodities or land, producing substandard foods or weapons of destruction, profiting from the cheap labor or misfortunes of others. The Girl then links herself to Clara with the pronoun "us," concluding that Clara died because of her poverty, and that since they are both poor women they share the same fate.

With the deaths of Butch and Clara, the Girl's desire for middle-class prosperity gives way to the frustration of poverty, enabling her to comprehend the corruption of the wealthy and the oppression of the poor in the capitalist system. As a sex worker, Clara exemplifies the woman as commodified labor in the extreme, selling her body because "it's the only thing you got that's valuable" (49). Although she is a prostitute, Clara lives in her own imaginary bourgeois dream-world. Even as she tries to teach the Girl how to pick up men on the street she explains her hope to marry a rich man: "someday you will have Irish tablecloths and peasant pottery and a pew in church and dress up and go every Sunday because you haven't had to hustle on Saturday nights" (8). In the future she will occupy a very different relation to poverty: it will be represented only as an antiquated, decorative

flourish, reduced to an aesthetic as "peasant pottery" and linens made by faraway poor people for her desiring middle-class consumption. Wishing to see herself as a consumer rather than as commodified labor, Clara exemplifies Bourdieu's claim that class distinctions are articulated through participation in consumerism and the display of taste. Like Butch, Clara dies young, starving and broken, her dreams reduced to sad clichés.

Male bodies are also vulnerable, and their mortality is marked as different from the women's but also linked in their class relations. In one powerful chapter that demonstrates the multiple ways the bodies of the poor are literally marked by their class position, the Girl reads the letter in which her case worker recommends sterilization, Clara returns from shock treatments in a vegetative state, and Amelia tells the Girl about the lynching of Wesley Everett, a white male Wobbly, in Centralia, Washington. Amelia laments the widespread support of the lynching by the townspeople:

> When they hung Wesley Everett they hung him by a long rope so *they* could all have souvenirs and you go there, in the best houses, you'll find a piece of that rope, and they are glad to show it to you. That's the kind they are, she said." (120; original emphasis)

Faced with the material bodies of the poor being mutilated and murdered, the Girl's class consciousness emerges and moves her to question the oppression she has heretofore endured stoically. Likewise, the lynching should not lead to a simple equation of anti-leftist violence with racist lynching; however, it does resemble racist lynching in its enactment of distancing, dehumanizing, and, like the category white trash, attempting to racialize the white male victims by associating them with the more frequent victims of lynching, African American men. In a complicated sequence of associations and allusions, the lynching of Everett's white male body suggests that although he constituted a socio-economic threat as a Wobbly, his body was destroyed in a specific way commonly used to destroy racially threatening bodies. Thus the very method of Everett's murder links him with African American victims of racial violence, who are marked in pseudo-scientific literature as biologically inferior, even as his political affiliation with the working class links him with the targets of eugenics discourse, the dysgenic white trash carrying genetic material that perpetuates the "biological" trait of poverty.

While the male bodies in *The Girl* are destroyed through their attempts to work or obtain money, the female bodies are manipulated and strictly controlled, especially in terms of sex and reproduction. The men's body count is actually much higher than the women's: Bill is shot scabbing; the Girl's father dies alone, bitter, and poor; Butch and Hoinck are shot in the bank robbery; Amelia's husband is dead; Sacco and Vanzetti are executed; and Wesley Everett is publicly lynched—all attest that women are not the only victims of class oppression. Rather, the male and female bodies are used in different ways: for production and/or for (controlling) reproduction. Coiner reads the deaths of so many men by the end of *The Girl* as a heavy-handed narrative tactic aimed at bringing the women together in the female-only collective that ends the novel on a utopian socialist-feminist note. I concur with her astute critique of Le Sueur's final chapters, in which the "elimination of all male characters by a *deus ex machina* [...] implies that cooperation among women and freedom from sexual domination are possible only in a world where men no longer exist" (118). While I agree with Coiner's reading, we may also read the male deaths as more than an awkward plot device. The systematic killing-off of all the male characters is also a commentary on the ways in which male workers' bodies are commodified and used up, if not killed outright.

