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Past (Im)Perfect and the Present Progressive:  
Time in Americans' Class Consciousness

by

Ann Pancake

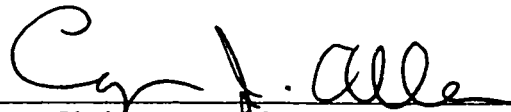
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## Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

Past (Im)Perfect and the Present Progressive:  
Time in Americans' Class Consciousness

by Ann Pancake

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Carolyn Allen  
Department of English

My project investigates how American literature and film construct and contest American common sense about temporality and the class structure. Through this investigation, I argue that Americans redefine economic inequities as differences in time. Such a redefinition includes the American mythology of unlimited social mobility, Americans' proclivity for presenting poverty as an anachronism, and their desire to associate the future with class ascent. This way of thinking about class helps Americans negotiate the inconsistency between the nation's ideals of equality and its realities of radical class disparity because it permits them to imagine class difference not in terms of socioeconomic inequality, but as "an order of successions" (Bourdieu Distinction 164).

I begin by examining how dominant culture has constructed Appalachia as "past" to legitimate economic inequalities between the region and America without admitting economic exploitation. Chapter One treats texts written about the region between 1870 and 1890 and argues that their nostalgic impulse to preserve the region's "pastness" originates in the precarious social position of the texts' authors and audiences, a declining elite whose cultural dominance is threatened by the incipient professional-managerial class.

Chapter Two covers literature about Appalachia between 1890 and 1920 and shows how the upwardly mobile professional-managerial class who now produces and consumes texts about Appalachia imaginatively eliminates its “pastness” by inscribing the entire region into the kind of upward class trajectory usually reserved for individuals. In Chapter Three I trace how Tillie Olsen’s Yonnondio and Meridel LeSueur’s The Girl confront the bildungsroman’s literary conventions of sequential development and the teleological progress of a single protagonist and revise those temporal conventions to make them more representative of working-class experience. My final chapter reads two 1994 movies, The River Wild and The Client, that both feature downwardly mobile middle-class protagonists interacting with “white trash.” I discuss how the films work to consolidate current hegemony, and in conclusion, I try to detect the “good sense” in the films, those elements of Gramscian common sense that might be renovated and redirected towards a politics favoring a more economically equal society.

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## Introduction

When I was trotted off to the first grade in 1969 southern West Virginia, the only “people of color” I had ever seen were miners black with coal dust who stopped at Halstead’s Foodland on their way home from their shift. “Gender” in my world, I suppose, meant my brother had the liberty to go shirtless in the summer. I was assigned to a classroom with 30 other white children, but by the end of the day, I had learned that some were different from me. The distinction I made wasn’t really based on how those other children looked because although I’m sure they were dressed more shabbily than I was, at that age I didn’t notice differences in clothes. What distinguished us was odor. I know now that those kids had no plumbing at home, but what I learned then was that the poor didn’t smell like I did. Thus began my education in class.

Of course, I didn’t call it “class” until much later, but the float through public school in West Virginia is, if nothing else, a lesson in economics. As John Gaventa has pointed out, Appalachia presents an especially exaggerated case of class politics that operate more invisibly in other parts of the United States (44). Although popular stereotypes cast the entire region as monolithically poor, in reality, I grew up in an environment that was much more class heterogeneous than the places in which most middle-class people in the United States spend their lives since neighborhoods, suburbs,

towns, and schools have become increasingly class-segregated after World War II. In both southern West Virginia and later in northeastern West Virginia, where we moved when I was eight, we lived in small communities with a few quite visible “rich” that included doctors, lawyers, and even wealthier individuals with mysterious connections to coal, oil, and chemicals; then a slightly bigger “middle,” college-educated and usually employed by the state, as my parents were; next the largest strata, the working-class, whom no one seemed to call anything at all, maybe because they were most common; and, finally, not as numerous as the working class, but very apparent, the poor. But not only did I encounter class inequalities between myself, middle-class by local standards, and most other children on the schoolbus and in the classroom every day for twelve years. I could also see the economic inequities between the way we lived in our region and the way people lived outside it every time I turned on the single channel we received on our TV or read another statistic in which my state competed with Mississippi for number 50 in any determinant of standard of living. And when I left the region and learned the privileges most middle-class white people in this country have, their access to education, health care, cultural amenities, information, clean environments, and safe transportation, I discovered how much I, solidly middle-class in Appalachia, had missed compared to the mainstream middle class. The discovery about myself made even more shocking the situation of the majority of people back home: the working class and the poor.

I mention my first day at school for two reasons. First, I want to clarify my stake in my project. Second, in hindsight, this memory of class identification through smell

offers me a personal metaphor for the invisibility of class in America in general and in the English academy in particular. I began graduate school in 1990 at the height of multiculturalism and identity politics. Although literature departments reverberated with the “race, class, gender” mantra, I realized rapidly that the part of the triad that had been the most salient part of my own experience seldomly took the stage. The English academy after 1980 has been more resistant to analyzing class than it has been to any other identity position, and I spent some time trying to understand why. I uncovered quite a few reasons, far more than I can begin to mention here, but I also realized that the academy’s antipathy to reading class was, in part, simply emblematic of America’s antipathy to acknowledging class differences. More useful than complaining about cultural studies and literature ignoring class, I decided, would be to explore how the nation constructs itself as classless.

That both a politically conscious academy and mainstream America have very little trouble ignoring class despite the reality that the United States has one of the highest levels of class inequality in the Western industrialized world (Wright Classes 192) led me to more specific question. How does a nation that holds “equality” as a central term of self-definition negotiate the inconsistency between this ideal and the reality of radical class inequality within its borders? To be sure, as Laclau and Mouffe make clear, political parity does not necessarily bring with it economic parity, but they also explain that when such democratic discourses do become available, they can “allow the spread of equality into increasingly wider domains and therefore act as a fermenting agent upon the different

forms of struggle against subordination” (155). Consequently, I concluded that hegemony in America, where democratic ideals undergird the definition of nation, must work especially hard to prevent egalitarian ideas in the political sphere from contaminating the economic sphere. I began to look for discursive strategies that helped Americans, especially middle-class Americans, justify economic inequality and in this way consent to and reinforce a capitalist hegemony.

Instead of finding an established theory, Marxian or otherwise, and then applying it to texts as a way to answer my question, I studied primary literary and cultural texts and let the class dynamics in those texts suggest their own answers.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I kept in mind Gramsci’s advice that “[t]he starting point of critical elaboration is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). Repeatedly, the texts I read disclosed strategies that coincided with what I “knew” about “myself” “as a product of the historical process.” In Appalachia, we were always told that our region was “different” (perennially economically depressed) because we were “backwards”; “behind the times”; “stuck in the past”; “yesterday’s people.” And in the American texts I read, too, notions of “time” kept appearing in conjunction with notions of “class” to disguise economic exploitation. In other words, one way Americans justify radical class inequality is by redefining class differences as differences in time. Such a redefinition includes the American mythology of unlimited social mobility, Americans’ proclivity for presenting poverty as an anachronism, and their desire to associate the future with class ascent.

Marxists from Georg Lukacs in History and Class Consciousness (1923) to Erik Olin Wright in Classes (1985) have reminded us that the hope of improving one's social status will always erode class consciousness. Both Karl Marx and Friederich Engels attributed low class consciousness in the United States to "supposedly uniquely high rates of mass social mobility in reducing social tensions" (Lipset "Foreword" xvi-xvii). But Pierre Bourdieu, speaking neither from a Marxist perspective nor of the American context, offers the most productive insights into the time/class dynamic that operates so successfully in reproducing the American hegemony, and Bourdieu's observations allow me to go beyond conventional notions of social mobility.

Because Bourdieu's Distinction plays such an important part in my project, I want to introduce here a few of his ideas that underpin all or several of my chapters, saving most of his relevant concepts for the chapter context that best fits them. Bourdieu's overarching thesis in Distinction is that people determine class positions by those positions' distance from positions subordinate to them (56). These may be distance distinctions in economic capital, cultural capital, or social connections, but they most often appear as distinctions in "taste." Although the ability to define the "tasteful" and then own the tasteful and do the tasteful depends on socioeconomic power, dominant culture presents the distinction as a choice made by those who were simply born with better taste. The representation of class in this way confirms the "natural" superiority of those in dominant positions in the social hierarchy and obfuscates economics.

Further, while many sociological studies map class structure only in spatial terms, Bourdieu goes a pivotal step further and injects the variable of time (244-45). Generally, Bourdieu argues that in highly competitive economic systems with somewhat fluid social structures, like the United States', an individual's movement--or, perhaps even more importantly, expected movement or frustrated movement--up or down the class hierarchy has tremendous influence on his or her classed identity, political attitudes, perceptions of the class hierarchy (or absence thereof), and the overall reproduction of class hegemony. (Bourdieu calls this movement between classes "trajectory.") In such societies, dominant ideology tends to associate the future with social ascent and the past with social decline. Class difference is imagined not in terms of socioeconomic inequalities, but as "an order of successions":

The social order at any given moment is also necessarily a temporal order, an 'order of successions' . . . . each group having as its past the group immediately below and for its future the group immediately above. . . . the competing groups are separated by differences which are essentially located in the order of time. (Bourdieu 163)

With class inequalities "re-translated into time-lags in a race aiming at the same objective" (Bourdieu 346), the antagonism "predecessor vs. successor" replaces "dominated vs. dominant." Bourdieu explains that the "re-translation's" efficacy in reproducing the existing class structure is as insidious as it is potent: the dominated, by agreeing to compete in "the race," legitimate the system that keeps them "behind," and their belief that by waiting they will eventually rise thwarts any struggle for systemic change (164-65). "By situating the differences between classes in the order of successions," Bourdieu

writes, “the competitive struggle establishes a difference which . . . is not only the most absolute and unbridgeable, but also the most unreal and evanescent” (164).

Clearly, Bourdieu’s theory has special explanatory power for American society’s perception of--or more specifically, its refusal to perceive--economic inequality. The American mythologies of the self-made man, America as a land of opportunity, and the American Dream incorporate some of the most deep-rooted and potent ideology in the nation, and all depend on the time/class conjunction: the notion that any present disparities in the economic system are only temporary, if not for the collective, at least for the deserving individual. The promise of future class ascent has been here, at least for whites, since the first colonists. David Leverenz calls Franklin’s autobiography the first American rags-to-riches story and claims Henry Clay coined the term “self-made man” in 1832 (74-75). Yet the mythology of American social mobility flourished most rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century at precisely the time class lines between workers and capitalists began to harden and the middle class had more and more difficulty reproducing itself (Ryan Chapter Four; Trachtenberg 72-76; Lang 270-74). The timing provides more evidence for American hegemony’s tendency to marry temporality to social position to ameliorate economic dissatisfaction. A formal theory about how class differences would be resolved by time--”the doctrine of the harmony of interests”--arose, not coincidentally, just after the Civil War as industrialization escalated and, concomitantly, opportunities for mobility diminished. To defuse growing frustration among workers, advocates of “the doctrine of the harmony of interests” argued that because the laborer would soon become

a capitalist, just as the capitalist had been very recently a laborer, capital's and labor's interests could never truly be opposed (Lang 270-74). The Alger stories exploded into mass popularity at about the same time--1867--and Celeste MacLeod contends that manuals on how to "make oneself" flooded the market as bestsellers from 1843-1882 (9), a timespan that nearly matches the one Herbert Gutman pinpoints as the period of America's most rapid industrialization: 1843-1893 (13).

The mythology has endured into the late twentieth-century even as actual upward mobility has dwindled except for a two-and-a-half-decade spurt following World War II. In the 1970's, sociologists Richard P. Coleman and Lee Rainwater found that most Americans willingly admit the existence of class in America only if they can also talk about the possibility of mobility (25). Moreover, when asked what they "like best about the nation's class structure," Americans tend to respond "social mobility," and, again, when queried about what they'd most like to change about America's "status system," Americans reply "more possibilities for upward mobility" (Coleman and Rainwater 293). Kathleen Newman goes so far as to claim "the promise of economic success defines our national identity" (Declining 211; emphasis mine).

Seymour Martin Lipset and Richard Bendix offer five reasons for the great American faith in social mobility: 1) America's absence of a feudal past; 2) its absence of a hereditary aristocracy; 3) the always increasing educational opportunities in the U.S.; 4) the continual influx of immigrants and the availability of minority groups to form new "bottom rungs"; and 5) the mass production of consumer goods in this century that has

decreased differences in standard of living between the working class and the middle class (77-78) Yet despite Americans' unshakeable conviction that in America, unlike in other countries, the future will resolve economic inequality, sociological studies prove that in reality the U.S. does not have and has not had higher rates of social mobility than European nations (Lipset and Bendix 11-75; 127; Erikson and Goldthorpe 336-337; Lipset xix). What is really "exceptional" about America, scholars agree, when compared to industrialized nations in Europe and Asia, is Americans' perception and evaluation of mobility, their worship of rags-to-riches stories and their cultivation of the myth. In short, what's exceptional about social mobility in America is its ideological force. (Lipset and Bendix 77; 82-83; 263; Erikson and Goldthorpe 313). It's the amazing way America's "ideological equalitarianism" has "persisted in the face of facts which contradict it"; it's the way Americans can insist "class" isn't a national issue despite their "daily familiarity with economic inequality and status distinctions" (Lipset and Bendix 79).

I am primarily interested in this ideological force, or, more exactly, in how the redefinition of class differences as temporal differences helps Americans accept extreme class disparity and how American literature and film perform and represent the redefinition. The few book-length studies that do treat social mobility in American literature--for example, Psychological Politics of the American Dream by Lois Tyson (1994) and Charles R. Hearn's The American Dream in the Great Depression (1977)--discuss social mobility neither in terms of how it is structured by time nor in terms of how the mythology justifies economic inequalities for a nation that holds "equality" as a central

term of self-definition. Because of the relatively limited foundation now available for analyzing class in American literature, I've approached in an eclectic fashion the classed issues the literature raises. I've drawn on both Marxian theories and the non-Marxian sociology of Bourdieu and others, and I've supplemented those ideas with feminist and postcolonial theories, narratology, and insights from Appalachian Studies. Bourdieu provides a complex understanding of temporality and social position that permits me to complicate the idea of simple upward mobility and investigate the time/class dynamic in more detail and in broader contexts. However, even more important to my project than Bourdieu is Antonio Gramsci. Certain ideas of Gramsci's constitute the most basic premises of my project, so I'd like to introduce here several of Gramsci's concepts: "hegemony"; "common sense"; and "ideology." Within the chapters, I will flesh out these concepts with more nuance and complexity, working directly with specific texts and historical periods.

When I use "hegemony," I do not mean "domination" or "power" in the popular sense. I take my understanding of hegemony from Gramsci's Selections from the Prison Notebooks and from interpretations of Gramsci by Raymond Williams in Marxism and Literature (especially 108-114), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (especially 47-91), Marcia Landy in Film, Politics, and Gramsci (especially 73-98), Stuart Hall's Hard Road to Renewal, and Evan Watkins' Throwaways.

Gramsci's hegemony is a concept of "rule" that goes beyond the "conspiracy theory" that a wealthy class controls society through manipulation and coercion, and a

concept of “consciousness” that goes beyond the traditional Marxist base/superstructure-influenced idea that particular classes have specific forms of consciousness that derive from their positions in relations of production. A hegemonic process rules not by force or coercion, but through consent: a group of often diverse interests come together in a strategic alliance--in Gramscian terms, a historical bloc--that manages to convince other groups in society that their interests are identical to the ruling alliances’s. For this reason, these other groups accept the dominant group’s political, moral, and cultural values as reasonable (Landy 95-96). The theory of hegemony stresses that the historical bloc carries out its “convincing” through the entire social process: not just through politics and economics, and not just through “culture” as that is usually defined, but even through “lived identities and relationships to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seems to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense” (Williams 110).

When I say “hegemonic work,” I mean this process of convincing and its production or reproduction of a given social structure. In addition, Williams continues, “a lived hegemony is always a process, never . . . a system or structure.” Hegemony must continually reproduce and reinforce itself, and it is just as continually being contested, resisted, modified, and restrained “by pressures not at all its own” (Williams 112). For this reason, one advantage the concept of “hegemony” offers a cultural critic is that it includes the possibility of opposition (Williams 110-111) Another advantage is that “hegemony” probably best accounts for the way power functions in electoral democracies.

Gramsci himself defines “common sense” as “the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed” (419).<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is a view of reality that appears reasonable to a particular group of people, and a successful hegemonic process will make a dominant group’s values and perspectives seem common sense to the majority of society. As Evan Watkins puts it, “common sense” includes “the largely unacknowledged assumptions that ‘make sense’ of current conditions and hence set parameters within which certain policies seem plausible and realistic, while others in contrast seem hopelessly naive, utopian, out-of-date, or incoherent” (203).

Metaphorically, common sense seems a dense, sluggish, yet always flowing marsh, sedimented with layers of past beliefs, and floating with fragments of superstitions, prejudices (Gramsci 396; 325; 419), magic, pop psychology, science, history, proverbs, and cliches (Landy 96-98). I find it an especially useful idea because it forces me as a critic to stay grounded in very specific sociohistorical circumstances and never to lose sight of everyday experience. Moreover, despite common sense’s tendency to be conservative and neophobic, Gramsci makes clear that common sense is not monolithic and contains within it liberatory possibilities. Common sense theory gives me some indication of where to look for “good sense” that might be rehabilitated for a more progressive politics. In other words, it is a theoretical framework that can link discourse with action, a link missing in most Left criticism at present.

I use “ideology” less often, but I’m also deploying that term in a Gramscian way. Very broadly, by “ideology” I mean a system of beliefs; more specifically, “ideology” as I use it refers to a system of beliefs that works in the favor of a “hegemonic bloc.” Laclau and Mouffe elaborate: ideology for Gramsci, they explain, is not “a system of ideas” *per se* and definitely not “false consciousness.” “[I]t is instead an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles” (Laclau and Mouffe 67). And “articulation,” which I also introduce at times, I use the way Laclau and Mouffe do. They believe that political and social identities and political and social antagonisms are indeterminate, not pre-given, and to fix such an identity or antagonism depends upon some kind of initiative or action: this initiative or action they refer to as “articulation” (Laclau and Mouffe 105)

Finally, I should clarify what I mean by “class.” Few terms seem to be more defined, contested, qualified, and redefined in social science literature, but when I use “class” in this dissertation, I’m referring to a position in a hierarchy of economic differences in which members in the lower strata occupy that lower strata because of economic exploitation that benefits the higher strata. In other words, I preserve the Marxist idea that economic exploitation creates class hierarchy, but, consistent with the Gramscian framework that underlies my analysis, I don’t contend that classes have predetermined interests and identities that arise from their positions in relations of production. I do, however, believe that members of a particular class tend to share certain

cultural characteristics with other members of their class position, including ideas, beliefs, tastes, values, and other predispositions. Certainly factors like race, region, ethnicity, and education influence how a person experiences his or her classed culture, but a particular class does more or less share a “culture.” E.P. Thompson’s definition of class in The Making of the English Working Class expresses in part my own understanding of it: “class happens when some men [sic], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves and against those whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs” (9). Yet, the feeling and articulation of this identity of interests, from my perspective, doesn’t necessarily mean a feeling and articulation of “class consciousness” in the traditional Marxist sense. Christopher Wilson’s term “class awareness” probably better represents most Americans’ class identity: “the cognitive perimeter that acknowledges its own class affinities but denies the reality of classes as a whole” (257). Although Wilson is referring specifically to “middle-class awareness,” I think “class awareness” characterizes well most Americans’ sense of class identity, regardless of their class position. Americans feel a connection to and affinity for others in their own class, and a difference between themselves and members of other classes, but they rarely acknowledge these feelings as “classed.” In some parts of the dissertation, I use specific class terms like “higher class,” “lower class,” “the professional-managerial class,” “petty bourgeois,” and “white trash,” and I try to be as precise as possible about how and why I’m using various terms in a given context.

Each of the following chapters investigates how American cultural texts construct and contest American common sense about temporality and the class structure in a different historical period. Because I'm exploring the hegemonic work the class/time dynamic performs, I take into consideration how capitalist structures in particular and the hegemony as a whole are changing in each period, and how those changes affect the class trajectories and class awareness of the authors, audiences, and subjects of the texts. I begin the dissertation with the issue that launched my interest in this subject: dominant culture's construction of Appalachia as "past" as a way to legitimate economic inequalities between the region and America without admitting economic exploitation. Chapter One treats texts written about the region between 1870 and 1890 and argues that the texts' nostalgic impulse to preserve the region's "pastness"--which includes the mountaineers' preindustrial economic system--originates in the precarious social position of the texts' authors and audiences, a declining elite whose cultural dominance is threatened by the incipient professional-managerial class.

Chapter Two covers literature about Appalachia between 1890 and 1920. With the rise and consolidation of an upwardly mobile professional-managerial class who now produce and consume texts about Appalachia, the texts present the "pastness" of the mountain people--including their poverty--no longer as a cultural reservoir to preserve, but as a problem to eradicate. I contend that authors imaginatively eliminate this "pastness" by inscribing the entire region into the kind of upward class trajectory usually reserved for individuals. Many historians identify these decades as the period when

corporate capital established its hegemony in the United States, and I explain how the “improvement narrative” about Appalachia helped the middle class, despite their initial ambivalence, accept corporate capital’s values as common sense.

While my first two chapters discuss primarily textual content, in Chapter Three I examine how formal literary conventions marked by time capitalize on the relationship between temporality and social position to replicate and reinforce for their audiences the American mythology of unlimited upward social mobility. Then, against the backdrop of the economic and political climate of the 1930’s, I trace how Tillie Olsen’s Yonnondio and Meridel LeSueur’s The Girl confront the bildungsroman conventions of sequential development and the teleological progress of a single protagonist and revise those temporal conventions to make them more representative of working-class experience.

Because American conventional wisdom maintains that while economically-determined class differences may have been significant earlier in U.S. history, they don’t play an important part in contemporary lives, I conclude the dissertation with a look at the relationship between temporality and class in 1990’s common sense. Like the turbulent 1930’s, the socioeconomic climate of the 1990’s calls into question the dominant American understanding of time and social position: in other words, that the future assures class ascent for individuals who deserve it. Contemporary popular culture, however, negotiates this dilemma very differently from 1930’s proletarian literature. I read in the context of American middle-class economic anxiety two 1994 “blockbuster” movies, The River Wild and The Client, that both feature downwardly mobile middle-class

protagonists interacting with “white trash.” In addition to investigating how the films work to consolidate current hegemony, I also try to detect the “good sense” in the films, those elements of common sense that might be renovated and redirected towards a class politics favoring a more economically equal society.

About ten years after that first day at first grade, I worked as a counselor at the regional Youth Opportunity Camp, a series of one-week camps for low-income nine to fourteen-year-olds. At each camp, I watched with curiosity a group of children who just couldn't stay out of the showers. Unlike the majority of younger kids at 4-H camps I had attended who would refuse to shower all week, these kids bathed two or three times a day. They raided the big box of free soap and shampoo the director kept on the dining hall porch, ran around all day with wet hair and a comb, crowded the showers two or three bodies at a time. Eventually, the motive for this shower frenzy dawned on me: the shower kids were the ones who had no plumbing at home. After being mercilessly teased at school all year, camp provided them a chance to wash away their smell. It was the week they could be more than invisible: they could be odorless as well. It was the week they were able, like middle-class Americans, to rinse away their class.

I hope that my insights on just one American discursive strategy for obscuring class might open up original conversation and criticism on the many interrelations between American literature and America's construction of itself as a classless nation.

### Notes to Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Carolyn Allen for advising me to take this approach.

<sup>2</sup>Because the concept of “common sense” recurs so often throughout my argument, I will use the term “common sense” without quotation marks even though I always deploy it as Gramsci does.

## Chapter One

### Past Perfect: Appalachian “Time” for an American Cultural Elite, 1870-1890

#### I.

These farmers, miners, and mechanics from the mountains and meadows of the mid-South--with their fecund wives and numerous children--are, in a sense, the prototype of what the “superior” American should be, white Protestants of early American, Anglo-Saxon stock, but on the streets of Chicago they seem to be the American dream gone berserk. This may be why their neighbors often find them more obnoxious than the Negroes or the earlier foreign immigrants . . . .

Albert N. Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” Harpers, February 1958

Votaw may have been writing in 1958, but Appalachia has troubled America’s sleep as the “American dream gone berserk” since at least the 1880’s. For this reason, American texts about Appalachia are as fecund as Votaw’s hillbilly wives with strategies Americans use generally to reconcile the nation’s ideal of “equality” with the reality of radical economic inequality inside its borders. For over a century, most of the Appalachian region has remained poorer than mainstream America, and the reason for its

entrenched depression was and is no mystery. Beginning in earnest around 1880, capitalist entrepreneurs and then corporations, most based outside Appalachia, gained control of the region's natural resources and much of its land. At the same time, they began to dominate its political systems, and through what David Whisnant calls "a regressive tax structure, class-biased social policies, and collaborative systems of patronage," they ensured that very, very little of the region's wealth returned to the Appalachian people (Whisnant Modernizing xviii).<sup>1</sup>

Although the cause of Appalachia's intractable poverty is relatively obvious--in two words, economic exploitation--the American imagination has been unable to understand it this way. That people might be permanently poor for reasons inherent in the U.S. economic structure falls outside mainstream American common sense. Consequently, when Appalachia makes from time to time a reappearance on the national scene, it presents a dilemma to the rest of the country by calling into question a number of cherished American myths, including progress, development, equality, the promise of upward mobility, and, yes, the American Dream. No different from the dominant power structure in this country in race, ethnicity, immigrant status, or even religion, as Votaw mentions, Appalachians' economic status could not be resolved by blaming genetics, a popular nineteenth-century explanation, and cannot be resolved by minoritizing it, a just-as-popular twentieth-century one. Nor was the usual rationale for "poor white trash" in the plantation South--they'd been ruined ethically by competition with slavery--available (Shapiro 95; Frost 102). Therefore, the "differences" between the region and the nation

have had to be “explained” in other ways, and such explanations have generated reams of discourse about Appalachia between the 1860’s and the present. These texts are saturated with the kinds of discursive strategies America has used to mystify class inequality and rationalize economic exploitation in broader contexts.

In the next two chapters, I will examine literature written about Appalachia between 1864 and 1920, a period that saw the southern mountains’ breakneck industrialization and the area’s “invention” as a distinct region with a homogeneous culture and population.<sup>2</sup> This invention, Henry Shapiro argues convincingly in Appalachia On Our Mind, was primarily the work of local color writers between 1870 and 1890 when at least 90 sketches and 125 short stories were published about the area; prior to 1870, Shapiro claims, the southern mountains weren’t considered much different from other parts of the rural U.S.<sup>3</sup> But once local colorists had established the “idea” of an Appalachia and introduced much of the mythology that would eventually be associated with this idea, “travellers, writers, missionaries, economists, geographers, sociologists, teachers, geologists, land developers and industrialists all tended to approach the southern mountains from this point of view” (Shapiro 18). As the critical role of local color in constructing the very existence of an Appalachia suggests,<sup>4</sup> literature, especially the kinds of fiction, social science texts, missionary tracts, and travel sketches I will treat here, has influenced the region’s material circumstances to an extent that might astonish even the most jaded cultural studies scholar.<sup>5</sup>

While these concrete effects make the literature's discursive strategies particularly compelling to interrogate, my focus here is less on the discourse's material consequences on Appalachian natives, which I will address in Chapter Two, and more on the hegemonic work it does for non-natives. The literature itself provides little reliable evidence for the former, but because the texts were produced and consumed by the American upper- and middle-classes who lived outside the Appalachian region, it does reveal a great deal about how these dominant classes negotiated the economic distance between themselves and their Appalachian compatriots.<sup>6</sup> Although my analysis centers on class, I don't want to give the impression that class or a particular stage of capitalist development is the only way Appalachian culture differs from dominant American culture. However, I do believe that the few existing analyses of cultural productions about Appalachia too often overlook the class-inflected dynamics at work in these texts. By reading the literature from a perspective sensitive to class, I hope to contribute not only to American cultural studies and literary criticism as I elucidate strategies Americans use to talk about (or, more often, not talk about) class, but also to Appalachian Studies with my classed approach to well-known Appalachian texts.

## II.

“Life is old there, older than the trees . . . .”  
 John Denver, “Country Roads”

“This ain’t the South . . . . This is the goddamn past.”  
 Jayne Anne Phillips, “Country”

“Only slow Time can cure them.”  
New York Times editorial on West Virginia  
 mine wars, August 3, 1921

One comes away from even a cursory examination of texts about Appalachia convinced that the most popular explanation for the region’s “differences” from the rest of the United States is a difference in time. In other words, Americans have reassured themselves for more than one hundred years that Appalachia’s “peculiarities” derive from its being marooned in a past that might be dated “the eighteenth century” (Semple 146; Allen “Through” 60; Kephart 165) or “the seventeenth” (Weller 26), “the Middle Ages” (Fox Trail 96), “Shakespearean” (Bradley “In Shakespeare’s”), “colonial” (Bradley “Hobnobbing”), or simply “barbarism” (Arnold Toynbee qtd. in Caudill xii-xiv; Fox “The Southern Mountaineer” 137; Cook 202). Occasionally, a single piece will locate the difference in an array of eras, such as John Fox, Jr.’s “The Southern Mountaineer,” in which the reader learns that the mountaineer is “pioneer” in his clothing and furniture, takes his speech from “Chaucer,” and practices religion, politics, and morals preserved

intact from the “Old World” (123). The facility with which Fox—a respected Appalachian “authority” of his day—can mix and match his anachronisms attests both to the “past” trope’s appeal to the American imagination and to the trope’s lack of historical grounding. “Primitive,” “degenerate,” “stagnant,” “premodern,” “regressive,” “arrested,” “retarded,” and “undeveloped” are adjectives commonly applied to the region, and although the “Appalachia as past” thematic appears as early as the 1870’s in short stories by Mary Noailles Murfree, it has proven remarkably durable. When the region made one of its periodic forays onto the American scene during the 1960’s War on Poverty, VISTA and other social workers were given Jack Weller’s 1966 Yesterday’s People as authoritative sociological text and how-to manual. One of Hollywood’s most recent depictions of Appalachia, 1994’s embarrassing Nell, featured Jodie Foster, preverbal in a granny dress, crouching in closets of what looked to be an eighteenth-century cabin. Even today, in my home county in West Virginia, people will routinely explain or excuse local irregularities or inadequacies as, “well, we’re just backwards around here.”

What is at stake for me with the Appalachia as “behind the times” stereotype is not the issue of misrepresentation. Any “truth” behind the trope is at best complicated because although much of Appalachia since industrialization has lacked the technology, social services, cultural opportunities, and standard of living considered “up-to-date” in mainstream white America, it has at the same time been subjected to some of the nation’s most intense forms of “modernization.” What I find most illuminating about the “backwards” trope is this: Appalachia, initially because of its relatively late entrance into

industrialization, but since the 1880's because of its concentrated economic exploitation, calls into question a number of national myths associated with time and class position, myths including "progress," "upward mobility," and "opportunity." American discursive strategies have repeatedly defused the way the Appalachian example contradicts these ideals by attributing its "abnormalities" to the region's simply being behind the times. Such explanations disguise the fact that this "pastness" has been for the last century produced by contemporary relations of production, is indeed, as theorist Evan Watkins would say, necessary to them. Temporal discourse about the region offers a productive case study of the way American hegemonic processes have always exploited the conjunctions of "time" and "class."

Bourdieu's theories about class trajectory and the representation of class hierarchy as an "order of successions" bring into focus the ideological utility of America's middle- and upper-classes' simply attributing Appalachia's poverty to its "predecessor status" in the economic "race." But while Bourdieu looks mostly at how competition in the "race" influences the dominated to reproduce the class structure--by joining the competition, the dominated endorse the very economic system that exploits them--the idea of class as an order of successions is relevant to my analysis in terms of how it affects dominant attitudes towards the dominated. Specifically, the idea that class inequality will be rectified in due time alleviates liberal guilt over economic exploitation, justifies the middle- and upper-classes' own social positions, veils the very existence of a class structure, and, most

important of all, resolves for all classes the contradiction between the ideal of America as “equal” and the reality of the nation’s economic inequality.

Before examining the interplay of “time” and “class” in specific texts, I need to locate the “Appalachia as past” thematic in its historical and literary contexts. Despite the ubiquity of the “backwards” trope in discourse about Appalachia after the late 1870’s, in the “real” past, the region was not characterized as “behind” at all. As I’ve already mentioned, antebellum writers don’t describe what was only later named “Appalachia” as much different from the rest of contemporaneous rural America. Elizabeth Appleton’s 1864 short story “A Half-Life and Half a Life,” if not the first short story set in the region as some claim, at least the first one to be published in a prestigious monthly magazine, makes only passing references to the area’s “primitiveness,” never introduces the “arrested” or “retarded” civilization theme, and seems instead to attribute most of the differences between the Big Sandy Valley and mainstream America to differences in “taste.” By the late 1870’s and early 1880’s, the popular Mary Noailles Murfree begins to romanticize what she, like Appleton, calls the “primitiveness” of the Tennessee mountains. However, Murfree is also more willing than any other writer will be until perhaps the 1960’s to ascribe the southern mountains’ peculiarities to the “class” or “caste” differences between Appalachia and the “rest” of America.

The “Appalachian as past” thematic begins to overshadow all other characterizations of the region in the late 1880’s. The fixation escalates to an obsession between 1890 and the nineteen-teens when the nation was offered nearly infinite

permutations on the motif in social science articles, essays, travel sketches, missionary appeals, and short stories with titles like “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains” (1899), “A Retarded Frontier” (1898), “The Southern Mountaineer: Our Kindred of the Boone and Lincoln Type” (1900), “In the Kentucky Mountains: Colonial Customs That Are Still Existing in That Famous Section of the Country” (1904), and “In Shakespeare’s America” (1915). In short, the time trope is introduced, popularized, and established as a permanent part of America’s conception of “Appalachia”—and, simultaneously, references to “class” in the discourse about the region become muted—in the same years as several not coincidental nationwide socioeconomic shifts which bring with them new attitudes towards class and time. The history of these shifts is a familiar one, and I sketch out here only what pertains to my argument. As I go on to discuss specific configurations of the time trope, I’ll flesh out this outline with historical details pertinent to each context.

First, in direct contradiction to its “backwards” or “premodern” stereotype, much of Appalachia between 1880 and 1920 was industrialized at a feverish pace. Ronald Eller has noted this contradiction, describing as “ironic” that the “static image” “was emerging as the dominant literary view” during the same years that the region was transformed by industrialization (38). I will contend that even if it is ironic, the ongoing construction of the region as “yesterday” while it was actually being forced into “today” performed an important function for middle- and upper-class Americans and was for that reason predictable.

Second, in the 1890's, that decade when the "Appalachia as past" notion really took root, Americans recognized that monopoly capital and corporations were now dominating the U.S. economy. Many were disturbed by this. After the Civil War, as more money became concentrated in fewer hands, tensions between labor and capital intensified. The tension raised for Americans of all classes central questions about the definition of the nation, questions including, as Richard Ohmann has pointed out, whether "ideas of democracy and equality [would] continue to legitimate the social order under such circumstances" (52). In other words, this was a period in which the inconsistency between the American ideal of equality and the American reality of economic inequality--that inconsistency with which Appalachia has continued to trouble the nation--became especially obvious and was grappled with in literary texts.

Third, many historians allude to the rise and consolidation of a new middle class during those decades when the American imagination became fascinated with the idea of Appalachia. In 1979, John and Barbara Ehrenreich coined the term "professional-managerial class" (PMC) for the form this class had assumed by 1890, and their characterization of the "new middle-class" is particularly specific and the most applicable to my work. According to the Ehrenreichs, a professional-managerial class arises when the relationship between the bourgeoisie and labor has "developed to a point that a class specializing in the reproduction of capitalist class relationships becomes a necessity to the capitalist class. That is, the maintenance of order can no longer be left to episodic police violence" (14). The PMC comprises salaried workers who are not capitalists themselves,

but whose primary role in the division of labor is to reproduce “capitalist culture and capitalist class relations” (Ehrenreichs 12). Richard Ohmann names PMC occupations with more precision: “professional workers . . . writers, editors, advertising men . . . mid- and upper-level corporate managers, their counterparts in government and other institutions, and highly skilled people who worked with numbers and technical processes” (118-119). Most scholars agree that by the turn-of-the-century, the PMC was replacing in cultural dominance an older elite which solidified before the Civil War. And all historians acknowledge that the professional-managerial class had tremendous faith that rationality, efficiency, planning, and education would bring about progress, self-improvement, and social improvement.

Finally, as the PMC fulfilled its class function of reproducing capitalist class culture and relations, Americans were accepting by the beginning of the twentieth-century capitalist values as national common sense. In short, as I will explain in more depth in Chapter Two, the nation made a hegemonic shift to a corporate capitalist state. With this transition, the kinds of questions raised by labor in the 1880’s and 1890’s about which class’s point of view might define “America” would forever after fall outside what most Americans conceive of as reasonable.<sup>7</sup>

I have found compelling Appalachian Studies specialist Herbert Reid’s insistence that because the creation of Appalachia was synchronous with the rise of corporate state hegemony, any analysis of discourse about Appalachia must read that discourse from the perspective of this hegemonic shift. In other words, we need to consider “how the

institutionalization of certain versions of Appalachian regionalism has become functional to the ideological dynamics and structural operations of the American corporate state” (“Appalachian Policy” 627; see also Reid’s “Appalachian Studies” 141). Several secondary sources that discuss discourse about Appalachia have tried to account for the institutionalization of Appalachia as a place stuck in the past. None, however, consider how the Appalachia-as-backwards thematic might function to facilitate the hegemonic shift to a corporate state. To begin my own investigation of this function, I want to review other explanations for the time trope’s popularity. Each of them tells part of the story, and I hope my own version of that story will be thrown into sharper relief by the following points of view.

One could argue that the “Appalachia as past” trope originates in the fact that the southern mountain region was first constructed as a discrete region and presented for national consumption through the genre of local color. By definition, local color demanded that its subject be set “outside the world of modern development” in a “zone of backwardness” (Brodhead 150). To satisfy this prerequisite, not only did local color writers portray the contemporary mountains as an “arrested civilization,” but many times the most popular writers, including Murfree, Fox, and Lucy Furman, actually set their tales decades before the one in which they were writing and publishing, a detail “largely overlooked” by Murfree’s audience (Shapiro 19) and assumedly the others’ audiences as well. The confusion blurred “history” and “current events” and helped reinforce the “past” motif. If one considers that local color had to be “past” and that local color invented

“Appalachia,” one might conclude that the stereotype is inevitable. Although this argument contains a kernel of truth, it begs the question of why late nineteenth-century America had such a voracious appetite for literary constructions of the “olden days” in the first place.

Local color histories and criticism attempt to answer that question, usually inadequately. Recent, well-informed, historically-sensitive studies on local color, especially local color set in the South, are few and far between. Richard Brodhead sums up the standard explanation for the nation’s late nineteenth-century literary fixation with the past in this way: people’s desire for literary regionalism awakened just when regionalism itself was disappearing as the United States modernized into a unified, homogenized, urbanized nation. Local color, from this point of view--which is not Brodhead’s--serves the purpose of “cultural elegy: the work of memorializing a cultural order at that moment passing from life and of fabricating, in the literary realm, a mentally possessible version of the loved thing lost in reality” (Brodhead 154-55).<sup>8</sup> This well-worn reasoning, which probably accounts in part for the appeal of the “past,” assumes that such regions were vanishing. In actuality, as Appalachian scholars insist and Brodhead agrees, these rural areas persisted and adapted (or were forced to adapt) to “modernization” in ways local color audiences preferred to ignore. So the question becomes why did the readers want to ignore the changes?

I’ll return to Brodhead’s answer, which does shed light on the Appalachian case, later. First, I want to consider the most common explanation in Appalachian discursive

studies for Americans' ignoring the modernization there and instead presenting the region as marooned in the past, an explanation most thoroughly presented, once again, by Henry Shapiro. Apparently drawing on the standard local color history Brodhead recounts, Shapiro contends that America, newly modernizing in this period and for the first time perceiving itself as a "unified and homogeneous entity" (ix), hungered for representations of Appalachia as the past because--and here he makes a familiar post-structuralist move-- America could use Appalachia's perceived "primitiveness" to confirm the mainstream's own "progress" and "modernity." "Comparison functioned not to point up failure, but to acknowledge success," claims Shapiro (14), and a few turn-of-the-century writers do indeed refer directly to this function. William Goodell Frost, for example, in "Our Contemporary Ancestors" remarks that "Appalachia America may be useful as functioning as a fixed point which enables us to measure the progress of the moving world" (98). Ellen Churchill Semple concludes her widely-read "anthropogeographical study" in a way that reassures her audience of both their "class" and "race" "success":

Nowhere else [besides the Kentucky mountains] in modern times has that progressive Anglo-Saxon race been so long and so completely subjected to retarding conditions, and at no other time could the ensuing result present so startling a contrast to the achievement of the same race elsewhere in this progressive twentieth century. (174)

Because Shapiro's book was the first exhaustive treatment of Appalachia as a discursive construct, it is very influential, and his theory is echoed in many later texts, as well it should be; Shapiro tells an important part of the story. Shapiro's study, however, is

always constrained by a certain propensity he shares with those very local color and missionary writers he analyzes: the propensity to ignore class dynamics. When he says “unified and homogeneous late nineteenth-century American culture,” he seems to mean “white and middle-class late nineteenth-century American culture.” But exactly what class was voraciously consuming the “Appalachia as past” representations? And what kinds of hegemonic work were these representations that often overlooked the region’s industrialization and always disregarded its economic exploitation doing for readers?

As a way to “class” what Shapiro proposes, my initial impulse was to turn to Bourdieu’s notion of temporal distance as social distinction. As I’ve already explained, Bourdieu argues in Distinction that privileged social positions are always determined by their distance from those positions subordinate to them (56). While these distance distinctions include economic capital, taste, cultural capital, and social connections, they may also include distance in “time”: those who are “progressive” have an edge in symbolic capital over those who are “outmoded”; the “new” are distinguished from the “dated” (Bourdieu 246-49). These temporal distinctions--the capacity to own and do the “latest”--originate, of course, in economic power, but the distinction is presented instead as a choice made by those with the better taste. This “choice,” in turn, corroborates the the “natural” superiority of higher-classed people, because they “know how to keep up with the times,” and, consequently, it reinforces the hegemony of the hierarchy by disguising its economic basis. If I rely on this theory, I would conclude that audiences crave “Appalachia as yesterday” because through the representations they achieve cultural

capital and a sense of class distinction by contrasting their own choice of “modernity” with the backwardness of ignorant mountain people. However, this reasoning is too simple.

Bourdieu is clear that a class tends to distinguish itself temporally and otherwise from the class immediately below it (58, 246), and the consumers of these Appalachian images were at a greater social distance from the southern mountaineers on the class ladder than a single rung. Although the typical local color history identifies the “rising middle-class” as the audience for the genre, and Allen Batteau calls those who read Appalachian local color a “nationally-oriented urban middle-class” (38), and Shapiro at one point refers to a “mass middle-class audience” (6), the audience prior to the 1890’s was actually not “middle-class” at all. Richard Brodhead, who argues that local color played a part in establishing post-Civil War “high culture,” proves that it was not a new “middle-class” who read local color publications, but an upper-class elite.<sup>9</sup> Richard Ohmann’s 1996 Selling Culture helps pinpoint the audience for Appalachian local color in particular by demonstrating that the consumers of the most important literary magazines of post-Civil War nineteenth-century America--Harper’s Monthly Magazine, The Atlantic Monthly, and Scribner’s/Century --were, again, not a rising middle-class, but an established leisure class with “cultured tastes” and the disposable income to buy what were very expensive periodicals by the standards of the time. And the magazines publishing stories, articles, and sketches about Appalachia prior to the 1890’s? With the exception of essays in The American Missionary, the southern mountain pieces appear primarily in Harper’s, Atlantic, Scribner’s, Lippincott’s, Appleton’s, and Peterson’s.

While Ohmann doesn't offer much information on these last three, Mott's History of American Magazines confirms that at least Peterson's and Lippincott's were targeting an audience similar to Harper's, Atlantic's, and Scribner's (Mott Vol. 1 351-352; Vol. 3 396-401).

In sum, prior to the 1890's, the "yesterday people's" paradigm was primarily produced for an elite audience. After the 1890's, a broader audience with a more professional-managerial class mindset consumed Appalachian images as well. I draw this conclusion from Ohmann's argument in Selling Culture that the 1890's witnessed the birth of mass culture and the proliferation of popular magazines as the PMC expanded in numbers and ascended in cultural dominance. This change influenced even Harper's, Atlantic, and Scribners/Century to "move away from their old aristocratic formulas" (Ohmann 392). And although there is no exhaustive compilation of texts generated about Appalachia in this period, the fairly comprehensive bibliographies that do exist, including Shapiro's in Appalachia On Our Mind and Lorise Boger's The Southern Mountaineer in Literature (as well as a number of more informal bibliographies that I've accumulated over the years), also suggest that a greater variety of books and periodicals presented Appalachian subjects after 1890 than before. Armed with this more precise understanding of class readership, I can analyze more incisively exactly what kind of hegemonic work the Appalachian as "past" thematic did for American audiences as they confronted the economic crises, inequalities, and class restructuring of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.

The “backwards” trope takes two main forms, and each period of class readership--the pre-1890’s and the post-1890’s--seems to favor a different form. One is the nostalgic, romantic impulse to “save” the mountaineers’ pastness, or what I’ll term the “preservation narrative.” The other is the drive to develop, fix, help, and generally eradicate the pastness, which I call the “improvement narrative.”<sup>10</sup> The two forms often occur in the same texts, generating kinds of ambivalence that I’ll discuss later, and both persist in contemporary culture: the Appalachian Regional Commission, for example, is a powerful practitioner of the improvement narrative. As for the preservation impulse, remember director Michael Apted’s film Nell, not to mention the ways the narrative is deployed by promoters of the booming second home/recreation/retirement industry in certain parts of the region today. Nevertheless, before 1890, the preservation narrative was in much greater circulation than the improvement one. I think it is no accident that the 1860’s through the 1880’s was the period of the most elite readership of Appalachian discourse. And in a number of stories written in the 1870’s and 1880’s, including those by Mary Noailles Murfree, one can detect class dynamics that illuminate how an established elite of the period was using notions of “time” and “class” to deal with the threat of an incipient middle-class that would replace them in cultural dominance by the turn-of-the-century.

It is important to bear in mind that Murfree (1850-1922), who published under the name Charles Egbert Craddock, was the earliest major popular writer on the southern mountains. At the time she started writing, industrialization was just penetrating the

region and the southern mountain people's economic "difference" from "America" had more to do with the stage of capitalist development they had reached than with their economic exploitation. Murfree's short stories began appearing in The Atlantic Monthly in the 1870's and were collected in In the Tennessee Mountains (1884), a book that went through seventeen reprints in two years (Brodhead 153). Critics agree that Murfree more than any other single writer introduced and created the "idea" of Appalachia that many Americans hold even today, and she has had tremendous influence not only on literature set in the region, but also on the social action taken in it. According to Shapiro, "for the first few decades of benevolent work in Appalachia . . . the short stories of Mary Noailles Murfree remained the principal text used to understand the peculiarities of mountain life" (xv). So momentous was her impact that present-day anthologies of "Southern women writers" continue to include Murfree as the representative of Appalachian women authors. However, as turned out to be typical of most "native Appalachian writers" of the era, Murfree was not only not a native of the mountains; but also her In the Tennessee Mountains tales were drawn entirely from memories Murfree had of spending pre-Civil War childhood summers in Tennessee mountain resorts--in other words, from the past. Murfree came from the established Southern upper-class, indeed, from the same wealthy leisure class who would read her stories in The Atlantic Monthly, and the ideals she celebrates in her mountaineers originate in this class position.<sup>11</sup>

Murfree's stories carry traces of the improvement narrative, especially when it comes to the undesirability of the mountaineers' feuds, moonshine, violence, and

superstition. Yet overshadowing the improvement impulse is her exultation of the “premodern” virtues of the Tennessee mountain people, virtues she obviously believes would benefit the whole nation if more Americans would return to, adapt, and preserve them. These virtues include what she presents as the region’s class egalitarianism and the locals’ refusal to acknowledge class distinctions; their disregard for money and for earthly ambition; their lack of technology; and their respect for and possession of intuitive moral standards. In addition to the celebration of these characteristics, three of the eight stories in In the Tennessee Mountains explicitly critique education, upwardly mobile aspirations, and the cult of the self-made man, a critique that stands in stark opposition to the post-1890 improvement narratives in which, as I will show, these three features nearly attain apotheosis.