TOWARD A HISTORICIZED "WHITE TRASH"

Historicizing the term white trash as it functioned earlier in the century demonstrates how important and consistent the trash identity is to modern as well as postmodern developments in twentieth-century American capitalism. In my use of the expression white trash to refer to 1930s poor whites, I provide a theoretical backstory for Evan Watkins's term "throwaways"—poor people regarded as expendable, replaceable workers who threaten middle-class narratives of socio-economic success. Watkins defines "throwaways" as "isolated groups of the population who haven't moved with the times, and who now litter the social landscape and require the moral attention of cleanup crews" (3). While throwaways exist in the postmodern era where technology has replaced Social Darwinism as the narrative that justifies social determinism, throughout the 1930s Social Darwinism provided the systems of what Watkins calls natural coding, including

eugenics and race theories, in which class mobility was linked to natural selection. "White trash" alludes to Watkins's term "throwaways" in that both explicitly position the working-class subject in relation to the capitalist economy in modernity and postmodernity, even as these relations are effaced by the emphasis on obsolescence prevalent in the dominant discourse, whether natural in the 1930s, or technological in the 1980s.[8]

Alluding to Watkins's postmodern "throwaways" with the term white trash forges a connection and continuity between the two, while at the same time allowing for their different historical moments. Throughout the twentieth-century, American capitalism has positioned specific groups within the working classes as obsolete obstacles to progress. In the 30s, consumerism and commodification had not yet reached the frenzied pitch they have in postmodernity. Accordingly, following these different relations of production and consumption, the term "trash," which suggests something that is used up, broken, and ultimately replaceable, like a chipped coffee cup, is preferable to the term "throwaways," which connotes something designed to be disposable, like a Styrofoam cup. "White trash" is thus the more appropriate term for analysis of early twentieth-century class relations. The glories of industrialization have not yet reached the backwoods of the Bundrens or the unemployed Girl in these novels, let alone the flexible accumulation and just-in-time inventory practices that mark the socio-economic conditions of Watkins's throwaways. Furthermore, for the 1930s white trash subject, the Depression hampered economic expansion and rural development thereby restricting access to increasingly "modern," and later "postmodern," modes of production and consumption.

The rural white trash characters in the novels are seen in racialized as well as classed terms by town- and city-dwelling white characters: the geography- and class-specific characteristics attributed to the Girl and the Bundrens also posit them as allegedly biologically inferior subjects, lazy, immoral, child-like, and promiscuous. In the U.S., as the *OED* etymology

8 As Watkins points out, "obsolescence involves conditions of both cultural and economic production in the present, not what has survived, uselessly, from the past, as obsolescence stories would have it" (7). This view of the poor has allowed Americans to explain away the harsh living conditions that mark the history of poor whites in the U.S., enabling the unspoken distinction among whites, while obscuring the material conditions that shape that history.

of "trash" demonstrates, the class prejudices of English society met the fundamental racism that specially characterizes American culture. I interpret this dual identification of the white rural poor as classed and racialized by invoking George Rawick's argument that white racism intensified as modes of production changed from agrarian to industrial. Forced by these changing modes of production, whites adapted to new restrictions such as timetables, the public/private split, urbanization, and delayed gratification, but felt compelled to distance themselves from their previous ways of life, which were recategorized as lazy, primitive, and promiscuous and projected onto African Americans. In his study of whiteness, David Roediger summarizes Rawick's thesis:

> Englishmen and profit-minded settlers in America "met the West African as a reformed sinner meets a comrade of his previous debaucheries." The racist, like the reformed sinner, creates "a pornography of his former life. [...] In order to ensure that he will not slip back into the old ways or act out half-suppressed fantasies, he must see a tremendous difference between his reformed self and those whom he formerly resembled." Blackness and whiteness are thus created together. (64)