Although the “good” qualities in Murfree’s stories belong to mountaineers who stay in their mountain “past” preserves, and the “bad” either to mountaineers who leave and become contaminated by the lowlands or to overeducated non-Appalachians, Murfree is clearly condemning the very values held dear by the rising middle-class whose expansion by the 1870’s must have disturbed the pre-Civil War elite to whom Murfree and her readers belonged. This new white collar class, figuratively and literally parent to the professional-managerial class that would not be recognized until about 1890 (Ehrenreich 18; Wiebe 111-112; Ohmann 19), began to solidify around the middle of the century when industrialization forced artisans, shopkeepers and similar self-employed individuals to help their children find jobs as clerks, professionals, and other salaried workers (Ryan

14 and Chapter 4). Social historians agree that these parvenus cherished as part of their strategy for upward mobility education, the acquisition of skills, efficiency, technical rationality, “objectivity” as an approach to problem-solving, and the faith that a man can form or build himself through individual effort, values that would continue to be important to the PMC.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, those virtues Murfree extols as still inherent in old-fashioned mountain people are, on a closer look, values typically held by an established bourgeoisie. Bourdieu argues persistently throughout Distinction that such a class tends to read its dominant position as “natural,” as deriving not from socioeconomic power, but from innate superiority, from its intuitive knowledge and inborn sense of taste. These kinds of “native intelligence” are exactly the traits Murfree feels should be preserved in the mountaineers. Her class interests explain Murfree’s privileging of “natural talents” like chivalry, nobility, and intuitive moral perspicuity over the “artificial” supports of education, money, and crass ambition. Her approval of the mountaineers’ inborn sense of class egalitarianism and their refusal to recognize class distinctions recalls Roland Barthes’ observations in Mythologies that the bourgeoisie is “the social class which does not want to be named” (138), a class that prefers to present what is specific to its class outlook as “universal” or as “human nature” (138-139). “[B]ourgeois norms are experienced as evident laws of a natural order,” Barthes continues, and he verifies again the bourgeoisie’s antipathy towards acknowledging a class hierarchy: “[t]he fact of the bourgeoisie becomes

absorbed into an amorphous universe, whose sole inhabitant is Eternal Man, who is neither “proletarian’ nor ‘bourgeois’” (Barthes 140).

Bourdieu puts into perspective Murfree’s associating these virtues with the past. He discusses class trajectory’s influence on individuals’ perceptions of their own place in the social hierarchy and also on their political attitudes. The specific class trajectory of Murfree’s audience must have seemed in possible imminent decline given the period’s economic changes. Certainly Murfree’s own social position, as the post-Civil War daughter of an antebellum Southern planter, was at best insecure. Bourdieu, in an insight that will be fundamental to my analysis of the improvement narrative as well, explains that a class in decline tends to look nostalgically and conservatively at the past. In contrast to classes on the rise, who are optimistic and future-oriented, Bourdieu writes:

individuals or groups in decline endlessly reinvent the discourse of all aristocracies, essentialist faith in the eternity of nature, celebration of tradition and the past, the cult of history and its rituals, because the best they can expect from the future is the return of the old order, from which they expect the restoration of their social being. (111; see also 455)

Although the mountaineers cannot recognize a class difference between themselves and non-Appalachians because, according to Murfree, people in the mountains belong to a nobler era when such distinctions were nonexistent, Murfree herself explicitly names the difference “class.” But for Murfree, the economic distance between Appalachia and America is not a scourge America must eradicate, as it will be for writers twenty years later. On the contrary, the mountaineers inhabit a more innocent and more “natural”

period of American history with a preindustrial agrarian economy that should be restored. The scourge is “modernization’s” creating an environment in which uncouth upstarts can scramble to higher social positions on the artificial props of education and sheer audacity.

The stories “Drifting Down Lost Creek,” “Electioneerin’ on Big Injun Mounting,” and “The Romance of Sunrise Rock” most vividly illuminate the established class/rising class tensions that operate more subtly in other pieces.<sup>13</sup> The first two stories both feature mountain men who are seduced away from their communities and achieve professional success in the lowlands. The lesson for readers is what the men sacrifice and how they are corrupted by following the code of the towns, a code again reminiscent of the aspiring middle-class’s values.

Evander Price in “Drifting”--even his name intimates his eventual contamination by commercialism--begins as a simple and virtuous blacksmith, an occupation reminiscent of the olden days, who likes to tinker in his shop and invent gadgets. When Vander’s “idjit” brother commits murder, Vander, as a testament to his high moral character while he remains in the mountains, takes the blame in “a stupendous self-sacrifice to fraternal affection” and is sentenced to the state pen (51). Without contact with the preindustrial atmosphere of the mountains, however, Vander’s early infatuation with “metal ‘n iron” intensifies to an obsession. Murfree uses “metal ‘n iron” as a shorthand for technology and technical rationality, those hallmarks of the new class and the new age, and she gives “iron” overtones that connote both literal and figurative imprisonment: the prison is, of course, barred with iron, but Vander’s entanglement in other types of iron hurt him far

worse than prison does. Vander invents a rivet head tool, patents it, and upon his pardon from prison, begins his social rise in the “valley” where ““he sets more store by metal than by grace,”” clearly a reference opposing “new” and “old” class values (67).

Material ambitions soon beset Vander’s old-fashioned natural virtue like a wildfire: “They scorched his more delicate sensibilities, and seared his freshest perceptions, and set his heart afire with sordid hopes” (77). Predictably, Vander’s petty bourgeois social and economic aspirations, along with his faith in technology and his aptitude for it, bring him not happiness, but disappointment. When he could have had pure mountain girl Cynthia Ware for a wife, he has instead married a socially ambitious telegraph operator who pressures him to commodify his talents because she can “not be content with his intrinsic worth, but long[s] for him to prove his value to the world” (76). Ultimately, his intuitive affinity for the mountains is supplanted by crass materialism. Returning ten years after his release from prison, he brings along a coal developer. Later texts will celebrate a mountaineer’s showing such entrepreneurial foresight as his finally attaining “civilization,” but for Murfree it signifies the point of no return in Vander’s long spiritual and moral decay. Now when he “surveys the vast landscape” of his home, it is “with a hard callous glance of worldly utility . . . . The language of the mountains had become a dead language” (78). Murfree’s nostalgia for the natural language of the mountains reminds the audience of another “natural” language, one privileging “intrinsic worth,” “delicate sensibilities,” and “grace,” a language now rendered unintelligible in the sordid modern world that has ruined Vander.

“Electioneerin’ on Big Injun Mounting” recounts the trajectory of another self-made man, but while in this story Murfree still denounces upwardly-mobile ambitions, her point seems more a critique of narrow adherence to “rules,” rationality, and efficiency, to the detriment of higher moral principles that should stand above human laws. Once again, the reader is confronted with class-inflected frictions between, on the one hand, the “natural” and “universal” and, on the other, more limited “modern” ideals of education, skills, and logic. Rufus Chadd, one of those Appalachians with tremendous personal potential of whom we will see much more in the improvement narratives, manages to leap “a hundred years” (163) of civilization between the ages of 17 and 33 by teaching himself the alphabet, making himself a lawyer, and finally becoming a district attorney. Now running for reelection, Chadd has incurred the wrath of his old mountain neighbors by what they see as his ruthless imposition of “justice.” In striking contrast to later “improvement” stories and articles set in Appalachia, especially those by John Fox, Jr., that will revolve almost entirely around the need to bring law to violent Appalachians and in which Chadd would be a hero, “Electioneerin’” presents his activities in a more ambivalent light. Murfree describes Chadd’s “subtle native instincts” (162) in animalistic terms, and says that although they are malleable and might have been elevated, his contact with criminals and, she implies, his immersion in petty-bourgeois modern American, have corrupted him. Chadd’s adeptness with the law, while effective, is narrow, manipulative, and sophistic; he has no understanding of the law’s real “grandeur” (163), and observers note that he “possess[es] only a remarkable dexterity with a few broad principles . . . and a

certain swift suppleness in their application . . . ” (163). Chadd’s skills typify those of the new professional-managerial class, especially its engineers, whom Alan Trachtenberg notes “brought into industry an apparently detached, objective, and highly specialized approach to solving problems” (54). Murfree’s casting him as a lawyer and using a doctor as her (eventually redeemed) villain in “The Romance of Sunrise Rock” would resonate with her audience for whom the professionalization of doctors and lawyers most blatantly signified the ascent of a new class (Wiebe 113-117).

Despite all his shortcomings, Chadd wins his reelection because of his unexpected response when he is attacked by an angry defendant, a response more indicative of “Eternal Man” than social climber. He is at first enraged because the man may have damaged not just his physical well-being, but more importantly, his “upward-reaching ambitions, and the immeasurable opportunity of achievement.” (“[W]hich after all,” Murfree adds as a jab at the perverse values of the new middle class, “is the essence of the thing called life” (176-77). But Chadd checks his rage, and instead follows “a noble impulse” (180): he insists that his assailant not be prosecuted. In this way, Chadd makes “a keen and subtle distinction in a high moral principle” (181), following a “premodern” sensitivity to universal laws instead of his “objective” intellect, and rehabilitates himself morally.

Murfree’s most explicit commentary on the shortcomings of the new middle-class’s mobility strategies appears in “The Romance of Sunrise Rock” in that formulaic Murfree plot that will resurface in countless other Appalachian narratives: outsider male has romantic encounter with mountain girl. Our representative of the socially ambitious

here is John Cleaver, a well-educated midwesterner who, not just despite his education, but quite possibly, Murfree insinuates, because of it, has failed to “make himself” as a doctor. Embittered, Cleaver retreats to the mountains to join an old friend, Trelawney, who has also “reared the great scaffolding of an elaborate education that he might erect the colossal edifice of his future,” only to find that “[h]is hands beat the empty air and he had no materials wherewith to build” (189). While Trelawney, however, wisely accepts his failure, Cleaver, overly attuned to class distinctions and condescending and snobbish towards his Tennessean neighbors, sulks. His soul-searching provides a vehicle for the author’s opinions of those who worship education, ambition, and self-making. Cleaver considers

In this day of over-education, when every man is fitted for any noble sphere of intellectual achievement and only inborn talent survives, might it not be that he had mistaken a cultivated aspiration for latent power? And if indeed his purposes had outstripped his abilities, the result was tragic--tragic. (193)

The opposition between men’s being “fitted” and having “inborn talent,” between a “cultivated aspiration” and “latent power,” between “purposes” and “abilities,” along with the reference to “over-education” exemplifies the tension between the new middle class and the old elite, between the former’s faith in “self-making” and education, and the latter’s nostalgic privileging of “natural” talents and innate virtues. And just in case the audience doesn’t pick up the message through Cleaver’s perspective on himself, the narrator almost immediately adds her own:

There is something so ludicrously contemptible in a great personal ambition and a puny capacity. Ambition is the only grand passion that does not ennoble. We do not care that a low thing should lift its eyes. And if it does, we laugh. (193)

In a typical Murfree strategy, Cleaver's vices are set off by the Teake family's virtues. The Teakes are old-fashioned mountain people, moral, respectable, and honorable, as well as completely and charmingly oblivious that they are on "a lower social plane" (196) than Cleaver and Trelawney because "[a]s to the artificial distinctions of money and education,--what do the ignorant mountaineers care about money and education!" (197). And because they recognize no "artificial" distinctions--although, assumedly, they are sensitive to the kind of "natural" ones that set Murfree's type of people apart from the upwardly mobile rabble--Murfree proclaims of the mountaineers: "Here are the true republicans! or, indeed, Here are the only aristocrats!" (186). That the reader is to perceive egalitarianism as a defining characteristic of both republicans and the aristocracy recalls Barthes' discussion of the bourgeoisie's refusal to see itself--or any other group--as a class.

"Fine, unspoiled" Selina Teake serves as the very distillation of traditional ideals because she possesses "a certain repose and gravity and dignity difficult to find among young ladies of high degree whose education has not proved an antidote for flippancy" (202). Murfree sustains this critique of contemporary educated women by contrasting Selina, "the only sincere woman" Trelawney has ever seen, his "ideal of a modest, delicate young girl," with contemporary women of his own station in life "who pursue

“society” as a man pursues a profession” (199). Eventually Cleaver, like many other protagonists in stories about Appalachia, is “saved” through Selina’s sacrifice. (Selina’s death also resolves the prickly issue of her consummating a cross-class marriage with Cleaver or Trelawney, a transgression Murfree will never permit despite her lip service to egalitarianism.) Not only does Selina teach Cleaver what is “truly” valuable, but the romantic inspiration of her “ghost” releases the innate talents it turns out Cleaver does possess. Through these he achieves the success mere education could not bring him. Furthermore, although Cleaver does return to his “accustomed and appropriate sphere,” he now sees this world as “flattened, narrowed, dulled strangely,” and populated by people “sordid, petty, and coarse-minded” (211) when compared with “the independent, money-scoring aristocrats of the mountains” (212). “There is a certain calm and strength in the old theories” of those “primitive” mountaineers, Murfree concludes wistfully (214), an invitation for her audience to associate the “old theories” of the mountain aristocrats with the “old theories” of certain other natural aristocrats they might know. Through this association, Murfree’s readers can affirm their own moral superiority to the new middle class despite their declining cultural significance.

While Murfree’s preservation narratives probably reached the most readers, other southern mountain stories written in the 1870’s and printed in the same kinds of magazines also celebrate “traditional virtues” by contrasting them with sordid material aspirations. Frances Hodgson Burnett’s “Esmerelda,” for example, published by Scribner’s in 1877, presents a North Carolina mountain family who is catapulted into

upward mobility with the discovery of iron on their farm. This Beverly Hillbillies prototype--although in 1877 they are the Parisian Hillbillies--excoriates the “aggressive and narrow” ambitious mother who forces her husband and daughter Esmerelda to accompany her to France where she plans for them to assimilate into the upper classes (82). Unlike the Clampitts in Beverly Hills, however, Esmerelda and her father are miserable with their class shift, and Esmerelda’s “unworldly and untaught nature” (83) begins to tarnish as she loses her beauty, spirit, “blush,” and “round figure” (87). Also in Scribner’s in 1877, Burnett offers us “Lodusky,” the title character yet another impetuous social climber from the mountains. Burnett accents Lodusky’s evil ambitions with sexual overtones when Lodusky tries to seduce an already betrothed non-Appalachian as a way out of the mountains and into a higher social class. Julie Schayer’s 1878 “Molly” again associates the yearning for social mobility with the pollution of the main character’s virginity: Molly, we learn through veiled references, made the mistake of venturing out of West Virginia to Richmond where she was ““a-arning heaps o’ money and livin’ so fine”” (714) only to have her reputation, youth, and innocence despoiled at the hands of vulgar non-Appalachian Dick Staples. And although Owlet, the title character in John Esten Cooke’s 1878 Harper’s story, does successfully and happily enter the elite, we discover at the end that Owlet did not so much rise in class as simply reclaim her rightful social position: she was the long lost daughter of English gentry all along.

With the preservation narrative, Murfree and writers like her exploit notions of “time” and “class” to reinvent for their audiences a nostalgic sense of “classlessness” that

although rapidly disappearing in industrializing America, still endures in the contemporary pastness of Appalachia. In this past, there are no class distinctions, only moral ones, and the morals revered there confirm the natural superiority of the declining elite over the ascendant new class of the late nineteenth-century. To be sure, in the old days, some people have more money than others, but that doesn't matter. Even if individuals don't know their "class" (perhaps because they don't know their class), they are content with their "place." Those who aren't and try to change it may succeed socially and economically, but are doomed to fail morally.

In the 1880's and 90's, as the old aristocracy intermarried with the nouveau riche to create new modes of class distinction (Wiebe 111), the elite for whom Murfree reinvented the past became itself a class of the past. As magazine culture began to cater to a mass audience, the values it represented looked more and more like those of the new PMC. And although in the 1890's, when the improvement narrative supersedes the preservation theme in popularity, the fascination with the upwardly mobile mountaineer persists, it persists with a significant difference: in the improvement narrative, the upwardly mobile impulse is the correct one.

## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>The Appalachian mountain range stretches from Maine to Georgia, but the region called "Appalachia" is popularly understood (and it is with the popular understanding that I am concerned) to include all of West Virginia, and parts of western Virginia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia and Alabama. At times, southeastern Ohio, southwestern Pennsylvania, and western Maryland are considered Appalachian as well.

<sup>2</sup>Of course, the region is not and never has been homogenous racially, ethnically, or culturally. Even subregions within Appalachia differ greatly. Nonetheless, Appalachian people have always been represented the way Votaw portrays them, as "prototypical" Americans, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and because it is more the idea of Appalachia than its reality that I am examining, my analysis will assume such a homogeneous population.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Shapiro's Preface and Chapter One. Allen Batteau's survey of early travel sketches about the southern mountains (29-37) also proves that antebellum authors did not view the area as "a singular or separate region" (30).

<sup>4</sup>Any sustained investigation of texts written about Appalachia, especially between the 1870's and 1920, not only offers a crash course in how a place and a culture might be constructed through language, but will also divest the most naive reader of any faith in a relatively impermeable boundary between "fact" and "fiction." One can trace stereotypes, cliches, and myths still alive today as they are conceived and then proliferate as text after

text reproduces, often verbatim, information, descriptions, anecdotes, characters, place names, and “personal experiences” which each author presents as original and often deriving from direct observation even though the same description might appear in, for example, a travel sketch that predates by a decade the article purporting to be “authentic.” As Shapiro says, the fiction precedes the other genres and disciplines, and when the embryonic social sciences appear at the turn-of-the-century, they often draw flagrantly, and with no acknowledgement, on local color. Batteau notes that most social scientists used as authorities Mary Noailles Murfree, a short story writer, William Goodell Frost, a missionary, and John Fox, Jr., an author and performer (83). A list of idiosyncratic place names in a 1870’s short story might turn up twenty years later in a missionary appeal; a social scientist presents as a reality he himself watched an episode that appears in a decade-old novel. Fiction is transformed into fact, art into anthropology.

I’ll say more about the literature’s influence on the region’s material history in Chapter Two. Shapiro discusses how missionaries depended on local color literature as authoritative texts to justify their intervention in the mountains and to define what types of social programs the mountaineers needed (61-63). In Modernizing the Mountaineer, David Whisnant insists that planning documents and the contemporary agencies and social programs that use them still rely on “the stream of misinformation that flows perennially from the missionary movement and its recent academic heirs.” Almost any page of these documents, he claims, shows that “the wisdom of the early private developers and

missionaries survives in hardy but profoundly uncritical oral and written tradition among planners and agency administrators” (xvi).

<sup>6</sup>By concentrating on non-Appalachian natives, I don’t want to imply that Appalachian natives were not and are not complicit in the exploitation of the region. However, native writers, as far as I can discern, contributed little to the literary construction of Appalachia in the period I’m addressing, probably because few had the cultural capital to produce texts that were distributed nationally.

<sup>7</sup>I have drawn this capsule history from works by Barbara and John Ehrenreich, Ronald Eller, Herbert Gutman, John Hennen, Richard Ohmann, Herbert Reid, Martin Sklar, Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Alan Trachtenberg, and Robert H. Wiebe.

I have omitted the period’s anxiety over immigration, its race paranoia, and its nativist movements. Although I’m unable to give these issues the attention they deserve, they are relevant to the Appalachia as past trope, especially to the nostalgic form that presents the region as a reservoir of Anglo-Saxon racial stock. Allen Batteau treats the relationship between race and “backwardness” in Chapter Four of The Invention of Appalachia, and Henry Shapiro treats it in the fourth chapter of Appalachia On Our Mind as well.

<sup>8</sup>Hobbs (87) agrees with this conventional local color wisdom, as does Richardson (199); for an especially well-articulated account of this commonplace Brodhead refers readers to Warner Berthoff’s “The Art of Jewett’s Pointed Firs,” New England Quarterly 32 (1959): 49-53. David Jordan grounds his work in the “national literature” theory

which contends that local color functioned to define American literature as unique and “distinctly American” as opposed to European literature (Jordan ix). According to Henry Shapiro, Fred Lewis Pattee advanced the “national literature” theory as early as 1910 (Shapiro 7-8).

<sup>9</sup>Brodhead believes that the upper class was fascinated with “backward” places because such places fulfilled an “elite need for the primitive made available as a leisure outlet” (162) and because they satisfied the upper class’s mental acquisitiveness for other cultures (163). Both the leisure activity and the mental acquisition helped distinguish upper class culture as “high culture.” At the same time, Brodhead contends, regional fiction reconstructed for its audience a sense of American homogeneity that was being threatened by the influx of foreign immigrants during the last half of the nineteenth-century (164). Brodhead does not mention the anxiety over upward mobility that appears in so many local color stories about Appalachia.

<sup>10</sup>In Modernizing the Mountaineer, David Whisnant also notes the prevalence of this simultaneous preserve/develop attitude towards Appalachia. But Whisnant believes the “develop” and “update” desire is generally applied to the region’s economy and politics, while preservation is seen as fitting for its “picturesque and nostalgic folkways and religion” (8). As I explain, I think the narratives are more complex than this.

I should also acknowledge Whisnant’s reference in the same book to the “Improvement Paradigm” that he uses in his discussion of the eighteenth-century

“Improvement” of the Scottish Highlanders, a project he sees as similar to the U.S. government’s approach to Appalachia over the last century (268-272).

<sup>11</sup>Background material on Murfree comes from Richard Brodhead; Henry Shapiro, especially pages 19-20; Allen Batteau, 39-56; and Merrill Maguire Skaggs, 220.

<sup>12</sup>Mary P. Ryan 147, 162, 166, 169. See also Ohmann, Trachtenberg, and Smith-Rosenberg.

<sup>13</sup>I want to distinguish myself here from Allen Batteau’s reading of Murfree in his The Invention of Appalachia, the most extensive analysis of her stories from an Appalachian Studies’ point of view that I can find. Batteau does consider class and economics, but he identifies Murfree’s audience as the new middle class, and his classed interpretation of the nostalgic impulse in the stories is this new class’s longing to preserve “the integrity of the domestic sphere in the face of capitalist expansion” (15; see also Chapter 3 and especially 52-56). Batteau’s insights are useful, but I object to his assumption that America imagines Appalachia as female which is the premise of his domestic preserve concept. Further, I disagree with his class definition of Murfree’s audience. In my own reading, I’ve tried to be more attentive to specific class tensions during these decades.