Rawick's point about the co-construction of "blackness" and "whiteness," linking shifts in racism to shifts in capitalism, predicts the overlaps between the classed other and the racialized other in *The Girl* and *As I Lay Dying*: the white trash characters in both novels are seen as both classed and racialized. The discursive slippage between racialized and classed identities results from this very co-construction, and the inseparability of race and class at this point in American history supports this argument. Specifically, in Depression-era Minnesota and in the New South Mississippi, the crisis of capitalism leads to a renewed emphasis on racial difference that acts as a diversion from class. The context of changing stages of capitalism grounds the racialized class distinction: white trash are the racialized and biologized "former self" to the whites in the working and middle classes who are striving to be upwardly mobile and must reject the "others" in order to protect their faith in their own success. In addition to projecting "bad" capitalist identities onto white trash others, upwardly mobile whites associate the bad poor with other "bad" subjects excluded from the opportunities of "free enterprise," i.e., people of color. In this way, the rest of the white culture can legitimize their own access to mobility as a function of racialized differ-

ence, not class difference; white trash are biologized, racialized, and naturalized in their socio-economic position so that the white middle and upper classes can minimize or ignore any resemblance between themselves and the white trash characters.

In the context of the Depression, embattled middle-class whites find racial ideology easier to fall back on than facing the flaws inherent in capitalism; similarly, the pseudo-scientific discourse of eugenics allows insecure middle-class whites to racialize white poverty instead of addressing the economic conditions that created it. Both these "natural" discourses, racist essentialism and eugenics, attempt to explain biologically why poor whites were not as upwardly mobile as the American work ethic claimed: if hard work and frugality are the equation for success, so the reasoning goes, they must not be hard workers or sensible with their money. With the creation of a distinction among whites, the trash can be separated out from the rest of white society, not because of capitalism or economics, but rather because they are read as biologically inferior and genetically locked into a legacy of poverty.

MOBILITY IN THE 1930S: TRASH ON THE HIGHWAY

The movement of individual characters from country to city in *The Girl* and *As I Lay Dying* accompanies the geographic shift on a national scale from agriculture to industry and from rural to urban spaces: the 1920 census identifies the majority of Americans as urban dwellers. As the balance of the U.S. population shifted from a rural to an urban majority, new relations of space and movement developed in tandem with the changing modes of production that encouraged urbanization. While some Americans were buying new cars and making money in growing industrial markets, many others were not as successful and thus not as mobile. The mode of transport also suggests a great deal about the characters and their place in the changing nation: the Bundrens in a wagon and the Girl hitchhiking and walking suggest that "traffic is not only a technique; it is a form of consciousness and a form of social relations" (Williams 296). Working-class characters are affected by developments in the modes of transport which, when they are left behind by the new kinds of traffic, signal a "growth and alteration of con-

sciousness: a history repeated in many lives and many places which is fundamentally an alteration of perception and relationship" (Williams 297).

The highway and the ability to use it carry symbolic value in *As I Lay Dying* and *The Girl.* For Faulkner's Anse Bundren, the roads represent a tax expenditure that may speed the destruction of his family's subsistence-level farm economy; for the Girl, the highway holds the memory of her dead lover Butch and his futile ambition to own a service station. The grueling incremental progress of the Bundren family's wagon and the Girl's brief tragic flight from and return as a hitch-hiker to the city exemplify the profoundly limited opportunities held out by geographical mobility for working people in depressed parts of the country. Private rituals and behaviors are forced into the public sphere as these characters struggle to adjust to their negative mobility: dead bodies, Anse's new wife, Dewey Dell's secret quest for an abortion, and the birth of the Girl's baby all take place in public places . The white trash characters of these novels struggle to find their place in the public spheres of the modern urban world, which is larger and faster than they can handle. As Williams points out, "The division and opposition of city and country, industry and agriculture, in their modern forms, are the critical culmination of the division and specialization of labour which, though it did not begin with capitalism, was developed under it to an extraordinary and transforming degree" (304). To the rural poor in Faulkner's novel, increased geographical mobility means exposure to consumer goods they can't afford and the growing likelihood of urban migration in search of higher cash wages. For the Girl, it means moving from country to city looking for work, but the descriptions of city life throughout the novel contrast vividly with the popular image of the gleaming modern city of industry and consumer heaven. Faulkner's death knell of the premodern rural South and Le Sueur's woman-centered Midwestern proletarian novel depict and problematize their characters' positions on the highway of modernity.