## Chapter Two

### The Politics of Backwardness: Temporality and Progressive Era Class Conscience

#### I.

“The worst of them still have good traits, strong characters, something responsive to decent treatment--They are simply the unstarted.”  
Horace Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders (1913)

The improvement narrative that condones the mountain person who tries to rise in social status appears in literature about Appalachia as early as 1864 in “A Half-Life and Half a Life.” However, it only begins to predominate in the 1890’s as discourse about Appalachia circulates more widely, the professional-managerial class comes into its own, and more of the Appalachian region is industrialized with many of the same people so picturesque to Murfree’s audiences economically dispossessed in the process. Shapiro notes this shift in the discourse, observing that around 1890 the perception of the southern mountains as merely “strange and peculiar” is replaced by distress over the region’s

“neediness,” and Shapiro calls the new paradigm “uplift literature.”<sup>1</sup> Although as usual Shapiro fails to historicize this shift from a classed perspective, he does point out that while authors of Murfree’s period actually refer to class differences between mountain people and the outsiders who visit them, after 1890 allusions to class (and, I would add, even allusions to poverty) rarely appear in the discourse (Shapiro 69-70). Works by John Fox, Jr., and Horace Kephart include occasional exceptions. Likewise, characters’ efforts at social mobility are no longer described in economic terms. For the first time in history, Shapiro confirms, the region is suddenly a “problem” (60-62). And this problem, as constructed by the literature of the time, is the region’s and its people’s need to be moved forward from the past of “barbarism” to the present of “civilization,” or from a “natural state” to one of “culture.”

The missionary impulse to move a people from a state of “nature” to “civilization” is a familiar colonial strategy, and it has been treated as such by critics like Rodger Cunningham who rely on colonial models when interpreting cultural productions about Appalachia. The colonialism model’s entry into Appalachian Studies in the sixties and seventies accelerated the sophistication of cultural criticism in the field by finally explaining how “the denigration of Appalachian culture” helped legitimate the region’s economic exploitation (Pudup, et. al., 6).<sup>2</sup> As David Walls points out, colonial models can illuminate cultural domination in ways orthodox Marxism, notoriously inadequate for cultural analysis, cannot, and for this reason, Appalachian Studies scholars interested in cultural analysis embraced the colonial model (Walls 239). While I concede that colonial

paradigms provide a productive starting point for interpreting discourse about Appalachia, I believe the model has significant limitations. Colonial theory can deemphasize class and capitalist economic structures, factors imperative for comprehension of the region's history and socioeconomic situation (Walls 235; Reid "Appalachian Studies" 147). The model also tends "to obscure historical continuities between regional and national cultural life," a tendency that derives from its being "based on the perspective of two cultural traditions in conflict" (Reid "Appalachian Studies" 147; emphasis Reid's). Only by understanding these continuities, Reid goes on, can we understand "the operation of crucial inequalities and discontinuities in the Appalachian domain of American capitalist society" (147).<sup>3</sup>

Walls' and Reid's critiques are important to my work in several ways. First, as they suggest and as I will discuss, the colonial model places constraints on interpretations that highlight class dynamics and class domination. Second, the historical continuities between region and nation that Reid claims the colonial model blurs because it was formulated to address the domination of one culture by another very different culture (and often of one country by another) are exactly what I find most provocative about the literature I'm examining. Appalachian people have so often and for so long perplexed dominant American culture precisely because of their similarity to "Americans," and I argue that this similarity is why the discourse about the region works so hard to justify Appalachia's economic "difference." On the other hand, continuities between poverty in Appalachia and wealth in the America outside Appalachia--in short, that the poverty inside

contributes directly to the wealth outside--are precisely what the literature tries to ignore or refuse. Finally, and especially pertinent to the nature-to-culture narrative, while dominant U.S. culture and Appalachian culture as represented in the literature do differ, they are also in many ways the same, and certainly more alike than the cultures colonial theory usually treats. Perhaps most importantly, dominant U.S. culture and Appalachian culture are racially and ethnically identical. The texts about Appalachia I have read imply that the cultural improvement America wants to make in the region is more a quantitative temporal improvement than a qualitative improvement. In other words, Appalachian barbarism denotes less a different culture that must be civilized to be more like the dominant culture--a relationship more typical of colonialism--than an earlier version of the dominant culture that needs to be rushed into its maturity.<sup>4</sup>

Appalachian Studies historians and economists closely attuned to material conditions in the mountains explain more explicitly than cultural analysts do how the improvement narrative and the past trope have in actuality facilitated economic "development" schemes and disguised economic exploitation in the region. David Whisnant's 1980 Modernizing the Mountaineer provides an exhaustive historical discussion of the ways the nation applied the developmental model to Appalachia from 1900 to the 1970's to justify the region's poverty and legitimate further exploitation. Pudup, Billings, and Waller state that ethnographers have long used "modernization theory as narrative device" when discussing Appalachia, thereby deflecting attention from "actual historical causes of social change" in the region (5). And Reid and Eller discuss

the relationship between “the notion that time stood still” in Appalachia and the obfuscation of the region’s rapid industrialization (Reid “Appalachian Policy” 622). These scholars, however, don’t treat literature, nor, with the exception of Whisnant, cultural texts, and they offer little interpretation of the hegemonic work the improvement narrative performs for the middle classes. Because literary, missionary, social science, and other texts played such a momentous role in how America perceived--and acted upon--Appalachia, and because the middle class, for the most part, produced and consumed these texts, I want to address both the literature and the ideological function it performed for the middle class. Yet I want to perform my cultural analysis without depending on colonial theory.

To overcome the limitations of the colonial model, I will approach the improvement narrative from a Gramscian point of view that focuses on the class dynamics at work in the narrative. I take my cue in part from Walls, who after admitting that colonial theory offers sharper tools for cultural criticism than orthodox Marxism, reminds his readers that they no longer need rely on orthodox Marxism after work done by Gramsci (239; Walls also mentions Lukacs and the Frankfurt School, but I find these less applicable to the Appalachian situation). And for Gramsci, what was most important about studying popular culture was “the need to explore (not interpret) cultural representations within specific historic conjunctures . . . for what they reveal about the production of consent” (Landy 85-86). As I did with the preservation narrative, I will explore the kinds of classed hegemonic work--the production of consent--the

improvement narrative performs during an especially volatile period in American history, a period that some historians identify as a hegemonic transformation that established corporate values as one and the same as “American” values. First, I will first set up the historical context of the improvement narrative and describe the new professional-managerial class’s role in this context. Next, I will discuss three past-to-present teleologies I detect within the nature-to-culture version of the improvement narrative after I examine it from a perspective sensitive to economics and class: first, the progress from the past of preindustrial agrarian market capital to the present of corporate industrial capital; second, the progress from the pastness of a lower-class position to the present of a higher-class one; and, third, the progress from nature into a natural resource and finally into a commodity. My discussion explains how the improvement narrative elides class structure and justifies economic exploitation in Appalachia. The narrative thus resolves for its audience the inconsistency between America perceived as a land of equality and Appalachia recognized as an American land where white Anglo-Saxon Protestant people are radically “unequal” in some way. In addition, I hope my exploration of the three Appalachian teleologies will shed light on how American ideology in general capitalizes on redefining economic inequities as differences in time.

## II.

## The Professional-Managerial Class and the Hegemonic Shift to Corporate Capital

“Usually the reform liberal has had great difficulty approaching Appalachian forms of identity in terms of social and historical time.”

Herbert Reid, “Appalachian Studies: Class Culture, and Politics, II” (1982)

Scholars including Richard Ohmann, Herbert Reid, Alan Trachtenberg, Herbert Gutman, John and Barbara Ehrenreich, Robert Wiebe, and Martin Sklar view the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries as the backdrop for a dramatic transformation in American economic, political, and social structures, a “formative” period that put into place the “basic institutions and relations of twentieth-century U.S. society . . .” (Sklar 28). Most studies identify the rise of corporate capital as the most influential force during the era, and even the more conservative scholars acknowledge that this development had ramifications far beyond the sphere of “economics.” If one examines the period from a Gramscian point of view, as Ohmann and Reid do explicitly and the Ehrenreichs do indirectly, one can argue that the transformation constituted in essence a hegemonic shift.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly, the story goes like this: after expanding recklessly and with startling rapidity after the Civil War up to the 1890’s, capital found itself confronted with a number of crises. The two relevant to discourse about Appalachia include escalating friction between owners and laborers--the Ehrenreichs claim that by the end of the nineteenth-century the nation faced the real possibility of labor insurrection (12)--and the concomitant

need for capitalists to legitimate their accumulation of wealth to other Americans. Many Americans were by this time so distraught over corporations' "stifling opportunity" (Wiebe 45) that they began to question whether the new social order could be considered "democratic" (Ohmann 52), or even "American" (Gutman 49-52). Prior to the 1890's, the embryonic American professional-managerial class, too, felt at best ambivalent towards corporate capital's nature and its recent expansion and in many cases even opposed it. While I can't recapitulate fully here how the capitalists resolved this crisis--although my analysis of the improvement narrative will shed light on it--the capitalist class achieved what Gramsci would call "a passive revolution"; that is, they gradually and successfully presented their own values as reasonable and beneficial to the majority of the members of all of America's classes.<sup>6</sup> The values of new corporate capital were established as an American "common sense." Ohmann calls this upheaval a "social movement" that "produced a new hegemonic class within a transformed social order" (61).

Of course, I have simplified the process here for purposes of clear summary; a passive revolution does not take place overnight and does not convert all of society's members at once. Hegemony is never static and must constantly work to reproduce itself. And most pertinent to my study because it examines how the new middle class encountered and resolved the "difference" of Appalachia is the role of the professional-managerial class in this hegemonic transformation. As I noted in Chapter One, the Ehrenreichs stress that the PMC, a "formation specific to the monopoly stage of capitalism" (10), comes into existence at the point in the relationship between workers and

owners when the latter need a class “specializing in the reproduction of capitalist class relationships” because the capitalist class can no longer depend entirely upon force to maintain order (14). In other words, the professional-managerial class performs an invaluable service to the capitalist class as it establishes its hegemony: it facilitates capital’s move from control by coercion and force--a method that had alienated members of all classes--to rule by consent. The projects of the Progressive Era--the reforms, the social programs, the philanthropy--had everything to do with this change to rule by consent.

However, the professional-managerial class at the turn-of-the-century did not see its function in the emerging socioeconomic order as handmaiden to capitalists. (Nor did the capitalists see the PMC this way.) Despite its having more to gain from an alliance with the capitalist class than did the working class and despite its adopting capitalist common sense as more or less its own before lower classes did (Trachtenberg 87), the PMC adopted these values with a certain amount of ambivalence. Hegemony is rarely totalizing. The Ehrenreichs clarify that the PMC’s “class outlook” “was distinct from, and often antagonistic to, that of the capitalist class,” but, at the same time, the two classes shared similar interests (21). One way the professional-managerial class negotiated its ambivalence towards capital was to conceive of itself as a buffer between workers and owners (Ohmann 56). From this point of view, it could see itself in a helping role; it believed it could solve disquieting problems between reckless and unstable capital and beleaguered and angry workers by providing the former “expertise, efficiency, [and the]

ability to regulate and rationalize capitalist development” and the latter, social programs, ameliorative aid, and “endless advice on how to be more middle class” (Ohmann 163). “The role of the emerging PMC, as they saw it,” confirms the Ehrenreichs, “was to mediate the basic class conflict of capitalist society and create a ‘rational,’ reproducible social order” (19). Importantly, Ohmann adds, the professional-managerial class even saw as its “historical task” that it “perhaps bring into existence a relatively equal social order” (172; emphasis mine). Yet as the PMC “temper[ed]” and “soften[ed]” class conflict and “moderated coercion into hegemony” (Ohmann 163; 164; 170), it unconsciously “strengthen[ed] the rule of capital by making it less abrasive and coercive, more reasonable, more ‘natural,’ more hegemonic” (Ohmann 345). In a sense, the PMC’s progressive projects killed two birds with one stone: they helped the PMC adopt corporate common sense as its own and they helped the PMC present corporate capitalist values as common sense to the lower classes.

I agree with Appalachian Studies scholar Herbert Reid that it is no coincidence America’s fascination with the idea of “Appalachia” occurred simultaneously with the consolidation of corporate hegemony. “Appalachia” must have epitomized for many members of the PMC both the hopes and fears that accompanied the new hegemony. On one hand, Appalachia, a white “American” region intensely industrialized and exploited by capital, fulfilled the PMC’s direst anxieties about the new order. On the other hand, the population’s being “Anglo-Saxon,” in theory, imminently rehabilitable, and, in actuality, one of the least controversial “needy” populations for the middle class to interfere with

(Shapiro 43-48; 52-53) made the southern mountains one vast arena for the PMC's "tempering" and "moderating" activities. Nevertheless, my purpose here is not to examine how the PMC swayed Appalachians to accept a corporate capitalist view as common sense. While the literature of the period features endless PMC characters attempting exactly that, the texts provide only a hopelessly skewed representation of this phenomenon. What the literature does speak volumes about is how the PMC represented and negotiated a capitalist worldview to itself and to other middle-class readers as reasonable and beneficial: as common sense. More specifically, the Appalachian texts elucidate how the professional-managerial class justified the detrimental and "unfair" effects corporate capital had on American society and how the PMC legitimated its own participation in and benefits from corporate capital's project. In particular, the literature reveals how the PMC dealt with the inconsistency between the United States as a nation of "equality" and radical class inequality in the southern mountains that they could not blame on racial difference or immigrant status.

For evidence of both the PMC's ambivalence and how it dealt with that ambivalence, take these excerpts from missionary publications of the period. The first comes from "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" (1899) arguably the most famous essay ever written about Appalachia (McNeil 91), composed by Berea College president William Goodell Frost, a man who reached larger audiences than any other mountain missionary of the time (Batteau 74-75). Allen Batteau identifies the piece as an Ur-text that contains all of the formulas Frost would rework for fund drives over the

next twenty years (74-75). It is also one of the first texts actually to refer to the region as “Appalachian.” Early in the essay, Frost positions himself in that intermediary or buffer role so dear to the professional-managerial class. He calls himself the “friendly interpreter” of “these eighteenth-century neighbors” for “modern life,” whose members, Frost concedes, have “little patience with those who are ‘behind the times’” (92). For the rest of the piece, Frost composes what will become a familiar medley of “past” (and often negative) imagery complemented by “potential” testimony. He mentions “the immense blank spaces” in the people’s minds brought on by their isolation in the past (98), but counters with optimism in their “latent abilities” (105). He laments that “mountain men and women are pathetically belated” (103-104), but summons the figure of Lincoln to prove that mountain men “have no mean native endowments” when given “opportunity” (105). The Appalachian is not “degraded,” Frost assures his readers, but simply “has not yet been graded up” (102). As a matter of fact, “The native capacity of the mountain people is well established and their response to well-directed efforts has been surprisingly ready” (106). Finally, Frost offers this passage, which will recur in different configurations over the next few decades. The passage exposes the professional-managerial class’s contradictory attitudes towards capital and hints at the strategies it generated to reconcile its ambivalence, strategies that never question the existence or the direction of capital, but instead promise to soften its blow and rectify its fallout. The first sentence also hints at resistance in the nation at the time to the shift from the preservation to the improvement narrative.

We are sometimes remonstrated with for breaking in upon this Aracadian simplicity, and we have had our own misgivings. But it must be remembered that ruthless change is knocking at the door of every mountain cabin. The jackals of civilization have already abused the confidence of many a highland home. The lumber, coal, and mineral wealth of the mountains is to be possessed, and the unprincipled vanguard of commercialism can easily debauch a simple people. The question is whether the mountain people can be enlightened and guided so that they can have a part in the development of their own country, or whether they must give place to the foreigners and melt away like so many Indians.

The means for extending this saving aid must be furnished by the patriotic people of the nation. (105)

I quote at length to draw attention to the complexities, ironies, and revisions at work here as Frost negotiates capitalist values as common sense to himself and his audience, and as he simultaneously exposes the limitations of such values for social programs that honestly want to bring about equality. First, Frost refers to runaway capitalist development with opprobrium, using the terms “jackals,” “abuse,” and “unprincipled,” all dimensions of corporate expansion at odds with the professional-managerial class’s values of reason and carefully planned development. But for Frost that the mountains’ “wealth” will be “possessed” is inevitable. And who will possess it? That Frost leaves unstated, trusting to the passive voice, but by the end of the paragraph we know Frost assumes it will not be possessed by the mountain people. While we can infer that the subject of the passive verb is corporate capital, Frost’s not articulating that subject suggests, first, that he and his audience see corporate capital’s exploitation as so inescapable it need not be mentioned, and, second, that the corporate capital system is

already, by 1899, such a given that it need not be explicitly named. At least for this class, corporate capital hegemony has already been naturalized.

Instead, Frost names the evil that is invading the mountains “commercialism.” The problem is not capitalism’s exploiting people, but commercialism’s debauching their simplicity and innocence.<sup>7</sup> With this revision, Frost transfers the problem from the sphere of economics, work, and production to the sphere of morality, the home, and consumption. Now the “improvement” the Appalachian people require need not be performed in the public sphere, which would mean the PMC’s directly challenging capitalist structures and therefore jeopardizing its own class position. If commercialism is the problem, the PMC can safely carry out its mediation--here called “guiding” and “enlightening”--in the private sphere of schools, churches, and the home. Predictably, the best the Appalachian people can hope for after being guided and enlightened is some bit part in the development of the natural resources under their feet. Again, already by 1899, Frost does not imagine reversing or even reforming the economic system, but seeks to “help” the Appalachian people participate in capitalism, either as collaborators or as recipients of some trickle-down effect. If they are unable to become capitalists, they will simply die out like “Indians.” As I will discuss in more depth when I treat the market capital-to-corporate capital teleology, the “civilized” American is the capitalist American, and the “uncivilized” American has no place in the nation. Finally, Frost makes the assimilation of Appalachians into corporate capital a national mission by deeming patriots those citizens who will contribute to this assimilation.

David Whisnant, in All That Is Native and Fine, reproduces an excerpt from the Hindman Settlement School's 1920 newsletter that performs similar maneuvers as it articulates the school's ambivalence towards corporate capital values, then resolves that ambivalence much as Frost does. The Hindman School, however, is also in the uncomfortable position of admitting its direct debt to coal companies for its financing. After describing the land grab and the industrialization of the region, the writer laments

This is commercialism. These people shut in here for a century and a quarter are not prepared to cope with it. They must be trained to meet the changing order of things rather than be picked up in its vortex and swept on--or destroyed. Far be it from us, however, to give the impression that the coal operators are ruthless. Many of them fully appreciate the problems to be met. A number of them realize their obligations to this section and at least a dozen companies contribute to the Hindman Settlement School. With their gifts come the most sympathetic letters. . . . We need such encouragement.

It is the abrupt change, the rushing-in of the aggressive commercial world on a people so unprepared both by training and experience that adds to the problem. Their wealth has passed into other hands, but they still have their splendid possibilities of personal development. (qtd. in Whisnant, All That Is, 75-76)

Like Frost, the Hindman author expresses disapproval of what seems to be corporate capital--the "aggression," the "vortex," the possibility of being "destroyed" if one gets in its path--but she calls "capitalism" "commercialism." The awkward contradictory position of the School here, compelled to criticize capitalism with one breath, then thank coal companies for contributions in the next, epitomizes the contradictory position of the professional-managerial class as a whole: it receives benefits--upward mobility, relative

autonomy, salaries, social status--from a capitalist order that still violates the PMC's American ideals of democracy, equality, and opportunity (opportunity at least for white citizens like Appalachians). Such mixed feelings are ameliorated, as usual, by its convincing itself it will rectify in the future the damage done by corporations by educating the Appalachian people so they, too, can participate in the capitalist project and eventually become like the professional-managerial class. In yet another move similar to Frost's, the School never questions the inevitability of the Appalachians' "wealth pass[ing] into other hands," but compensates for this impoverishment by stressing the mountaineers' innate potential-- "their splendid possibilities for personal development"--moving the solution from the public sphere of corporations, industrialization, and land theft to the noncontroversial private sphere of personal education. And missionaries are not the only people who voice such mixed feelings and tepid solutions; Horace Kephart concludes Our Southern Highlanders with the same negotiations (454-469).

Frost's locating the solution for the mountaineers' problems in their "latent abilities" and "native capacity" and the Hindman School's locating it in "their splendid possibilities of personal development" bring me back to the popularity of the improvement narrative with the professional-managerial class. Surely the narrative's appeal stems in part from the PMC's social trajectory. One of the most salient differences between the PMC and the declining elite who preferred the preservation narrative is class trajectory, and Bourdieu's research demonstrates that a progressivist outlook is especially attractive to a petty bourgeois class fraction on the rise, precisely the position of the professional-

managerial class capturing cultural dominance by 1900.<sup>8</sup> Because such a class in ascendancy occupies an “enchanted” relation to its place within the class structure, its members tend to be “inclined towards social optimism” and “turned towards the future, novelty, movement, innovation, progress . . . .” (Bourdieu 454). But to realize this social progress, Bourdieu continues, a rising petty bourgeois class frowns upon the use of force, like strikes, favoring instead “symbolic weapons” including education, information, and voluntary associations (457): exactly the weapons proposed by Frost and the Hindman School, as well as by countless other texts about Appalachia. These are the kinds of “weapons” that soften and moderate class conflict without challenging the given economic structure, and although Bourdieu and the Ehrenreichs are working within different frameworks, if one considers the dynamics of class trajectory, one can infer it’s no coincidence an ascendant petty bourgeois class is the class the Ehrenreichs pinpoint as historically mediating a hegemonic shift from rule by coercion to rule by consent.

The improvement narrative not only suits this optimistic, future-oriented mindset, but also expedites the PMC’s representation of corporate capitalist values as beneficial, reasonable, and consistent with ideals of equality. Admittedly, the improvement narrative approaches the Appalachian people ambivalently, in keeping with how the middle class has traditionally viewed lower classes, vacillating between, for example, repulsion over the working-class’s abominable taste and poor politics, and admiration for their honesty, earthiness, and nobility under duress.<sup>9</sup> Almost all of the texts I will discuss reproduce the popular stereotypes of the southern mountaineers as violent, ignorant, lazy, dirty, drunk,

and lawless. The ways these derogatory characterizations legitimate economic exploitation is fairly transparent: if a culture is simply despicable, then no one has anything to lose by capital's meddling with it. But I find more intriguing because more revealing in terms of the reproduction of capitalist culture and class relations how often the denigratory representations are supplemented with a discourse that valorizes Appalachians. The ways the improvement narrative deploys and manipulates positive discourse shed more light on the subtle dynamics of rule by consent. Affirmative discourse works more efficaciously and insidiously than bald defamation to temper economic exploitation and obfuscate class structures, thereby facilitating the PMC's legitimation of capitalist culture both to itself and to other classes. "Soft imagery," in short, is more useful to strategies of consensual domination than is "hard imagery."<sup>10</sup>

As Ohmann reminds us, the PMC believed part of its historical mission was "perhaps bringing into existence a relatively equal social order" (172). One way the PMC felt it might achieve more equality was to teach the lower classes how to be more like the PMC: "Of course," Ohmann writes, "the PMC saw itself as different from (and superior to) the working class, but in a tutelary relationship to it that might lead to greater likeness" (172). The professional-managerial class's objective of making the working class more like itself helps explain why the loudest and most insistent message the positive discourse sends is this: despite all their vices, the Appalachian people have a tremendous innate potential for personal development. In other words, the southern mountain people--white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant--have the potential to be rehabilitated into a "greater

likeness” with the PMC, and this imminent rehabilitation will resolve the economic differences of the present. In a sense, the PMC solved the dilemma Appalachia posed to American myths of progress by inscribing the entire region into the kind of rising class trajectory usually reserved for individuals. This trajectory narrative, like the countless rags-to-riches stories by that time circulating in American popular culture, taught that the region had only to wait and exercise its innate potential, and (with a little help, of course, from its friends) it would soon “catch up” with the rest of white “modern” America. Such a narrative operates hegemonically, as Bourdieu points out, to retranslate economic differences into temporal ones (164-65). Once classes are merely an “order of successions” rather than a hierarchy of antagonisms, the relationship between classes shifts from one of dominated against dominant to one of predecessor versus successor. Poverty from this point of view is only a passing phenomenon, the class hierarchy impermanent. Economic disparity becomes temporal disparity, and temporal disparity becomes temporary disparity.<sup>11</sup>

The myth of the unlimited potential of the Appalachian people buttresses the notion that classes are merely an order of successions and appears in both fiction and nonfiction. It is usually intertwined with typical negative imagery that instead of detracting from it merely reinforces the urgency of that potentiality being somehow developed as quickly as possible. John Fox, Jr.’s, remarks in his 1901 essay “The Southern Mountaineer” are representative. He assures his audience that mountain people are “quick-witted, strong-minded, sturdy, tenacious, and usually very religious” (143);

“naturally capable, eager to learn, easy to uplift” (143); and “most tractable, more easily moulded, more easily uplifted than the people of similar grade in the city” (142).