The meandering wagon trip and tragicomic attempts to fix Cash's broken leg suggest more than Anse's ineptitude, however. They also symbolize the dialectic of mobility and immobility that pervades the novel. When the wagon breaks up in the flooded river, Cash tries to hold onto Addie's coffin and winds up nearly drowned with a broken leg. After an agonizing day of traveling with Cash's leg in splints, Anse decides to pour cement on the leg to keep it from moving. Cash's condition worsens, clearly a result of the

poorly conceived cast: his leg and foot turn first red "like they had been boiled" and then black "like a nigger's" (213; 224). Again a Bundren is likened to a "nigger," this time by young Vardaman remarking on the gangrenous leg, layering another symbol of immobility onto Cash's already ridiculous situation by linking him, specifically his injured leg, with African Americans, who were also shut out of the economic promise of mobility in the New South. In the first place, Cash loses his mobility when his leg breaks and he must lie on the coffin in the wagon, wincing at every jolt. Moreover, the journey itself signifies mobility only superficially, since the circumnavigation of floods and other calamities that befall the Bundrens more emphatically marks their inability to reach their destination, rather than real movement. And finally, his blackened foot further suggests that it has been slammed in the door of the Southern recovery, in a way similar to poor Southern blacks. The highway is not just to Jefferson via Mottson, but to modernity via consumerism, and the Bundren family wagon is a worn-out, barely roadworthy vehicle, representing as it does (complete with corpse) the outmoded and bottomed-out agrarian economy of the New South. As a remedy, the cast on Cash's leg is not only ineffective; it inflicts further damage. Similarly, the roads built to foster greater mobility of goods and people for the state of Mississippi in *As I Lay Dying* bring the Bundrens misfortune, pain, and loss.

Driving in circles, mending broken wheels, crossing flooded rivers, the traveling Bundren family is the living (and dead!) proof that just because there is a road doesn't mean everyone can get somewhere. In the 1920s the Mississippi highway system was in its infancy, and Anse speculates whether such a modernization is even worth the tax money, bringing as it does the increased mobility of labor and consumer desires for commodities: "Durn that road. [...] A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it. [...] it seems hard that a man in his need could be so flouted by a road" (35; 38). He further laments the temporary losses of Darl to the draft during World War I and then of Cash to wage labor in carpentry and the seduction of mail-order tools. These losses are in addition, of course, to the loss of the money in taxes to build the road in the first place, as the Bundren sons increasingly work as wage laborers rather than exclusively on Anse's farm: "[g]ot to pay for the way [literally the road] for them boys to have to go away to earn it [money]" (37). In his usual hyperbole, Anse attempts to blame Addie's death on the

road, since "[s]he was well and hale as ere a woman ever were, except for that road" (37). His resentment of the highway illustrates, on the one hand, the healthy suspicion and resistance to change typical of many poor whites during the economic restructuring in the 20s and 30s South. On the other hand, however, Anse is right: the road *is* killing his family's way of life, signaling the urbanization and modernization of even the agrarian South. Like Watkins's throwaways, white trash characters like Anse Bundren are positioned as virtually immobile trash along the highway, the waste of change.