Renowned “anthropogeographer” Ellen Semple concurs in the same year by attesting to Appalachians’ insatiable appetite for education and their untiring struggle to attain it:

“When a mountain lad comes down to the State University at Lexington, it is a foregone conclusion that he is going to carry off the honours,” she avows, and she goes on to remind her audience that by doing so, the mountain boy has made “a stride over an intervening hundred and fifty years” (172). Horace Kephart, twelve years later, in his immensely popular Our Southern Highlanders--the book went through two editions and six reprintings (Batteau 89)--swears over and over again to the unlimited potential of the people in his title. “The worst of them still have good traits, strong characters, something responsive to decent treatment . . . . They are simply the unstarted--and their thews are strong” (349; see also Kephart’s final chapter ““When the Sleeper Wakes””).

While Ohmann, however, talks about how the PMC hoped to make the lower classes more like itself, and while countless texts in this period do indeed trace Appalachian characters’ efforts at social mobility, these same texts rarely refer to Appalachians in terms of class or economics at all. Instead, class differences become entirely differences in time. Therefore, for the Appalachian people to achieve “greater likeness” to the professional-managerial class, they must move not from the poor or the working class to the middle class, as Ohmann describes, but from an imperfect past state of “nature” or “barbarism” to the progressive present of American “culture” or

“civilization.” The improvement narrative is most often written, and read, as the progress from nature to culture. The ideological utility of recasting economic disparities as stages along a nature to culture continuum introduces yet another perspective on the hegemonic use of conceptions of temporality and class position.

### III.

#### From the Barbaric Past of Preindustrial Market Capital to the Cultured Present of Corporate Capital

Thus the industrial problems and human problems are beginning to solve themselves side by side in the backwoods of Kentucky. You begin with coke and end with Christianity.

--James Lane Allen, “Mountain Passes of the Cumberland” (1890)

Bourdieu argues that to obscure the features of a class hierarchy by rewriting the oppositions between social classes as “stages in an evolution” is not an “uncommon ideological mechanism” (490). Such a revision comes especially easily to Westerners because it is informed by both a centuries-old tradition in the West that associates dominated classes with the natural, low, vulgar, and common (Bourdieu 251) and by a Western worldview that connects the future with social ascent and the past with social decline (Bourdieu 346; consider, Bourdieu suggests, the currency of the metaphor “he has a future”). Evan Watkins, in *Throwaways*, sheds more light on the nature-to-culture

version of the evolutionary paradigm. Although Watkins' primary argument is how nature as a field of reference to explain social position has been replaced by technology, he confirms that especially prior to industrialization, but also into the twentieth-century, Western ideology was inclined to explain a population's inferior social position by its "closeness to a 'state of nature'" (15-16; 22-23). Watkins also notes that in the "various natural codings of 'progress'" popular before the twentieth-century, a "state of nature" was typically equated with being "stuck in the past" (33).<sup>12</sup> Conversely, one can infer, a dominant class position is linked with civilization and the present.

The Western impulse to explain social positionality by reference to a nature-to-culture evolutionary continuum would have been particularly compelling to turn-of-the-century Americans. In the aftermath of Darwin, interest in evolutionary theories and teleological thinking approached an obsession, and the popular Horace Kephart even talks explicitly about the pertinence of the evolutionary paradigm for the Appalachian situation. "The only people," Kephart writes, "who can consistently despair of the future for even the lowest of our mountaineers are those who deny evolution" (466). But the improvement narrative was not grounded in Social Darwinism, the theory that explained the growing gap between America's rich and America's poor as the dictate of a natural law that determined the socially "fittest" reaped the most material rewards by virtue of their superior talent, intelligence, and ability (Watkins 1; Wiebe 155). Even at Social Darwinism's peak in the 1880's, many Americans were still troubled by it (Wiebe 135), and the improvement narrative's nature-to-culture trajectory, in its undaunted optimism,

worked much more subtly and hegemonically to justify the same economic gap. The improvement narrative seems more an offshoot of the theory of “social evolution.” Propagated by thinkers like Lester F. Ward, Richard Ely, Simon Nelson Patten, and Frederic Howe, social evolution blended “biological organicism and philosophical idealism” to explain that society was evolving from lower and simpler stages to a higher and more complex ones (Wiebe 140). Within this system, “advanced industrial societies were marching through the last stage to a final goal inherent in and predetermined by the process of evolution itself” (Wiebe 140). The final goal, social evolution assured its adherents, would include a more “benign” social order that would resolve “the many contradictions between values and practices that were bedeviling so many Americans” (Wiebe 135-136). These contradictions included the chasm between, on one hand, the ideals of equality and democracy and, on the other, the practice of monopoly capital. From this perspective, Appalachia’s evolution from the simple past to a more advanced “American” culture would ensure its ultimate social equality with the rest of the nation.

From Appalachia’s “invention,” writers smoothed the way for the nature-to-culture evolutionary paradigm to supersede one that might have been attentive to economics by constructing the whole region as “classless.” While earlier authors like Murfree and Burnett do mention class differences between the southern mountains and “America,” neither they nor any other author refer to class distinctions within the region, preferring to praise the Appalachian people’s spirit of egalitarianism. (Again, Fox and Kephart are interesting exceptions; both celebrate mountain egalitarianism, but both also sometimes

describe a class hierarchy.) This remark by Ellen Semple is typical: “Every man recognizes every man’s equality; there are no different classes” (170). Not surprisingly, such a depiction belies Appalachian social history which demonstrates the region had, of course, a class structure. The southern mountains were not romantically egalitarian.<sup>13</sup> Still, the discourse presents the region as classless, and the classes who are blotted out to produce the “classless” mystique are the upper and the middle. This is certainly true in part due to local color readers’ appetite for the “picturesque”; as Horace Kephart frankly admits, “poverty [is] more picturesque than luxury” (329). Nevertheless, the result was (and has been) to justify outside interference because no one “inside” the region was (or is) “developed” enough to “develop” the region; to homogenize the region’s needs; to simplify its exploitation; and to help reconfirm the fiction that the United States in general is a “classless” nation. Finally, and most relevant to my argument, erasing the upper and middle classes erases as well as the working class because classes are only defined in relation to each other. The effacement of the class structure lays the groundwork for the evolutionary continuum which plots the mountaineer as moving from a state of classless primitivism to a modern American “normalcy” or “civilization,” a “civilization” always measured by middle-class standards but never named in class terms.

In the turn-of-the-century Appalachian texts, what masquerades as this amorphous, all-encompassing nature-to-culture evolutionary scheme incorporates three economically-inflected teleological subtexts: the movement from preindustrial market capital to corporate capital; the rise from a lower-classed position to a higher-classed

position; and the development of Appalachia and its people from a state of nature to a state of natural resources and, finally, to a commodity. Each subtext operates to persuade its audience that corporate capital is reasonable, beneficial, and democratic. All three teleologies' embeddedness in the political and economic neutrality of the nature-to-culture continuum further naturalizes corporate capital's hegemony.

The version that links "nature" with the mountaineers' preindustrial economy--in actuality an agrarian market capital, but depicted in the literature as barbarism or simply an absence--and equates "culture" or "civilization" with corporate capital draws on two strains of American common sense already in circulation: the period's interest in evolution, especially social evolution, and the progressive element of American mythology that Gary Gerstle defines as "the belief in the fundamentally rational, abundant, and ever-improving character of the modern world in general and of American society in particular" (10). Tapping into these twin sources, this configuration of the improvement narrative operates hegemonically to present corporate capital as beneficial and reasonable because it is the natural and, following the laws of evolution, naturally superior, successor to all earlier forms of economics. Historians Lawrence Goodwyn (vii-viii), Martin Sklar (71, 105, 135-137), and Richard Ohmann note that by the turn-of-the-century business and political leaders were fashioning a new ideology that located American corporate capital at the top of the evolutionary ladder, an ideology that "imagin[ed] the corporation as successor, through natural evolution, to the old entrepreneur, and as the vanguard of progress" (Ohmann 60). And, as Sklar goes on to explain, this evolutionary teleology

pertained not just to economics, but also to society in general: corporate capital signified not simply the zenith of economic systems, but the zenith of civilization (114, 137).

Such a perspective, familiar to late twentieth-century readers from mainstream approaches to the “Third World,” sees poverty not as a hierarchical relationship between exploiters and the exploited, but as the “earlier” part of a temporal sequence from “undeveloped” to “developed.” Once again, the reassurance that social equality is right around the temporal corner alleviates middle-class consciences. The teleology also reminds the audience that “civilized man” is capitalist man—to “civilize” an American is to make him a capitalist (see also Frost 105). And finally, very conveniently for investors, identifying corporate capital with civilization justifies and encourages capitalist penetration of the region since only corporate capital guarantees civilization. As a matter of fact, Sklar, discussing Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policies, argues that by the 1910’s, the conflation of civilization and corporate capital had led to the conviction that corporate capital itself carried democracy and Christianity (114). In other words, in contrast to many Americans’ suspicions at the end of the nineteenth-century, American leaders twenty years after were claiming that far from exacerbating inequality, corporate capital actually helped eradicate it because it brought democracy in its wake.

This configuration of the nature-to-culture continuum also hints at how the nation’s conception of itself as always “developing” and its unquestioned assumption that growth is the same as improvement conforms to and accommodates the dynamics and demands of capitalism. It is a Marxist platitude that capital must always expand if it’s not

to fail; “the idea of economic growth is . . . central to [capitalism’s] nature” (Hennen 149). The centrality of “growth” both to American identity and to laws of capitalism helps explain how American identity so readily harmonizes with a capitalist identity--and why capitalism has expanded without restraint in America--despite capitalism’s contradicting many American ideals. The literature about Appalachia that rewrites stages of capitalism as the movement from barbarism to civilization suggests that by the end of the nineteenth-century, a certain segment of the American population directly equated the evolution of the nation with the evolution of capital. The highest level of American “civilization” is identified with the latest stage of capitalism.

Nowhere is this identification better illustrated than in the oft-told tale of the backwards barbaric feudist who turns modern cultured capitalist with the arrival of capitalist industry--always renamed “civilization”--in the region. Writers usually blame Appalachians’ alleged mania for feuding on the culture’s being marooned in, at best, some primitive Scottish highlander feudalism or, at worst, simple savagery. The redemptive effects of capital on feuding mountain men reconfirm the myth that the most recent stage of capitalism embodies the highest level of national “culture.”

S. S. McClintock in 1901, for example, blames mountain feuds on “lack of business and consequent idleness,” and he supports his theory by telling of an especially infamous feudist who, when the railroad comes, gets a job as a foreman and becomes “one of the most law-abiding citizens of the county” (“The Kentucky Mountains and Their Feuds” 175). John Fox, Jr., and James Lane Allen also favor this version of the nature-to-

culture continuum, and that they do is certainly not unrelated to James Fox's enlisting both for the explicit purpose of advertising the region to investors (Wilson 6). Fox's version, in "The Southern Mountaineer" (1901), explains that "while civilization pressed close enough in 1890 and '91 to put an end to organized fighting, it is a consistent fact that after the failure of Baring Brothers, and the stoppage of the flow of English capital into the mountains, and the check to railroads and civilization, these feuds slowly started up again" (138). Note that Fox identifies "civilization" with a corporation--"Baring Brothers"--and with "the flow of English capital," and he warns that any "updates" achieved in Appalachian culture can easily disappear if corporate capital pulls out. Fox resurrects the same narrative for his short story "The Last Stetson" in A Cumberland Vendetta and Other Stories. When the "Panic" hits the area where this story is set and the investors withdraw, civilization recedes and all the feudists swarm out of their hiding places, plunging the region back into savagery.

In "Mountain Passes of the Cumberland" (1890), James Lane Allen meets a former feudist whom capitalism has miraculously regenerated into a real estate agent. Although Pineville, where this meeting occurs, used to be "a blot on the civilization of [Kentucky]," since the arrival of industry, "the passion for homicide [in Pineville] had changed into a passion for real estate speculation" (566). "Thus the industrial and human problems are beginning to solve themselves side by side in the backwoods of Kentucky," Allen continues, reinforcing with "side by side" the connection between social evolution and the evolution of capital. And no author better encapsulates the equation of the growth of

capitalism with the growth of “civilization” than Allen does with the line: “You begin with coke and end with Christianity” (567), an especially absurd remark when one recalls that Christianity entered the Appalachian mountains at the same time European peoples entered them--some two centuries before Allen is writing.

The endlessly recycled anecdote of the feudist civilized by contact with capitalism resurfaced with potent hegemonic utility during 1920’s labor militancy in West Virginia. When violence erupted around miners’ attempts to unionize and coal companies’ brutal repression of these attempts, the mainstream media simply blamed the hillbillies’ infamous feuding tendencies (Corbin xiv, 220; Batteau 111-112). The myth encouraged the representation of labor militancy as nothing more than an anachronism from Appalachia’s primitive past, best remedied, no doubt, by more civilization, which is to say, more corporate capital.

#### IV.

##### From the Past of the Lower Class to the Present of the Middle

There was something in her voice that was vaguely felt by all as a part of the universal strangeness that was in her erect bearing, her proud head . . . a strangeness that was in that belt and those stockings and those shoes . . . to which . . . every eye wander[ed] as to tangible symbols of a mystery that was beyond their ken.

--John Fox, Jr. The Trail of the Lonesome Pine  
(1908)

One nature-to-culture subtext promises Appalachia's imminent improvement by tracking the passage of a single exceptional Appalachian from a lower-classed position to a higher-classed one.<sup>14</sup> The ambitious mountaineer functions as metonym for the region and demonstrates through the realization of his or her potential the improvement possibilities of the southern mountains in general.<sup>15</sup> Lorise Boger's The Southern Mountaineer in Literature, the most complete annotated bibliography of the literature in the period I'm examining, suggests that the hillbilly rags-to-riches plot may surpass all others in popularity, even though most of the versions of it I have read never overtly describe the social mobility in terms of class or economics. Anecdotes about and allusions to the upwardly mobile mountaineer include the feudists-turned-real-estate-speculators stories, Semple's mountain boys who excel at college, Frost's Abraham Lincoln, and Lucy Furman's "scholars." But the most apt vehicle for tracing in detail the social rise of a central protagonist is that most middle-class of genres, the novel, and, more specifically, the bildungsroman. Because the bildungsroman usually follows the "education" or evolution of a central character, its narrative progression provides an ideal forum for plotting individual social mobility.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, it is probably no coincidence that two of the most popular novels by the most popular writer on Appalachia of all time, John Fox, Jr., are bildungsromans (Batteau 64, 68; Wilson 5-6, 8; McNeil 120). The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come and The Trail of the Lonesome Pine both follow the social rise of an exceptional mountaineer, on one level parroting and reinforcing *status quo* progressivist ideology about self-making

and self-improvement, and on another complicating that ideology with intimations of genetic theories and ambivalence over industrialization. The nature-to-culture continuum patterns the novels' plots, explains the mountain characters' "difference" from Americans, and even determines how contemporary critics read the novels. But the nature-to-culture trajectory also camouflages class distinctions and substitutes for class trajectory. Both texts exemplify how easily differences in class can be rewritten and reread as differences in the evolutionary stages between savagery and civilization once social position is defined not as a matter of economics and power, but sheerly as a phenomenon of manners and taste.

John Fox, Jr., (1862-1919) was, like Murfree, not native to the region at all. Instead, in a move reminiscent of Frost and indicative of how the new middle class saw their relationship with the lower classes, Fox managed to construct himself as an authority on and "“interpreter”" of Appalachia for the rest of white middle-class America (Wilson 9). In reality, he spent very little time in the mountains and cribbed most of his ideas from relatives and friends. Publishing primarily in Scribner's and a dramatist as well as an author, Fox appealed to an urban audience "predominantly white, native, and progressively middle class" (Wilson 25).

Fox's own class position and his economic activities during the late nineteenth-century put into perspective the social dynamics of his fiction. The son of an impoverished western Kentucky schoolteacher with ten children, Fox managed to attend Harvard on a "Poor Boy's" scholarship. The Fox family letters, as summarized and

interpreted by Darlene Wilson, give the impression that Fox, surrounded by his social superiors at Harvard and after, struggled constantly to attain financial stability and to appear of a higher class than he actually was. Fox's older brother, James, also in economic dire straits, began around 1880 to develop and invest in coal mining and land speculation in Big Stone Gap and the Jellico Hills, that Virginia/Tennessee border area where much of Fox's fiction would be set. James enlisted John to promote investment in the region, making John, in essence, from 1884-1895 "a publicist for his brother and other entrepreneurs . . ." (Wilson 26). After John's bankruptcy in the Panic of 1893, he turned fulltime writer: apparently mining the region for literary material seemed a safer venture than mining it for coal, and the investment did pay off. John Fox finally achieved his long-anticipated social success, a rags-to-riches story himself after a fashion. His lectures, shows, stories, novels, and essays proved enormously popular, making him by the turn-of-the-century one of the best-known American writers (Shapiro 30). Moreover, Fox influenced not just his anonymous readers. He numbered among his friends Owen Wister, Thomas Nelson Page, and even Theodore Roosevelt, and had the ear--and assumedly the readership--of many prominent leaders, policy-makers, and journalists (Wilson 31).<sup>17</sup>

Both The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come (1903), Fox's first bestseller, and The Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1908), his most popular book, sold out in every edition and continue to be published by the University of Kentucky Press (Wilson 26). Trail has been produced each summer for decades as an outdoor drama in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and it was designated Virginia's official "State Drama" in 1994 by then governor George

Allen. In short, audiences have found these stories very compelling for almost one hundred years. While the books' longevity has puzzled some scholars and critics--Fox recycles the same predictable and cliched formulas over and over again--their literary thinness is compensated for by an ideological density I can only begin to explicate here. Cultural themes deployed by these two "classics" include post-Civil War North-South reconciliation fantasies, nostalgia for the vanishing frontier, anxieties over masculinity, and explorations of scientific racism and white supremacy. And surely the novels' appeal also derives from their thorough development of the improvement narrative.

The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come is a "historical novel" that takes place in the years before and during the Civil War. A true bildungsroman, the plot traces the evolution of Chad, an orphaned Kentucky mountain boy who rises through his own efforts and his exploits in the war, along with the aid of some Bluegrass patrons, from "poor white trash"--a term applied to Chad only by African-American characters--to Chadwick Buford, gentleman. Chad's enormous potential, and by association, that of at least certain mountaineers, reverberates on nearly every page: Chad is brave, honest, a hard worker, an excellent woodsman, fighter, marksman, and rider; he excels at Blab School in the mountains, then at college in the Bluegrass, rapidly surpassing the other students despite his regional/temporal handicap. The opportunities Chad has for upward mobility in the America that exists outside the mountains Fox presents in typical "work hard, get ahead" rhetoric that persistently elides references to money, occupation, or class. The mountain schoolteacher, for instance, encourages Chad to go to college "since any boy could do

anything he pleased if he only made up his mind and worked hard and never gave up”

(39). And when Chad does leave the mountains to study law, he “proudly marched the Old Wilderness Road that led to a big, bright beautiful world where one had but to do and dare to reach the stars” (148-149).

Chad himself not only personifies the pastness of Appalachia and proves that the region can catch up, but his own maturation from childhood to adolescence to manhood Fox makes stand as a microcosm for the social evolution of America at large. In this way, Chad reconfirms the American faith in a social teleology by encapsulating in his own improvement the improvement of America herself from a state near nature to a state approaching the pinnacle of civilization. When Chad, wearing a coonskin cap and bearing a flintlock rifle, first ventures into the Bluegrass, the startled locals see him as “Dan’l Boone,” a “miniature pioneer” (69), and a “reincarnation of the old race” (104). But by the time Chad is a young man, Fox can point out that “in [Chad’s] own short life, he already epitomized the social development of the nation, from its birth in a log cabin to its swift maturity behind the columns of a Greek portico” (171). Here the apex of American civilization is not corporate capital, as it will be in later Fox works, but antebellum plantation aristocracy.

Although Fox presents Chad’s evolution explicitly as a development from the barbarism of the mountains to the civilization of Bluegrass Kentucky, it is at the same time a rise in class. To be sure, Fox never discusses Chad’s change in terms of class. Indeed, within the world of the novel, to attend to class distinctions seems itself a marker of poor

taste; the most overtly class-conscious characters in the novel, the Bluegrass “negroes,” are condemned even for mentioning class. As a matter of fact, the novel doesn’t directly name Chad’s improvement anything at all, although it seems at times to represent his “modernization,” at others his “civilization,” and at still others his “urbanization.” Nor does Fox connect Chad’s rise to money or even to occupation. However, he does point out that Chad aims to become a “gentleman,” a “big man” (87), and “quality” (99). In keeping with Fox’s class euphemisms, Chad’s social rise involves not his accumulating money or power, but his adept imitation of higher-classed manners, social skills, and language. Chad’s learning to take his hat off in the house (84-85), to call his elders “sir” (71), to give up drinking and chewing tobacco (87), to dance the quadrille (164), to master standard English (97, 99, 117, 161) all signify changes in classed manners and habits more than they signify “modernity.” And Chad’s newborn disgust at “the dark room, the crowding children, the slovenly dress, and the coarse food” when he returns rehabilitated to the mountains also indicates that he has undergone an education in class distinctions (122).

The shift away from associating social mobility with economics, power, or even status--Murfree would not have hesitated to see it in these ways--to implying it is a progression along a nature-to-culture teleology calibrated by distinctions in manners, taste, and social skills does more than simply erase the class hierarchy. It recasts differences between people that originate in their class backgrounds as differences that rise from choices they make due to their “good” or “bad” taste, or, in this case, their

modern/civilized or premodern/barbaric taste. As Bourdieu argues throughout Distinction, this revision naturalizes dominant class values and presents them as universal values that everyone else simply falls short of. While in actuality “good taste” is nothing more than what a dominant class, drawing on its cultural power, defines as “good taste,” it prefers to conceive of its good taste as an innate trait that makes it naturally superior to the ignorant others who choose the trashy because they don’t know any better. Or, if we follow the improvement narrative, because they don’t know any better yet. From this perspective, Chad’s not taking off his cap to a lady indicates not his hailing from a classed background where one might respond to a woman in a different way, but his being inferior to the Bluegrass aristocracy for whom such a gesture comes naturally. But it is important to notice that Fox does preserve Appalachian upward mobility for his audience. He simply codes that mobility barbarism to civilization--in other words, as an upward social trajectory comfortingly devoid of economics.

Regardless of whether Chad’s improvement is presented as “culture” or “modernity” or “class,” he proves that young men from the mountains who work hard and have a little help can become more like mainstream Americans, which is to say, more like the middle or upper classes. As Fox maintains, “It may take three generations to make a gentleman, but one is enough if the blood be there, the heart be right, and the brain and hand come early under discipline” (171). Or does Chad prove this? As the phrase “if the blood be there” insinuates, at this stage in his career, Fox muddies the theme of unlimited equal opportunity for American whites by intimating that genetics may restrict one’s class

mobility. Early in Shepherd, in sharp contrast to much other writing about Appalachia at this time that insists the region is classless and also in striking contrast to how Fox handles Chad's improvement, Fox describes in detail the mountain class structure. (Such attention will vanish five years later in The Trail of the Lonesome Pine.) Those on the top of Fox's hierarchy, we discover, got there not by dint of their own effort and intelligence, but by their "gentle blood"; those in the middle are Scotch-Irish and English, while the "white trash" at the bottom are "the worthless descendants of the servile and sometimes criminal class" of London slums (34-35). Even more importantly, Chad himself, the audience and all the characters gradually learn, is not just any Appalachian, but the long-lost son of a southern gentleman; Chad, too, has "gentle blood" in his veins. And no matter how he proves himself in aptitude and deed, the Bluegrass aristocracy will not accept him as their social equal until he verifies this paternity beyond suspicion.

However, such undemocratic and, from the point of view of the PMC, antiquated advantages of "blood" vanish in the novel's concluding paragraphs when Chad, an eagle circling his head and a sunset in the background, decides to go West and "start his life over afresh, with his old capital." Now Fox presents "capital" not as blood, nor as money, but as "a strong body and a stout heart" and the national spirit in Chad's breast that has made America "the Kingdom Come for the oppressed of the earth" (322). By defining "capital" as a strong body, a strong heart, and the national spirit of equal opportunity, Fox appeals to the PMC faith that effort and aptitude, not biology or social background, determine success in America. Further, Fox's closing praise for the nation once again

assures the audience that economic and social “problems” in the Appalachian mountains will be solved in due time because in America the oppressed are inevitably saved, just as they are in heaven.

Fox’s most popular novel, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, written five years after Shepherd firmly established him as a professional writer--and as a member of the professional-managerial class--reveals even more about the new middle class’s attitudes toward class and capital than does Shepherd. Although Trail intertwines several plots, one, in bildungsroman fashion, follows the maturation and social mobility of mountain girl June Tolliver who, like Chad, has great talents, and with the help of non-Appalachian Jack Hale, leaves the mountains to realize them. Those critics of the novel who speak of June’s trajectory, like Allen Batteau (69) and Rodger Cunningham, read it as her passage from barbarism to civilization. Cunningham’s analysis, which draws on colonial theory, is the more thorough, and admittedly the savagery to civilization teleology drives the novel’s narrative on one level. However, if one reads June’s trajectory from a classed perspective, it is easier to account for the ambivalence towards industrialization and other “civilizing” influences that seems to disrupt the novel’s celebration of corporate capital. Cunningham charts these disruptions meticulously, but his colonial paradigm prevents him from formulating an adequate explanation for them. The Trail of the Lonesome Pine not only exposes the limitations of colonial theory for the Appalachian context, but also offers more evidence of how the nature-to-culture continuum erases the American class structure while still promising social mobility. In addition, by following the two main characters’

vicissitudes of upward and downward mobility, one gets a glimpse into how the professional-managerial class was normalizing in its own world view both corporate capitalism and its own class position within corporate capital.

Trail (1908) takes place in the “past” of the late 1880’s and early 1890’s when the region where it is set--the area around Big Stone Gap, Virginia--underwent breakneck industrialization at the hands of, among others, the Fox family. Fox works all the familiar platitudes about the southern mountaineers as childlike noble savages frozen in the past who, nonetheless, possess incredible potential for improvement when they aren’t shooting people, getting drunk, and bumping around in dark dirty cabins where they commit shocking breeches of decorum like sleeping in their clothes and slurping their food. June’s maturation through adolescence and her accompanying social rise parallel and personify the industrial development of Big Stone Gap, similar to the way Fox overtly connects Chad’s coming of age with the march of American history. Intermediary between “the Middle Ages” and “the Twentieth Century” (39), June verifies with her achievements the local anthropologist’s hypothesis “that the [mountain] children of the day would, if given the chance, wipe out the handicap of a century in one generation and take their place abreast with children of the outside world” (100-101). Further, she convinces the imported New England schoolteacher “that there is no native quicker intelligence in our country than you shall find in the children of these mountains” (176), and by the time she is eighteen, she has substantiated “the latent possibilities of the mountaineer” (280).

But what exactly is “the place” June “takes” after her reformation in the “outside world”? Fox leaves his readers as befogged about the nature of the “changes” June undergoes as are the novel’s locals when they are struck by a “universal strangeness” in June upon her return, but can only explain it as “tangible symbols of a mystery that was beyond their ken” (293). As he does with Chad, Fox bandies about various euphemisms for class like “condition” (50), “way of life” (50), and “station in life” (268) to account for the difference between June “before” her rehabilitation and “after.” And he implies that her improvement is a kind of modernization when he has Hale contrast June and his own sister as the “roughly clad, primitive mountain girl and the exquisite modern woman” (223). But even more so than Chad, probably because of her gender, June’s improvement depends on her capacity to ape higher-classed language, dress, manners, and social skills. As a matter of fact, one of June’s greatest virtues is her talent for imitation and her readiness to use that talent. As Hale’s sister notes approvingly, “The girl was quick, observant, imitative, and docile. . . . It was really seemed as though anything might be possible” (229). From the PMC’s point of view, June’s willingness and ability to become, as Ohmann would say, reassuringly more like the middle class makes her a heroine (Ohmann 172).

June’s trajectory arcs through three levels: the lower-middle class milieu of the Gap, the upper-middle class of the Bluegrass, and the heights of New York. In the first two stages, June finds women on a higher-classed level than herself whom she can use as models: an imported schoolteacher in the Gap and Hale’s sister in the Bluegrass. And the

new “customs” June adopts as she progresses lend overwhelming support to my argument that her “civilization” is essentially a rise in class: she learns the middle-class hygiene of regularly washing her hands (122); she begins to dress and style her hair like middle-class women; she learns “proper” table manners (227) and “good” deportment (240); suffers the inevitable initiation into standard English (113, 122, 212); practices “self-suppression” (230); and assumes “increasing formality of speech” while deploying “shrewd comments” (237). June returns from New York wearing diamonds and dragging along a pile of “huge trunks” and “smart bags” (263), and moves “like a queen” (256) among the locals who now make her “shudder” with distaste (263). Finally, after she is improved and visits the mountains, the greasy food, lack of napkins, gobbling of meals, and eating with knives and fingers, all violations of middle-class etiquette and hygiene, repulse her (199-200).

Once again, Fox’s narrative demonstrates how easily class differences, if portrayed as differences in manners and taste, can be re-read as higher and lower planes of “civilization”--a re-reading made by even the novels’ contemporary critics, including Cunningham, Batteau, and Henry Shapiro, who interprets the distance between Appalachia and America in Fox’s novels as a distance between cultures (Shapiro 20; 69-70; 73). Fox does indeed describe the distance as cultural, and on one level it is. But if one exerts a little pressure on this description and asks exactly what different “cultures” are opposed here, one can conclude, at least in part, that the different cultures are cultures of class.<sup>18</sup>

Jack Hale, the non-Appalachian who underwrites June's improvement, is also the entrepreneur/engineer who develops the coal and timber on her father's land at the same time he develops her. Hale serves as the professional-managerial class figure with the perspicuity to recognize potential--of both the mineral and human types--and the know-how and planning skills to realize that potential. Of course, Hale's motives aren't entirely altruistic. As Dave, June's jilted mountain boyfriend tells her in one of the most honest exchanges of the novel, "So you ain't good enough fer him jest as ye air, air ye? . . . . He's got to make ye all over agin--so's you'll be fitten fer him" (201). Nor is Hale's class position solidly PMC. While June busily scales the social ladder in the "outside world," Hale, contaminated by the mountain environment and then bankrupted by "The Crash" (read "Panic of 1893"), plummets in the opposite direction. One of the novel's biggest crises comes when Hale recognizes "[h]e had sent [June] away to fit her for his station in life--to make her fit to marry him. She had risen above and now *he was not fit to marry her*" (268; italics in original).

Although June's ascent and Hale's decline reconfirm the fluidity of the American class structure, the gravity of this crisis may resonate with middle-class reservations about Americans, especially working-class Americans, who rise too far too fast; it most certainly echoes PMC anxiety over the irrationality and risks of entrepreneurial capitalism. Both attitudes seem inconsistent with the general thrust of the narrative that exalts as "civilization" the glories of capitalism and industrialization. These inconsistencies aren't the novel's only ones. As Rodger Cunningham documents, June returns to the mountains

only to feel ambivalent about her “improvement” because it alienates her from herself and her people. Shortly after June recognizes her alienation, the novel admits that “civilization” comprises not just the glories of “lawfulness” and “every man a capitalist” and clean sheets and efficient schools. “Civilization” also does “cruel, deadly work”: it pollutes streams, kills fish, and destroys forests (Cunningham 34; Trail 201-202).

Cunningham argues that these disruptions open the way for “complexity and subversion” of the novel’s dominant colonial discourse, a subversion Cunningham believes Fox eventually contains with his forced ending (Cunningham 35 and 39). However, Cunningham’s explanation for the contradictions surfacing in the first place leaves something to be desired: “Fox’s knowledge of the situation is so detailed,” Cunningham writes, “and his two main characters have taken on so much roundness that this simple paradigm generates within itself elements which complicate and subvert it” (33). Darlene Wilson’s recent research into the Fox family letters proves that Fox’s knowledge of these kinds of situations was actually not very detailed. Moreover, to attribute the text’s dynamic to characters so round they take on lives of their own makes the characters independent of both author and audience. If, however, one restores the social context of the novel’s production and consumption and reads the discourse from the perspective of class rather than that of colonialism, these apparent fissures in the text’s dominant discourse make more sense. The ambivalence over “civilization” because it bears with it not only the virtues of law and order and a higher standard of living, but also degradation of land and people, recalls the new middle class’s contradictory position between capital

and labor and its mixed feelings over the explosion of corporate capitalism. These moments in Trail aren't much different from the ambivalence expressed by Frost, Kephart, and the Hindman Settlement School.

Similarly, although one might expect the novel's overriding ideological force simply to extol June's upward mobility and Hale's rise to ultra-successful businessman, from the point of view of the rational and moderate new middle class, both characters' precipitous class rises, and Hale's fall, must be tempered and stabilized. Accordingly, by the novel's end, June no longer wears diamonds and "airs," but dons her homespun and bakes cornbread while still speaking standard English and appreciating middle-class tastes like Keats, the piano, and clean towels. She has abandoned her ambitions of becoming a famous singer and now plans to teach school in the Gap (410-415). In other words, June must come down a few notches to a moderate middle-class compromise to make her fit to marry Hale and to conclude the novel. In part, June's gender requires her descent; although in the dominant ideology of the time, a man might marry his social inferior, he most certainly can't marry his superior. But Hale, too, levels out to the same middle-class ideal as June. After his reckless success as an entrepreneur and his subsequent dive into bankruptcy, Hale resumes that paradigmatic PMC position of what he calls "'just a plain civil engineer . . . .'" (417). Now on a social footing compatible with each other and with "normal" Americans, each declares to want to marry the other "'just as you are'"(421). Obviously, Hale as engineer is superior to Hale in poverty, but it is worth noting that Fox also presents Hale as engineer as preferable to Hale as old-style laissez-

faire capitalist. By 1908, the PMC, along with the United States government and the capitalist class, were reforming laissez-faire capitalism to make it more stable, rational, predictable, and less risky: they were making it, in other words, into corporate capitalism. In the way Fox depicts the ideal economic position for Jack Hale, he implicitly privileges corporate capitalism over laissez faire market capital. (With the success of The Little Shepherd, John Fox himself, like Jack Hale, made the transition from ruined entrepreneur to stable member of the PMC, a popular author now busily performing his professional-managerial class function of reproducing dominant class culture and class relations.)

Finally, and again, reminiscent of those new middle-class attitudes in Frost, Kephart, and the Hindman Settlement School, June and Jack alleviate PMC anxiety over the “cruel, deadly work of civilization” by privatizing the dilemma and cleaning up their own little patch of industrial evils. Drawing on PMC ideals of planning and rationality and confining their efforts to the two hundred acres they own in Lonesome Cove, they resolve to tear down the miners’ shacks, restock the river with fish, plant trees, and clean up the trash (415-416). As Hale declares, “I’ll take away every sign of civilization, every sign of the outside world” (416)--that is, around their home. In the meantime, civilization can carry on unchecked in the public space of the Gap where both June and Jack will earn a salary performing their respective PMC occupations. These representatives of the new middle class negotiate their contradictory position within corporate capital by using the weekends to soften the capitalist culture which on the weekdays they reproduce.

## V

Appalachian People and Appalachian Earth: From Nature to Natural Resource to  
Commodity

“The few representatives of this obscure people who have made their way to regions of greater opportunity have shown no mean native endowments. Lincoln himself is an example . . . and we expect to find similar outcroppings from the same strata.”

-- William Goodell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains” (1899)

The subtexts within the nature-to-culture continuum that trace the movement from a lower-classed position to a higher-classed one and from preindustrial capital to corporate capital throw into relief how the professional-managerial class during corporate capital’s “passive revolution” resolved the inconsistency between the increased inequality brought by a new economic system and their own American ideals of equality. The third teleological subtext exposes a less generous attitude towards Appalachia on the part of the PMC. If, as the Ehrenreichs claim, the PMC at one and the same time resists capital and shares interests with it (21), this third subtext tells less about the PMC antagonism and more about its complicity. Within the context of this subtext, Hale’s “development” of June and the novel’s returning her to a more modest social position after her rise are themes that reproduce the class structure in a more aggressive way than the PMC’s simply

inscribing the southern mountains into an upward social trajectory and assuring itself Appalachia would catch up in the by and by. The themes enact a kind of cultural work more insidious than the PMC's privatizing economic and structural catastrophes and then pretending to rectify them in that private sphere. And the cultural work I'm referring to occurs in many, many other texts about Appalachia written at this time. The third subtext embedded in the evolutionary paradigm advocates the development of the Appalachian people from a state of nature to a natural resource and, finally, into a commodity.

As Hale's developing June concurrently with her father's coal suggests, much of the literature conflates the human beings in the mountains with the natural resources there, constructing both as an available reservoir for the nation's every appetite. In other words, the progressivist ideology that insisted the Appalachian people be lifted out of "the past" and rushed into "the present" coalesces in the literature with industrializing America's need for the region's vast undeveloped natural resources so that not only the minerals and timber, but also the human beings in the mountains, are represented as a "resource for development": available human materials for the nation's wars, factories, and dangerous and low-paying jobs.

The American imagination's longtime identification of all that is Appalachian with nature prepares the ground for the human/natural resource conflation. As Batteau contends in most of his book (see in particular 42-50) and Cunningham points out as well (23; 29; 35), authors tend to describe Appalachian characters in natural terms or represent them as the personification of natural phenomena. At times, writers personify

Appalachia's natural environment itself. In Murfree's extensive repertoire of "natural" mountaineers, we find, for example, women described as "slip[s] of willow" (127), "ethereal woodland flower[s]" (138), and "deer" (289); she calls the men "wildcat[s]" (172); and believes Appalachians in general to be "as uncivilized as foxes" (205). In addition, she paints the mountain landscape so that it embodies the moods of her characters. John Esten Cooke's "Owlet" (1878) features a protagonist with eyes of "a wild animal" (200) who seems to have "evolved" from "a young pantheress" (201). John Fox, Jr., recounts the exploits of "Wild Dog" in A Knight of the Cumberlands (1906) and of "Red Fox" in The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. He considers the mountaineers to be "wild animals" (Trail 24) and presents the uncivilized June as "a great scarlet flower," a "little creature . . . like something wild," "fox-like," and "a crouched panther cub" (Trail 2). These few examples merely gesture at what is an enormously popular trend in the literature.

The common "Appalachians as squatters" theme also contributes to the construction of the Appalachian people as part of nature. It recurs nearly verbatim in many texts of this period, including Charles Dudley Warner's 1889 "Comments on Kentucky" (269), James Lane Allen's 1886 "Through Cumberland Gap on Horseback" (66), Fox's 1901 "The Southern Mountaineer" (139), and Semple's 1901 "The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains" (156). The lesson here is that the mountain people don't understand deeds, don't legally own their land, and thus behave irrationally when they get angry at being forced off of it. (Recall the still circulating stereotype of hillbilly

wielding twelve-gauge shotgun at “trespassers.”) Besides the more obvious hegemonic work this misconception performs of justifying corporate land theft--it is no accident that the theme appears in investment publicists Allen and Fox--the representation depicts Appalachians much like American mythology depicts Native Americans: they are of the land, but don't possess it any more than do the foxes, deer, or panthers.<sup>19</sup>

Along with the mythical equation of Appalachia and nature, the metaphor of Appalachia as a reservoir for the nation to siphon off when it needs to and ignore when it does not also supports the conflation of Appalachian people and Appalachian natural resources. The metaphor has played a part in the way Americans have perceived Appalachia from its invention as a region. Murfree, as I've detailed, presents the southern mountains as a repository of old-fashioned virtue. Turn-of-the-century writers like Semple, Fox, Kephart, Frost, and others see it as an Anglo-Saxon gene pool that might check the racial pollution carried in by foreign immigrants. Increasingly after 1885, authors celebrate the mountains' natural resources and, in keeping with the improvement narrative, cast the human population as a reserve labor and military force. By 1935 at the latest, the rhetoric is directly embedded in government publications, like the Department of Agriculture report that declares “[t]he Appalachian area is a reservoir of population. A reservoir is a place where supplies are stored and furnished at the right time to places where they are needed” (qtd. in Branscome, 11).<sup>20</sup>

Further, the literature advances the notion of the Appalachian people as an infinite resource in its nearly unanimous depiction of them as unusually fertile. In addition to the

huge families in most of the fiction, especially Fox's and Furman's, Charles Dudley Warner claims "This region is, according to the census, the most prolific in the United States" (271) and James Lane Allen attests to the "fecundity" of the southern mountain "race" ("Through Cumberland Gap" 69). Frost (98, 105), Semple (152), McClintock (25), Fox's nonfiction ("The Southern Mountaineer" 134), and Kephart (332-333) as well all make reference to the endless supply of children Appalachians seem to reproduce.

With the mountain people firmly established as a part of nature and as sharing with nature the condition of being a reserve pool for the nation, the improvement narrative slips effortlessly into presenting humans as material to be developed in the same way the region's natural resources will be. The literature constructs the potential of people and the potential of mineral deposits through each other, one representation reinforcing and supplementing the other. The "Report of President [William Goodell] Frost to the Trustees, 1900-1901," for example, states: "We are to help the poor, to deal with crude material, to lay foundations in character, intelligence, and thrift" (qtd. in Shapiro, 130). Frost's choice of "crude material" casts the people as raw resources poised for development into something more "useful," and the "lay[ing] of foundations" summons up an engineer's mentality of formulating well-laid plans for the efficient future use of such materials. Sociologist George Vincent, visiting the "Retarded Frontier" in 1898, also refers to the people as "material" America should capitalize on (19), and he evokes the reservoir metaphor when he describes the mountain population as "quiet pools" (1). William Aspenwall Bradley reminds his 1915 audience that mountaineers have long been

“buried in the wilderness” (“In Shakespeare’s America” 439), much the way Chad in Shepherd has been “buried in the hills” (Fox 149) and the locals in Trail have “simply lain dormant in the hills” (Fox 100). “Buried,” as well as “dormant,” persist as popular adjectives for the Appalachian people, subtly connecting them with those highly-desired mineral deposits also buried dormant in their hills. In “The Southern Mountaineer,” Fox draws the relationship even closer by twice calling the people “fossils” (122; 143). Most dramatic is Frost’s comment in “Our Contemporary Ancestors” when he introduces Lincoln as the paradigm of Appalachians’ potential and goes on to add “and we expect to find other similar outcroppings from the same strata” (105; emphasis mine). Here Frost, I suppose unconsciously, lapses into geological terminology usually applied to coal deposits to articulate his confidence in the latent possibilities of the people who live on top of that coal.<sup>21</sup>

The conflation is especially blatant in peculiar hybrid pieces written by Fox, James Lane Allen, and Charles Dudley Warner between 1886 and 1901 that read as part travel sketch and part corporate publicity material. The articles appear in Harper’s and Scribner’s, and in the cases of Fox and Allen, publicity material is the correct term. Not only has Darlene Wilson demonstrated that both were employed by James Fox to advertise the region, but Wilson has also found “a letter dated July 23, 1885 (Fox Papers)” that proves “both John [Fox] and Lane Allen were recruited to ride ‘On Horseback Through the Cumberland Gap’ for the express purpose of publicizing corporate aims held by James Fox’s coalition of businessmen and attorneys” (7).<sup>22</sup> Allen’s 1886 “Through Cumberland

Gap on Horseback,” his 1890 “Mountain Passes of the Cumberland,” and Warner’s 1889 “Comments on Kentucky,” all published by Harper’s Monthly Magazine, are composed mostly of long, detailed, celebratory descriptions of the raw resources in the mountains ripe for exploitation by the far-sighted capitalist. Warner, in a typical line, writes that eastern Kentucky is “stuffed, one may say, with coals, streaked with iron, abounding in limestone, and covered with superb forests” (263). As a matter of fact, he continues, eastern Kentucky has a higher concentration of minerals than anyplace else in the world (263-64) and “is a region that appeals as well to the imagination of the traveller as to the capitalist” (263). Allen, in both articles, also raves for pages and pages about the natural resources, with this passage from “Through Cumberland Gap” representative of the essay as a whole.

Bell County and the Yellow Creek Valley serve to illustrate the incalculable mineral and timber resources of eastern Kentucky. Our road at times cut through forests of magnificent timbers--oak (black and white), walnut (black and white), poplar, maple, chestnut, beech, lynn, gum, dogwood, and elm. Here are some of the finest coal fields in the known world, the one on Clear Creek being fourteen feet thick. Here are exceedingly pure canned [sic] coals and cooking coals. At no other point in the Mississippi Valley are iron ores suitable for steel-making purposes so close to fuel so cheap. With an eastern coal-field of ten thousand square miles, with an area equally large covered with a virgin growth of the finest economic timbers, with water-courses feasible and convenient, it cannot be long before all eastern Kentucky will be opened up to the great industries of the modern world. (72-73)

Allen, however, has little optimism about the improvement of the mountain people, and his solution for what he calls “the human problem in Kentucky” (“Mountain Passes”

561) portrays the people less as dormant natural resources and more like the slag that must be washed off the coal, the brush that must be cleared from the timber, and the earth that must be dynamited for tunnels through the hills. They need to “interfuse” through marriage with Kentucky lowlanders or be “absorbed” by shopkeepers, speculators, and developers. Warner, on the other hand, in the solid PMC spirit of improvement, is “not so despondent of [the mountain people’s] future. Railways, trade, the sight of enterprise and industry will do much with this material” (271). This is the second time Warner calls the local people “material,” and his using the term after a fifteen-page-long invitation to capitalists to develop the mineral and timber materials in the region leads the reader to view the human material as available for use in similar ways.

John Fox, Jr., as usual, outstrips all other writers in both sheer number of times he deploys the human/natural resource conflation and in the variety of permutations he gives it. Like Warner and Allen, Fox imbues his nonfiction piece “The Southern Mountaineer” (1901) with ebullient descriptions that come across as thinly disguised advertisements. The southern mountains, Fox tells his audience, are “richer, perhaps, in timber and mineral deposits than any other region of similar extent in the world” (123), and later, in a semantic move reminiscent of Warner’s, Frost’s, and Vincent’s “material” and Frost’s “outcroppings” and “strata,” Fox writes that the Appalachian people “are most tractable, more easily moulded, more easily uplifted than the people of similar grade of intelligence in the city” (142). Although “tractable,” “moulded,” and “grade” may not be words as

scientific as “outcroppings” and “strata,” they are still words more often applied to raw materials than people.<sup>23</sup>

Trail's June Tolliver, as I've already suggested, embodies the most thorough identification of people and minerals I've come across, as even a contemporary reviewer of the novel noted: “[Hale] finds simultaneously an apparently rich vein of cannel [coal] and a beautiful mountain girl. He makes the most of both treasures, the coal by mining, the girl by education” (qtd. in Batteau, 71).<sup>23</sup> While one might expect investment promotion rhetoric to surface in Fox's nonfiction, it appears as well in the novel Trail. I quote at length from this episode, when Hale first glimpses June's father's coal, to draw attention to how Fox embeds the undeveloped, yet imminently improvable, June directly into the description of the undeveloped, yet imminently marketable, coal. The passage sets up what will be the pattern of the entire novel: the parallel development of the coal and of June, the plot shifting from one to the other, then back again. Through this interweaving, the novel fuses the “possibilities” of the Appalachian minerals with the “possibilities” of the Appalachian people.