The Girl's parents moved around often as she was growing up, looking for work and a comfortable home: they "moved from one house and city to another in the Midwest, always trying to get into something bigger and better" (9). At one point, her father moves the family to a Wisconsin bee and plum farm, although they have no agricultural training or experience. The working-class desire to move up in social and economic hierarchies comes through in her father's explanation for the move: "think of it, honey and plums, that will be different from the coal mines where I was raised" (27). Predictably, the farm fails: drought, disease, and crop failure belie her father's idyllic visions of pastoral bliss. The honey and plums her father dreamed of didn't feed eight children, and the Girl recalls being sent out to work for room and board (and abuse) at a neighboring farm when she was eleven. The dream of escaping the city to a happy country life surfaces again at the speakeasy, when Belle and Hoinck suggest moving to Canada to establish a homestead: "Belle threw her arms around us laughing, throwing back her wild head. We'll go in my car" (13). But the Girl recognizes the desperation and futility in their plan and knows "that car wouldn't cross the Mississippi" (13). The dream of mobility doesn't come true for her family when they move to the farm, while the crowd at the speakeasy can only fantasize about moving to a better life: inferior vehicles, unattainable fantasies, and inadequate geographical capital prevent the poor characters in *The Girl* from securing any real upward mobility. Whether the move is from city to country or vice versa, the trash characters can't achieve what they seek: class mobility.

From the opening chapter the Girl is marked as a newcomer to the big city, a country kid still wet behind the ears, even though she spent much of her childhood in industrial towns. Clara and Belle take on the roles of educator and protector, since as a "virgin from the country scared of her own

shadow," she needs them to teach her how to survive waitressing in the speakeasy and maneuvering the city streets (2). Her allegedly rural origins are far from idyllic, however, since she leaves her parents' small-town home because they haven't enough food or money to support her there. As Williams points out and the novel illustrates, the country often serves as a mythical repository for the "good old days" and a "golden age gone by" that never existed and that often masks the realities of rural experience. The Girl's father falls prey to that myth and the family pays dearly for it on the plum farm; the Girl even romanticizes the country in her fertility metaphors for female sexuality. But if we historicize the pastoral mode as always already nostalgic for a fictive past, questions arise. What struggles are elided by this pastoral myth and who benefits from their elision? How does the elision of the modern industrialized country affect the people who live there, or who move from there to the city? In *The Girl* and *As I Lay Dying* these questions lead to a revealing reading of the geographies of city and country, in which neither is as prosperous as popular wisdom would allow. As a result, for the poor there is no actual paradise on earth, city or country, although popular representations of these two places motivate the poor to migrate toward the greener grass on the other side of the fence.

Although the Girl has made her way in the big city, she is no more successful than her father was on the plum and honey farm or in the coal mines of his youth. And though she grew up moving from place to place, the Girl's only road experience in the novel is driving the getaway car from the failed robbery. She ends up hitchhiking back to town alone after Butch dies, leaving the car, out of gas, on the shoulder of the highway, a symbol of her own immobility. Now car-less and hitchhiking, she goes to a thrift store and looks at the second-hand shoes: "I tried one on and it was like stepping into another's grief" (96). The Girl folds a bit of newspaper to stuff the holes in her own shoes, preferring her own grief for her only reliable mode of transportation, her feet. Like Cash's broken leg, the Girl's feet symbolize her physical mobility but also her metaphorical immobility. In the Minnesota winter she walks instead of drives, in shoes that are falling apart like Anse's bad shoes in his childhood of hard work. And like the Bundrens' wagon trip, as the Girl walks in her bad shoes she moves about but doesn't get anywhere: "The streets used to be only something you walked through to get someplace else, but now they are home to me" (107). In the high-speed, technologically advanced modern age, the Bundrens and the Girl are one

step above immobile—they can move from one place to another, but only laterally and literally. The class status they are born into and the Depression economy in which they must survive ensure that they will be stuck, if not where they started out, then somewhere comparable or worse. The characters in the two novels even have their immobility written on their bodies: the broken leg and the freezing and deformed feet symbolize their ill-equipped and ill-fated efforts at movement. The highways, roads, and streets in *As I Lay Dying* and *The Girl* represent the national push to modernize towns and cities and to urbanize rural areas, but the characters in the novels have nowhere to go and little way to get there.

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