There was no parting except two inches of mother-of-coal--midway, which would make it but easier to mine . . . . As Hale drew closer, he saw radiations of some twelve inches, all over the face of the coal, star-shaped, and he almost gasped. It was not only cannel coal--it was 'bird's eye' cannel. Heavens, what a find! . . . .

The little girl [June] was standing on the porch as he rode past the milkhouse. He waved his hand to her, but she did not move nor answer. What a life for a child--for that keen-eyed, sweet-faced child! But that coal, cannel, rich as oil, above water, five feet in thickness, easy to mine, with a solid roof and perhaps self-drainage . . . and a market everywhere--England, Spain, Italy,

Brazil.” (34-35; for more effusion over the money-making possibilities in the region, see 24-25; 88-89; 126; 182; 232-234.)

Jack Hale is not the only engineer Fox presents as moving the mountain people from the savage past into the civilized present. In fact, in Fox’s fiction, engineers may be as likely to rehabilitate the people as are teachers and preachers. Fox’s first short story, “A Mountain Europa” (1892), prefigures Trail’s plot with a non-Appalachian engineer named Clayton who improves mountain girl Easter Hicks. In A Knight of the Cumberlands (1906), we meet “the young engineer” Marston and witness some of his efforts to civilize the locals into lawfulness as a member of the Gap’s “volunteer police guard.” One of Fox’s favorite subjects, the “guard,” is a vigilante group of non-Appalachian men who ride around on their horses subduing and often imprisoning mountaineers who resist “civilization.” The “guard’s” members inevitably include engineers, speculators, and mine managers, and it appears not only in A Knight of the Cumberlands, but also in Trail, “Manhunting in the Pound,” and “To the Breaks of Sandy.” (Both stories are reprinted in Christmas Eve on Lonesome; ‘Hell-fer-Sartain’ and Other Stories.) That engineers so often serve as the agents who develop the people contributes further to their conflation with raw natural resources.<sup>25</sup>

When a people are so closely affiliated with land, mineral, timber, and other natural resources, one can see how the nation’s common sense understanding of those natural resources--their existence in their own right is subordinate to the nation’s (which is to say, by the 1910’s, corporate capital’s) “need” to develop them and use them up--could apply

as well to the human population. Such a transfer offers one explanation for twentieth-century America's readiness to treat the Appalachian people, and especially its working-class and poor, as a population at its disposal. It also brings me to the end product of the teleological subtext that represents the region as moving from nature to a natural resource to a commodity. In other words, many texts represent the mountain population as poised to enter the industrialized workplace as workers and soldiers, a now useable and exchangeable form of a natural resource. Just as raw coal and timber, properly processed, are transformed into fuel and lumber, the Appalachian people, properly civilized and educated, their labor power developed into a productive and saleable form, are transformed into a reserve labor force.

Within this context, I need to amend Ohmann's observation that the PMC saw itself in a "tutelary relation" to the working class that might lead "to greater likeness" between the two classes (172), an observation that I believe is integral to the hegemonic force of the improvement narrative's faith in Appalachians' "potential." I agree that these texts indicate that the middle class does want to help lower classes become more like themselves--but only in certain respects and only to a certain extent. A closer look from a classed perspective at the turn-of-the-century literature intimates that the professional-managerial class, fulfilling its function of producing and reproducing the class structure, sought to construct and socialize the Appalachian people not simply into "Americans," and not even simply into workers and soldiers, but into its middle-class ideal of an industrialized working class: a population with middle-class values, but with working-

class expectations. Appalachians should fulfill their tremendous potential and adopt middle-class values like sobriety, cleanliness, thrift, manners, patriotism, industry, promptness, and faith that hard work is rewarded fairly, but maintain working-class expectations--satisfaction with being miners, farmers, factory operatives, laborers, and soldiers, sporadically employed depending upon when the economy needs them. This 1899 comment by Frost crystallizes the PMC ideal: "the aim should be to make them intelligent without making them sophisticated . . . . let them be taught not to despise the log cabin, but to adorn it" (106).

The PMC's literal, as opposed to literary, success with this project can't, of course, be proven from primary texts written at the turn-of-the-century. I can direct readers to historically-based studies of Appalachia that strongly suggest that the human/natural resource conflation and the portrayal of Appalachian people as potential workers and cannon fodder which I believe follows from the conflation has been much more than a matter of semantics.<sup>26</sup> Be that as it may, the literature I'm examining does illustrate how the new middle-class visualized the ideal terminus of the improvement narrative. First, the literature constantly shows how the mountaineers are given or should be given lessons on middle-class manners, taste, and values, as I've detailed in The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come and The Trail of the Lonesome Pine and pointed out in the nonfiction pieces,<sup>27</sup> and, second, it constantly reminds its readers of the excellent soldiers and workers the mountain people will make if trained and educated properly.

The notion reiterated in the literature that mountain people are far, far hardier than “normal” Americans fosters the perception of Appalachia as a quarry of proto-workers and soldiers. Appalachians, readers learn, are more resistant to illness and less apt to feel pain, cold, and discomfort than conventional white Americans. This remark by McClintock--”They will wade in icy water all day long, working with logs, and apparently are none the worse for it”--is typical of others by Kephart (293-295; 328), Allen (“Through” 70); Fox (“Southern” 128), and Furman (Quare “Moonshine” 767). Couple these traits with Appalachians’ renowned disregard for human life and irreverence for the dead, and an audience can feel less concern over the population’s sacrifice in dangerous hard labor, like mining, and in wars (Semple 169; Fox “Southern” 136; Kephart 334; the incessant accounts of feuds usually mention this irreverence for the dead as well).

Wars in particular offer an appropriate use of these human commodities because Appalachians love to fight so dearly that if no war is available as an outlet, they will turn on themselves and start a feud. Lucy Furman’s The Quare Women describes this sequence of events explicitly (“The Fourth of July” 71-72), but it is implicit in the majority of the feud “explanations” that most writers on Appalachia feel obligated to provide their readers. The feud mythology, augmented by the mountaineers’ reputed patriotism, fervor for freedom in the Revolutionary War, and loyalty to the Union in the Civil (this last mostly a myth as well) constructs the mountain people as “a brave and fighting race” whom a little training will transform into perfect soldiers (Furman Quare “The Fourth of July” 71; see also Furman Mothering “The Boy That Fit the Marshall” 854-55; Kephart

152-152; 92; 295; 450; Frost 98-99; Semple 164; and Fox “Southern” 143 and Shepherd 191-92 (we also shouldn’t overlook Chad’s much-touted military prowess)). Sarah S. Gielow’s 1913 novel Uncle Sam, discussed by David Whisnant in All That Is Native and Fine, articulates the mountaineers’ availability as soldiers with shocking bluntness. The heroine in this book opens a mission school in the mountains for the express purpose of “‘Uncle Sam need[ing] lots of mountain boys to replenish his ranks of workers and soldiers . . . .’” Two of her students eventually go off to lead “‘the boy brigade of embryo soldiers preparing to give their services, as their ancestors did, to fight, bleed, and die for Uncle Sam’” (Gielow Uncle Sam (New York: H. Revell, 1913) 60; qtd. in Whisnant 5). While Gielow’s rhetoric might seem melodramatic to the point of absurdity, it acquires a different resonance when read in light of the fact that West Virginia, the only state entirely Appalachian, has had the highest per capita casualty rate in every war this century.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, Gielow mentions not just soldiers, but also workers. While the celebration of the Appalachians as potential workers enters the turn-of-the-century discourse less often than does their use as soldiers, most likely because soldiers are more glamorous and make better reading, both Frost and Kephart emphasize that the mountain region needs industrial or vocational education; in other words, the type of education that produces working-class expectations and reproduces the working class. “The schools needed here,” Kephart writes, “are not ordinary graded schools. They should be vocational schools, that will turn out good farmers, good mechanics, good housewives”

(469). In the same paragraph in which Frost directs philanthropists to make the mountaineers “intelligent,” but not “sophisticated,” he recommends that “[i]ndustrial education, instruction in the care of their forests, rotation of crops, and similar elementary matters will make them sharers in the gifts of science” (106).<sup>29</sup>

Lucy Furman’s fiction in general epitomizes the figurative construction of an ideal working-class: most of it features missionary women busily and earnestly instructing the natives in middle-class habits, dress, and morals, while simultaneously referring to the mountaineers’ latent capabilities as soldiers and illustrating their possibilities as workers. Mothering on Perilous, serialized in Century from 1910-1911 and set in a settlement school based on the Hindman Settlement School, performs this illustration especially well. Because “[a]ll of the 50-odd children who lived in the Settlement School on Perilous worked, out of school hours, to pay their board, the girls at cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, sewing, and weaving, the boys at carpentry, furniture-making, blacksmithing, gardening, and other things,” Furman can always depict the children performing various chores as background to their more entertaining escapades (Mothering “The Pure Scholar” 445). The children’s constantly working reassures both general middle-class readers and philanthropic contributors that despite the mountaineers’ unsavory reputation, they are not really lazy and shiftless and, with the aid of the middle class, will fulfill the improvement narrative as obedient workers. Furman omits that the boys are more likely to end up in the mining and logging camps that have shared Knott County, Kentucky, with the Hindman Settlement School for decades than they are to become preindustrial

blacksmiths or furniture makers (Whisnant All That Is 88). Furman even includes in one installment, “The Two Homesicks,” an actual photograph captioned “At Work in the School Garden” (298). It pictures more than a dozen boys between the ages of eight and twelve laboring with gardening tools and overseen by a large woman in a bonnet.

In addition to pictorial and verbal representation of missionary women supervising what they call “the outdoor industries,” Furman provides details of job schedules, narrating what chores should be performed at what times, indicative of the PMC’s obsession with regimented time and pressure on the newly industrializing working class to adapt to it. Often subplots in both Mothering and in The Quare Women treat how the women convince resistant children (and adults) to perform jobs they don’t want to do. The cajoling, coaxing, and reasoning the missionaries use to get their way with the Appalachians recall the professional-managerial class’s function of managing workers for owners through persuasion rather than force.

Like the subtext that advocates Appalachian progress from a preindustrial economy to corporate capital and the one that fantasizes the mountaineers’ class rise, the teleology that begins with nature, proceeds to natural resources, and ends with a commodity performs hegemonic double duty. It palliates the middle-class conscience over white Appalachians’ economic status by promising that mountain people can “share” the American Dream with PMC aid; and it encourages capital’s penetration of the region by promoting the profit potential of the Appalachian people and land. But even more than the two subtexts I discussed earlier, the third teleology throws into relief how that

hegemonic double duty responds to the PMC's contradictory class position--its being opposed to certain capitalist values, yet its sharing vital interests with capital. The nature-to-natural resource-to-commodity subtext draws attention to these shared interests by exposing the limits of the PMC's expectations for the mountain people. Appalachians should "rise"--but only high enough to contribute to capital's expansion.

## VI.

### Backwardness From a Present Perspective

“‘I don't like these improvements,’ said an old mountaineer to me. ‘Some calls them ‘progress,’ and says they put money to circulatin’. So they do; but who gits it?’”

Horace Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders  
(1913)

Finally, this question remains. Was the professional-managerial class's turn-of-the-century optimism about an imminent solution to the Appalachian "problem" warranted? Was the improvement narrative fulfilled? Were the economic inequities between "America" and these mountain people, who seemed on one hand quintessentially "American" in race, ethnicity, and religion, yet on the other hand, somehow "different," resolved over time as Appalachians realized "their splendid possibilities of personal development"?<sup>30</sup>

For one very informal glimpse at an answer, a glimpse that despite its lack of authority should put into context the primary point I want to make in this conclusion, I perused a half dozen recent copies of my home county's weekly (and only) newspaper, The Hampshire Review. These issues just happened to be lying around my apartment as I finished this chapter; in other words, the articles I found are not ones I culled from a year's worth of newspapers to support my argument. Before I summarize them, I should add that problems endemic to the state of West Virginia and statistics about the state can be interpreted as more or less representative of the Appalachian situation in general. West Virginia is the only state wholly within the boundaries of what is usually considered Appalachia, and it has a history and socioeconomic conditions similar to those of eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, southwestern Virginia, and western North Carolina, all parts of Appalachia in states that aren't entirely Appalachian, which means those state statistics don't perfectly signify Appalachian realities. And I should also point out that my home county is not in the most heavily exploited part of Appalachia. We have no coal, border on Virginia where many county residents commute (at least two hours a day) for factory and construction jobs, and our unemployment usually hovers around the state average or even below it; we never reach the 27% to 30% rate not unheard of in the coalfields.

This infamous unemployment rate comes up in the April 30, 1997 issue which celebrates the fact that unemployment in March went down to 7.8%, the lowest March figure for the state in eighteen years (5). 7.8%, however, is still considerably higher than the national rate of 5.2%, evidence that the state hasn't yet "caught up" in this respect.

And although many people seem to be working, an article a week later confirms our lag in economic equality by reporting that in 1996 West Virginia, as usual, ranked “49th of the 50 states in per capita personal income” (“State 49th in income” 2). The April 30, 1997 cover story, “Public invited to Friday’s regional jail groundbreaking,” promises some compensation in the one hundred jobs the county will gain around the year 2000. We have finally gotten into the prison industry even though we’re a bit of a Johnny-come-lately here, too, since the industry began its rapid expansion a decade ago, and even then only the nation’s “backwards” zones like ours were willing to host it. Moreover, the jail will be a small one, and county residents will continue to have a better shot at a job in neighboring Hardy County. That’s where our state’s antiquated environmental laws invited chicken processing plants to take refuge after the state of Virginia drove them out of the Shenandoah Valley for the havoc they wreaked there. In “backwards” West Virginia, the chicken industry faces no constraints on the size of its operations and no regulations on its disposal of dead chickens and manure. And according to the April 23, 1997 front page article “Poultry industry blamed for Potomac’s endangered status,” “West Virginia’s growing poultry industry was cited as one of the reasons the Potomac River has been named the seventh most endangered river in the nation.”

Apparently, I’ve already recycled the Review that reported on parental resistance to the state’s newly established “Schools To Work” curriculum that begins to prepare children for “the work force” in elementary school with activities like volunteering at Wal-Mart and demands that they select a “career track” in eight grade. But in the May 14

edition Board of Education minutes, I read the Board has approved that the sixth grades at two county schools, including my own elementary alma mater, go to Altoona, Pennsylvania “as a culminating activity to their Schools to Work curriculum.” And why Altoona? Not to see a university, or a hospital, or some computer company (touted weekly, as it is all over the country, as panacea for all the state’s education and employment ills) or, god forbid, an arts facility, or even a corporate headquarters. No, these students will “visit the Benzil Pretzel Factory” (“School Board holds special meeting” 4C).

Of course, I don’t pretend that this random sampling of articles from a single regional newspaper serves as authoritative evidence that Appalachia has failed to “improve.” At the same time, I would argue that these problems, issues, and statistics are more or less typical of contemporary Appalachia, at least outside the central Appalachian coalfields; there the “pastness” is far, far more serious. Furthermore, these articles suggest that the question of whether Appalachia has or has not fulfilled the improvement narrative cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. The response will vary depending upon which version of the improvement narrative I consider. If I look at the improvement narrative that casts the region as moving from a lower-class status to a higher one, a version with great resonance for those PMC members troubled by economic inequities, the narrative remains unfulfilled. Appalachians as a group are still poorer than other white Americans and social mobility for an Appalachian usually demands geographic mobility. If I read the narrative in its “nature to culture” or “barbarism to civilization” version, the

answer is more complex and hinges on how I define “culture” or “civilization.” Although the region has certainly progressed since 1900 in terms of social services, transportation, education, communications, and health care, it remains always several years or decades “behind” the “civilization” of white middle-class America. If, however, we define “civilization,” as one of the subtexts of the improvement narrative does, as the latest stage of capitalism, Appalachia is right in step with the times. The international economy has catapulted the region from agrarian-based market capital to industrial corporate capital and now into transnational capital, regardless of costs locally. And, finally, if we read the improvement narrative as the region and its people’s being developed from a state of nature to a state of natural resources to a commodity, the narrative can also be deemed a success. The “Schools to Work” curriculum is just one example of the assiduous reproduction of the working-class in the region, and unemployment continues to swell military recruiters’ quotas. The improvement narrative’s success ideologically--in other words, how well it has facilitated Americans’ adoption of corporate capitalist values as common sense by using notions of “time” to reconcile real economic inequalities with ideals of equality--is a question I hope I have begun to answer in my analysis of the Progressive Era texts about the region.

In sum, Appalachia does seem to have moved into “today” in ways that favor the national (and now transnational) economy. It has remained “yesterday” in ways that also favor capitalist interests, but often degrade local quality of life. And the reason the region has remained in the perennial past tense in these material respects and in the American

cultural imagination, as I have learned from Evan Watkins' Throwaways, is because such "pastness" is continuously produced by present conditions. Throwaways' most useful contribution for understanding how Appalachia's economic exploitation has been mystified as the region's simply not keeping pace with modernity Watkins sums up in the following passage:

My general point is a very simple one: positionally, obsolescence involves conditions of cultural and economic production in the present, not what has survived, uselessly, from the past as some obsolescence stories would have it. Throwaway populations are not the survival of the unfit, the waste of change. They are produced by and indispensable to present social organization. (7)

In other words, the "pastness" of Appalachia--both its "backwardness" in terms of real material conditions, and its cultural construction as a place marooned in another decade--is and has been produced by contemporary processes and is essential to contemporary hegemony. Materially, the pastness is integral because of the contribution this kind of regressiveness can make to the economy. As Watkins says, speaking of the transnational context, "the nonsynchronous appearance of what . . . seems like working conditions surviving from the past is itself produced from within the organization of production in the present" (37). Appalachian Studies scholars, while never as explicit as Watkins is about how the persistent production of an antiquated Appalachia serves corporate and transnational capital, imply as much in their critiques of how the U.S. power structure has always explained Appalachia's "problems." The Appalachian Regional Commission of the 1960's, Whisnant tells us, like Progressive Era do-gooders, insisted

that Appalachia stayed poor “because it was not integrated into the larger economy.” In fact, Whisnant explains, “its problems derived primarily . . . from its integration into the national economy for a narrow set of purposes: the extraction of low-cost raw materials, power, and labor . . . “ (*Modernizing* 129). The Appalachian economy must stay “behind”—or, more specifically, stay a kind of economic anachronism that mixes the past of low wages, lax environmental and safety laws, and cheap resources with present technology, management, and flow of capital—to bolster the dominant economy. Ron Eller agrees: “the persistent poverty of Appalachia has not resulted from lack of modernization [i.e., “pastness”], but from [a] particular kind of modernization” (42)—a kind indispensable to the growth of capital, but not a kind that improved life for the people.<sup>31</sup>

Ideologically, the contemporary cultural production of Appalachia’s pastness “is indispensable to present social organization” as a timeless explanation for poverty that assuages liberal middle-class consciences and never threatens dominant structures. On the contrary, it strengthens dominant structures because of the ways the improvement narrative contributes to national acceptance of corporate common sense, as I’ve detailed in this chapter, and because of the way the region’s one-hundred-year-long representation as a place in desperate need of “modernization” has invited and justified corporate penetration and exploitation.

The professional-managerial class’s cultural construction of Appalachia’s pastness has in ways complemented, in ways facilitated, and in ways merely deflected attention

from corporate interests as the latter have tampered with property, environmental, tax, and worker safety laws, broken unions, and bought government officials in the region. This complicity between the middle class and capitalists has ensured an uninterrupted flood of locally generated capital to points east, north, and “present.” At the same time it has generated the fortuitous byproduct of a throwaway population of “yesterday’s people” for America’s life-threatening and low-paying jobs, pollutant industries, dam projects, and wars. Appalachia, in its perpetual pastness, typifies America’s yoking of social position and time in ways that work ceaselessly to reproduce present hegemony.

## Notes to Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup>See Shapiro 5. In Modernizing the Mountaineer, Whisnant also mentions this shift, but he associates it more closely with the turn-of-the-century (3). Durwood Dunn places it in the late 1880's (xiii).

<sup>2</sup>Of the three "models" popularized in this half of the twentieth century to explain "Appalachian conditions"--the Subculture of Poverty Model, the Regional Development Model, and the Internal Colonialism Model--the last is by far the most radical and does address economic exploitation, which the other two do not. Developed in the 1960's, the Internal Colonialism Model is perhaps best represented by the essays that make up Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case edited by Helen Lewis, et. al., and published in 1978. One of the earliest and most widely read works that treats the region's problems as colonial is Harry Caudill's 1962 Night Comes to the Cumberlands. "Signs of Civilization: The Trail of the Lonesome Pine as Colonial Narrative" by Rodger Cunningham applies the colonialism model to the nature-to-culture theme in a turn-of-the-century novel about Appalachia.

<sup>3</sup>Other reasons the colonial model works poorly for the Appalachian situation include 1) racism, usually considered key to colonial ideology, is not an important factor in the way outside interests have exploited Appalachia (Walls 238); and 2) when applied to Appalachia, the colonial model offers no alternative to present conditions (i.e., Appalachia cannot become a postcolonial nation state) while some form of socialism actually does

(Walls 232). I have also learned how colonial and postcolonial theories can veil class and economics by observing their deployment in English departments over the last decade.

<sup>4</sup>To be sure, colonies, too, are often represented as inhabiting the past, as Anne McClintock elucidates especially clearly with her concept of “anachronistic space.” Through the trope of anachronistic space, McClintock contends, “[g]eographic difference across space is figured as a historical difference across time . . . . The stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from Europe and thus equally valid, but as temporally different and thus as irrevocably superannuated by history” (40; emphasis McClintock’s). However, discourse about Appalachia insists that the Appalachian people are not “irrevocably superannuated by history”; they are on the brink of stepping into the present. Admittedly, colonial discourse may also figure the civilizing process as progress from the past into the present--this aspect of the discourse is not McClintock’s project--but dominant American discourse celebrates Appalachia as an earlier version of America that is racially and ethnically identical to “America” in the present--or even racially superior to America in the present given the influx of immigration at the turn-of-the-century. Racial and ethnic identity with the colonizing culture is unlikely to play a part in colonial discourse. Again, the progress Appalachia must make culturally is more quantitative than qualitative.

McClintock adds that Victorian Britains also projected women and the working-class into anachronistic space (40). Barbara Ehrenreich, in Fear of Falling, brings up

several times how Americans associate the poor and the working-class with the past. Both references support my theory that the past trope is not only a colonial strategy, but also a strategy for class domination. Ehrenreich also mentions that liberals are inclined to view this pastness as something to reform, while conservatives seek to revere and preserve it (51; 119-121).

<sup>5</sup>Although Trachtenberg, Gutman, Sklar, and Wiebe don't use the language of hegemony or even of Marxism, the facts they recount support the notion of such a shift.

<sup>6</sup>Gutman, Ohmann, the Ehrenreichs, and Trachtenberg provide more details about how the capitalists legitimized their activities to the American people.

<sup>7</sup>As Batteau points out in his own analysis of this passage, "For Frost, the evils of industry were not in exploitive labor relations, but in the debauchery and immigrant workmen that accompanied it" (79).

<sup>8</sup>The Ehrenreichs make clear that within their paradigm, the professional-managerial class is distinct from the petty bourgeoisie, whom they define as the old middle class, the middle class that predates corporate capital (17). They also state that the turn-of-the-century professional-managerial class in America were the sons and daughters of this old middle class (19). Bourdieu, however, uses "petty bourgeoisie" in a more general sense than the Ehrenreichs do (Bourdieu does not make as many modes of production distinctions), and as far as I can determine, his deployment of the term would include the Ehrenreichs' "PMC."

<sup>9</sup>John Fox, Jr.'s, character Red Fox (a white, not a Native American, and no relation to John) personifies mainstream America's contradictory feelings about the Appalachian people. "An old man with a dual face," one side of Red Fox's visage is "calm, kindly, philosophic, benevolent; but, when the other [is] turned, a curious twitch of muscles . . . show[s] the teeth and [makes] a snarl there that [is] wolfish" (Fox Trail 72 and 37).

<sup>10</sup>A recent article on Murfree and other female regionalist writers by Marjorie Pryse entitled "Reading Regionalism: The 'Difference' It Makes" testifies to the enduring seductiveness of soft imagery for readers with "good intentions." Pryse, who has edited a Norton Anthology of Women Regionalist Writers, praises those authors like Murfree who take what Pryse calls an "empathic approach" toward the marginal populations in their fiction because such an approach teaches readers to confront "differences" more sympathetically. Although Murfree is the only "Appalachian" writer Pryse discusses and I consider Murfree more representative of the preservation narrative, the "empathic approach" contains much of the same positive discourse that so enthralled the turn-of-the-century middle class. Pryse overlooks its regressive characteristics including its compatibility with reformist politics and the way it helps mystify radical economic changes in rural areas during the period of the local color movement.

<sup>11</sup>Rodger Cunningham's "Signs of Civilization: The Trail of the Lonesome Pine as Colonial Narrative" calls the kind of positive imagery I'm discussing "pure potential." I reject this for the same reason I reject Ron Eller's "static image": the past trope functions

so effectively to justify class inequality to the middle class because, at least in the discourse about Appalachia, mountaineers do repeatedly progress and realize their potential. Granted, such a realization often causes regret in the rising character or in the narrator, but the image is not “static” and the potential is not simply “pure” or suspended in infinite possibility.

<sup>12</sup>I want to acknowledge my debt to Evan Watkins for my general thinking about and interest in Appalachia’s construction as “yesterday.” His distinction between “natural coding” and “technoideological coding,” and his insights on the advantages of the latter for a capitalist hegemony have indirectly informed my argument, but the specifics of technoideological coding seem more relevant to an analysis of discourse about Appalachia in the second half of this century than they are to the improvement narrative.

Nevertheless, the improvement narrative does seem to draw on both kinds of coding, at times presenting Appalachians as stuck in a state of nature and at other times invoking the stagnant/rising opposition that Watkins attributes to technoideological coding (24). The mix supports Watkins’ claim that although technoideological coding began appearing in the early nineteenth-century, natural coding continued to operate ideologically well into the twentieth (22). Ultimately, however, I think the “rising” half of the stagnant/rising binary had the greatest explanatory power in the Progressive Era. Watkins talks more about the “stagnant” half because he focuses on the late twentieth-century, and this makes Throwaways’ argument less useful to my own analysis.

<sup>13</sup> Class hierarchy was more or less rigid depending on the particular community or subregion, but Appalachia indeed had a class structure, one typical of the preindustrial agricultural-based market capitalism found in much of the nation before the Civil War. See Altina Waller's Feud, John Alexander Williams, Walter Precourt, and Pudup, et. al., on the late nineteenth-century class structure in Appalachia. Durwood Dunn, in his study of a western North Carolina community from antebellum days to the early nineteenth-century, finds that residents didn't make as many class distinctions among themselves as urban Americans did at the time, but the community still had a class structure (19).

<sup>14</sup>I understand and am sympathetic to neoMarxist antipathy toward the categories "lower class" and "higher class." As Wright explains in Class Counts, defining class in these ways highlights material inequalities in standard of living and detracts attention from how production and exploitation determine class structure (29-30). Yet I use "lower-classed" and "higher-classed" deliberately in this section of my argument. Most characters in these texts do not occupy a "working class" position because they live in preindustrial economies. Although certain characters, like June, may end up in a professional-managerial class position, I need the umbrella term "higher to lower" to account for all the variations in the upwardly-mobile-mountaineer narratives. Finally, the logic of the nature-to-culture teleology sees social position exactly this way: "lower" and "higher." Class position is not defined by one's place in production. Instead, class structure, when acknowledged at all, is a fluid trajectory from lower/past to higher/present.

<sup>15</sup> That the bulk of the mountaineers shuffle their shiftless feet in the background while this unusual character fulfills his or her talents does not seem to detract from the improvement narrative's core message. Even though only one mountain character achieves social success in The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, for example, she confirms beyond a doubt the non-Appalachian characters' theory that the mountaineers as a race are imminently rehabilitable (Fox Trail 100-101; 280). Perhaps the glaring imbalance in the success/failure rate doesn't undermine the narrative's optimism because Americans, and especially middle-class Americans, tend to focus on individuals and overlook groups-- as a matter of fact, it is this privileging of the individual that makes the class structure seem fluid. Furthermore, a novel's very form encourages such a myopic view: because the exceptional character is inevitably the protagonist, the audience will identify with him or her and carry away that character's experience as their greatest impression.

<sup>16</sup>Chapter Three treats in depth the bildungsroman as medium for narratives of social mobility.

<sup>17</sup>For background material on Fox and his two best-selling novels, I've drawn on Wilson, Batteau, Shapiro, Cunningham, McNeil, and Askins.

<sup>18</sup>Because I'm working with Appalachian materials, I should stress that by "culture of class" I mean nothing like "Culture of Poverty." The "Culture of Poverty" model, popular in the 1960's for explaining the Appalachian "problem," blames poverty on "the internal deficiencies of lower-class subculture" (Walls 233). I use "culture of class" in a broad and descriptive way to mean the customs, values, habits, manners, etc., typical of a

particular class community. And, again, while I think the differences between mainstream national culture and Appalachian culture are not only differences in cultures of class, I believe Appalachian cultural critics often overlook the role class plays in the cultural differences.

<sup>19</sup>Ambiguity over who “owned” property in Appalachia was not entirely an invention of late nineteenth-century capitalists and writers. Especially in West Virginia, tremendous confusion and litigation over land titles began in the eighteenth century. Much of this trouble originated in tensions between, on the one hand, resident settlers and, on the other, absentee speculators and huge land owners, many of whom failed to pay taxes. John Williams, in Chapter One of his West Virginia: A History, provides an excellent explanation of how the labyrinth of politics, speculation, land grants, “tomahawk rights,” taxation, and forfeiture made western Virginia by the late eighteenth century “a paradise for land lawyers” (27). David Corbin’s Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922 summarizes how the situation set up the land grab of one hundred years later.

Following the Revolutionary War, the state of Virginia had compensated its soldiers with the ‘wastelands’ of its western counties and sold the rest in bulk to early land speculators. By the 1880’s, the deeds to both groups of land had been forfeited to the state because of the failure of the original title holders to pay taxes on the land and to register their ownership. Virginia, and later West Virginia, reclaimed the land and sold it to the people who had settled there. The late nineteenth-century speculators and capitalists now purchased the original deeds and sought help from the courts, claiming that they were the rightful owners. (3)

For a discussion of parallels between dominant U.S. approaches towards Native Americans and towards Appalachians, see Whisnant, All That Is Native and Fine (254-267).

<sup>20</sup>Social scientist Stephen Foster, alluding not only to natural and human materials, but also to symbolic ones, describes Appalachia as “a resource from which mainstream America can pick and choose, depending on the strategic necessity or politics of a given moment” (161). In secondary works about the southern mountains, only Foster makes an explicit reference to how humans and natural resources are equated in Appalachia when he mentions that outside corporations confuse people and land as both “underdeveloped” and in need of “help” (174).

<sup>21</sup>After these raw human materials were consumed and thrown away, observers continued to identify them with minerals, but now it was not coal, but mining waste. Journalist William Brooks in a 1935 Atlantic Monthly article calls the men in coal camps “injured men, worthless men, trouble makers, men without morals. The poison which rises from these human slag piles is a good deal more virulent than sulphur smoke” (199). (Slag is the refuse from processed coal.) Thirty years later, in 1966, a missionary named Paul Douglass published an article entitled “Strip-mined Landscape and Impoverished Souls” in the June 8 edition of Christian Century that described an Appalachian community in Ohio this way: “the men are not only no help, but are . . . an active hindrance. . . . They are the empty shells, the human equivalent of the strip mine ‘spoil banks,’ left behind when mineral treasures have been exhausted” (753). Recalling

euphemisms much earlier missionaries to the region used for capitalism, Douglass blames the problems in the region on “predatory business practices” (753).

<sup>22</sup>Although Warner’s article reads very much like Fox’s and Allen’s, I can find no evidence that Warner was working for corporate interests. (Warner is best known for his collaboration with Mark Twain on The Gilded Age, a book that critiques the excesses of the period.) David Whisnant’s “Charles Dudley Warner and Social Change in the Southern Mountains: Note on a Serendipitous Discovery” and John Stephenson’s untitled piece in Appalachian Journal (4.1 (1976): 34-38) both treat Warner’s writing on Appalachia.

<sup>23</sup>Despite the description Fox gives of “mineral and timber desposits” “richer perhaps than other region” in the world, five pages later he can still explain the mountaineers’ impoverishment this way: “No mountain people are ever rich. Environment keeps mountaineers poor . . . . This poverty of natural resources makes the mountaineers’ fight for life a hard one” (128). Although in this context Fox means by “natural resources” arable land, the contradictions in his explanation of poverty are astounding.

<sup>24</sup>Batteau does not provide the reviewer’s name.

<sup>25</sup>Elizabeth Appleton’s 1864 “A Half-Life and Half a Life,” which may be the first fiction about Appalachia published in a major magazine, explores how mine boss George Hammond lifts mountain girl Janet forward in time and upward in class. It is worth

pointing out that in 1864 the hero is a capitalist, not the more professional-managerial-type engineer.

<sup>26</sup>For a start on studies that do prove the success of the production of the Appalachian people as a reserve force of workers and soldiers, see David Whisnant's Modernizing the Mountaineer and All That Is Native and Fine, John Hennen's The Americanization of West Virginia and Caught Up In Time: Oral Narratives of Appalachian Vietnam Veterans, Joe Trotter's Coal, Class and Color, David Corbin's Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coalfields, and Shapiro's Appalachia On Our Mind, especially chapters 6, 7, and 8. The Dollmaker by Harriet Arnow offers a moving and insightful fictional critique of how Appalachians were used as a reserve labor pool in World War II factories.

<sup>27</sup>Although I can't analyze them here in as much depth as I'd like, Lucy Furman's novels Mothering On Perilous, Sight To the Blind, and The Quare Women provide even more examples of these lessons on middle-classness than do Fox's works.

<sup>28</sup>As evidence of the PMC's success in constructing Appalachians as soldiers, John Hennen contends that in the Vietnam War, West Virginia lost 85 out of every 100,000 males, the highest per capita loss in the nation (Caught Up In Time 11). Although I have no concrete source for this next statistic, on every Memorial Day and Veteran's Day, West Virginia newspapers assert that the state had the highest per capita casualty rate in all this century's wars with perhaps the exception of the Gulf War. Hennen claims that the military considers Appalachian males "pre-trained" as soldiers because of their

experience with guns, woods, and strong authoritative family structures, and consequently have “traditionally directed Appalachians into combat roles” (Caught Up 12). I think most West Virginia high school graduates, myself included, can confirm this simply by recalling the near daily appearance of the recruiter--whom everyone knows by name--cruising our high school halls.

<sup>29</sup>Apparently the West Virginia Board of Education agreed with both Kephart and Frost when in 1919, after referring to the state’s children as an “‘army of young workers’” and the “‘capital of civilization,’” it announced that West Virginia teachers’ primary responsibility was “‘to attend to the vocational needs of the 96 in each 100 who must do the main work of the world’” (qtd. in Hennen Americanization 69). Whisnant’s All That Is Native and Fine and Modernizing the Mountaineer, Chapter 6, also treat the promotion of vocational education for Appalachians, as does, to a lesser extent, Shapiro, especially 153-154 and 228-243.

<sup>30</sup>Hindman School 1920 newsletter, quoted in Whisnant All That Is (76).

<sup>31</sup>Herbert Reid concurs with Eller and draws a more direct link between the Appalachian situation and Watkins’ insight: “The notion that ‘time stood still’ in Appalachia . . . has developed in ways that deflect or obscure comprehension of that region’s particular form of modernization” (“Appalachian Policy” 622). Allen Batteau goes so far as to blame the region’s poverty on certain kinds of “overdevelopment” (177), completely calling into question the nation’s apotheosis of “development.” Speaking of rural areas generally in the era in which Appalachia was “discovered,” Alan Trachtenberg

sheds more light on why present hegemonies produce certain populations as “past”: “[the countryside was to be] an impoverished zone, a market colony, a cheap source of food, labor, and certain raw materials. Its function was precisely to remain a backwater, to remain dependent” (115). And Stuart Hall points out that “the law of capitalist modernization [is] uneven development, organized disorganization” (165).

## Chapter Three

### Story Time: Working-Class Women's Interventions in Literary Temporal Conventions

#### I.

Up to this point in my discussion of temporality and social position, I've concentrated on textual content, saying little about the role of literary form. Yet aesthetics, too, contribute to the production of consent and the justification of class inequalities. Raymond Williams locates the intersection of class hegemony and literary aesthetics in dominant literary conventions which, he argues convincingly, tend to serve the reproduction of a society's class structure (173-79). And many conventions do indeed reinforce American common sense about time and class.

An examination of the apex of nondominant class literature, the proletarian novel of the 1930's, throws into relief both the dominant narrative conventions of which Williams speaks (and that still operate in American common sense about economics) and working-class narrative tactics that interrupt such conventions and then transform them to serve working-class purposes. In part because the Depression thoroughly undermined the prevailing American ideology that deserving Americans would improve their class status

over time, the Communist Party flourished in the years following the Crash, along with other groups and periodicals committed to working-class issues. Consequently, the 1930's provided the most nurturing atmosphere for working-class writers in American history. Within this climate, writers from and sympathetic to the working class confronted the system of literary conventions they inherited that were incompatible with working-class experience, culture, and politics and invented ingenious narrative strategies that challenged the upper-/middle-class-biased formal conventions of American fiction.

Over the last decade, scholars like Paula Rabinowitz, Constance Coiner, Linda M. Park-Fuller, and especially Barbara Foley have begun invaluable criticism on the ways 1930's authors challenge formal bourgeois conventions, in particular those of the bildungsroman that valorize individual change. They show how novelists deploy tactics of heteroglossia, polyphony, multiple narrators, family, and gender solidarity to supplant individuality with community and to rewrite the individual quest as a collective one. In other words, they focus on the first term in "individual change."

I want to focus on the second term-- "change"--because of the hegemonic work certain notions of change perform in preserving U.S. class inequalities. Tillie Olsen's Yonnondio and Meridel LeSueur's The Girl, both drafted in the 1930's, not only revise the traditional bildungsroman's celebration of individuality. They also invent formal narrative strategies that challenge the bildungsroman's temporal structure, calling into question popular assumptions about "change" including teleology, linearity, vertical narrative movement, and temporal order.

## II.

And Tracy was young, just twenty, still wet behind the ears, and the old blinders were on him so he couldn't really see what was around and he believed in the bull about freedom of opportunity and a chance to rise and if you really want to work you can always find a job and rugged individualism and something about pursuit of happiness.

--Tillie Olsen, Yonnondio

she believed in love and everything comes to those who wait kid--you would get anything you hankered for, she said, if you'd believe and keep it in the mind's eye . . . . O, there's a rainbow for everyone, she said, a pot of gold and the dice falling right.

--Meridel LeSueur, The Girl

Despite the ironic stance Olsen and LeSueur take here toward the American faith in economic mobility, many critics suggest that the genre in which they critique it, the bildungsroman, simulates in its narrative progression the kind of individual upward trajectory so important to recasting class inequalities as differences that will be rectified in time.<sup>1</sup> (In Chapter Two, I discussed how Fox's bildungsromans The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come and The Trail of the Lonesome Pine work in this way.) Novels in general are associated with the construction of the middle class, largely because they privilege individual change, a notion imperative to the middle class's faith in social mobility (see Lang 277; Foley 254-55, 297; Said 71; Suleiman 241, to name only a few). And if the novel per se is a paradigmatic middle-class form, then its subgenre, the bildungsroman, is the very distillation of middle-class self-conception. Here the entire narrative is driven by

a single exceptional individual discovering his or her a priori essence (Foley 284, 297, 321; Hardin xiii; Rabinowitz 69). Jeffrey Sammons locates the “intensely bourgeois” “concept of bildung” in the form’s “many assumptions about the autonomy and relative integrity of the self, its potential self-creative energies, its relative range of options within the material, social, even psychological determinants” (42). Furthermore, Sammons draws attention to the parallel between the narrative progression of a bildungsroman and the trajectory of upward mobility by reminding us that the bildungsroman must be more than “mere accumulation of experience . . . . There must be a sense of evolutionary change within the self, a teleology of individuality” (41; emphasis mine). Patricia Alden is one of the few critics who explicitly points out the form’s compatibility with the subject of social mobility, asserting that the bildungsroman’s English version, at least, has often “linked the individual’s moral, spiritual, and psychological maturation with his economic and social advancement” (2). And G. Robert Stange, in his 1962 introduction to The History of Henry Edmond, Esq., confirms Alden’s observations about the relationship between the form and an ascendant class trajectory.

In outline . . . the bildungsroman is almost an image of the life of the middle-class. Novels of all kinds depend on some kind of movement, but the difference between the journey in the relatively primitive picaresque novel and the progression in the bildungsroman is that in the latter, movement is vertical; the hero does not merely travel about the world, he develops, he rises in society, he advances toward intellectual, moral, and economic goods. The form is very much the creation of an age dominated by ideas of evolutionary progress . . . . (qtd. in Alden 2)

In short, the relatively linear temporal order and vertical movement of the traditional bildungsroman parallel and reinforce the temporal order and vertical movement of the myth of upward mobility. If, as Williams says, dominant literary conventions, which include this kind of narrative progression, do serve the reproduction of a society's class hegemony (173-79), the bildungsroman's conventions can be seen as a lesson in upward mobility. Moreover, this lesson inheres not only in the work's content, as the reader follows the hero's or heroine's experiences and discoveries, triumphs and disappointments, but is inscribed in the very rhythms of the narrative. As narratologist Seymour Chatman explains, readers recognize literary conventions by naturalizing them as part of their "interpretive net" (49), and if the act of reading a bildungsroman naturalizes the convention of a teleology of individuality, of movement ever upward, one can see how the experience may confirm and reinforce the American belief in unfettered upward mobility. To adapt Foley's general observations about the bildungsroman to the specifics of its narrative trajectory: the reader, identifying with the exceptional protagonist, wanting what she does, shares her future orientation and climbs along with her, anticipating the inevitability of the heroine's rise. With the traditional closure, the reader's expectations are satisfied and her faith in this kind of trajectory is reaffirmed. "Story" itself, as Susan Suleiman says, is a means of persuasion (73).

Clearly such narrative conventions contradict working-class experience in which "personal development" is so often stymied and "individual change" can only follow a change in society. Consequently, those 1930's proletarian novelists who used the

bildungsroman genre usually replaced the teleology of social mobility and individual destiny with a teleology structured by the protagonist's development of class consciousness (Rabinowitz 78; Foley 327). In this way, as Foley would put it, they "corrected" for the genre's conservative formal tendencies with the force of their leftist content and/or doctrine (258-262).

Yonnondio and The Girl are unusual because they do not simply replace the middle-class content of the bildungsroman, but also alter its form. Most importantly, they undermine the myth of upward mobility by revising the content and the formal conventions of time to serve their own feminist and working-class interests.<sup>2</sup>

Yonnondio most directly reflects the difficulties in using traditional aesthetic conventions for representing working-class experience and most clearly revises traditional novel time. The title, taken from a Whitman poem, is allegedly an Iroquois word meaning "lament for the lost" (Coiner 175), and the portion of the poem Olsen selects for an epigraph makes clear that "lost" refers to those working-class stories never narrated. Later, in the novel's body, Olsen implies that one reason these stories are silenced is the disparity between conventional aesthetic forms and working-class subjects. As the women of a mining town await the return of their men after a mining accident, Olsen's narrator abruptly interrupts, the intrusion itself a strategic disruption of the narrative flow the reader expects, to challenge the audience directly: "And could you not make a cameo of

this and pin it onto your aesthetic hearts?" (20). She continues in this ironic tone to contrast the "cameo" of the industrial disaster scene with Western classical aesthetics.

Surely it is classical enough for you--the Greek marble of the women, the simple flowing lines of sorrow, carved so rigid and eternal. Surely it is original enough--these grotesques, this thing with the foot missing, this gargoyle with half the face gone and the arm. In the War to Live, the artist, Coal, sculptured them. It was his Master hand that wrought the intricate mosaic on this face--splintered coal inlaid with patches of skin and threads of rock . . . . (20)

Olsen's own attempt to wrought a working-class aesthetic, Yonnonidio follows the travails of the 1920's Holbrook family as they drift around the West and Midwest, from mining town to tenant farm to urban slaughterhouse, in search of a better life. Much, though by no means all, of the novel is presented from the girl Mazie's point of view, and those who categorize it as a bildungsroman do so because of the way Mazie is featured. However, the time covered in the book is unusually brief for a bildungsroman, only around two and a half years, beginning with Mazie as a six year old, and the narrative's lack of continuity has led at least two critics to accuse it of "fly[ing] off in many directions, not all of which are equally developed or coalesce with the others" (Burkom and Williams 50). The fractured flow of narrative, which is so important to Olsen's revision of temporality, stems in part from the fractured process of the novel's composition, and this process is worth examining for what it discloses about the obstacles preventing a working-class author, especially a woman, from "rising." As Rosenfelt asserts (72), and Coiner agrees (174), "In Yonnonidio, the most powerful theme is the tension between human

capacity and creativity . . . and the social forces and institutions that repress and distort that capacity” (Rosenfelt 72). In Olsen’s case, the composition and publication history of the novel reinforce this theme, both text and biography demystifying the myth of individual progress and unfettered upward mobility.

Olsen claims to have begun work on the novel in 1932 while recovering from an illness that provided her rare time away from work and political activities. When part of the first chapter was published in 1935 in Partisan Review as “The Iron Throat,” Robert Cantwell praised it as an “early work of genius,” and Olsen has since spoken of her ambition at that time to become a great writer. However, even though Olsen had a contract with Random House to finish the novel, the demands of child-rearing, housework, wage work, and political activism, exacerbated by the alienation she felt among literary circles, short-circuited her “promise” as a novelist (Coiner 145-48; 174). Rosenfelt confirms that “passages from her journals in these years [the mid-30’s] include frustration at the amount of time required for housework and political work, agonized self-criticism at not being able to write regularly in a more disciplined way . . . “ (67). Finally, in 1937, after the birth of her second child, Olsen gave up on the novel entirely (Coiner 147).

A fifteen-year hiatus in her development as a writer and thirty-five-year interruption in the composition of Yonnonidio followed, a non-classical narrative of “personal evolution” indeed. In 1972, her husband, Jack, stumbled upon the novel’s first four chapters, which were essentially complete, along with sheafs of fragmented passages,

outlines, and notes intended for the rest of the book. After minor revisions of the first chapters, Olsen turned to piecing together the rest, discarding some parts, organizing others, but doing “no rewriting, no new writing,” as she herself claims in the introductory note to the work’s eventual publication as an incomplete novel in 1974 (Coiner 175; Turow 29). “Only fragments, rough drafts, outlines, scraps remain--to tell what might have been, and never will be now,” she concludes in her final authorial note (133). While the economic and political climate of the 1930’s inspired the novel’s composition, the feminist movement finally facilitated the novel’s publication.

Besides its disrupted composition history, Yonnondio critiques the American Dream of an ever-ascendant class trajectory on at least four levels. The most overt comes in explicit character and narratorial commentary, including the long passage quoted in part as an epigraph above. The passage begins with Jim Holbrook mulling over the naiveté of a young coworker, Jim Tracy, and closes with a narratorial voice expounding on the futility of individual revolt and the need for a collective one (62-64). Anna, the Holbrooks’ mother, makes this kind of commentary as well when her early optimism (her children will get an “edjication” and work in an office) is replaced with her resignation that they will never rise above her station: “it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond, beyond any effort or doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound” (88; also 90).

What happens to our heroine, Mazie, corroborates Anna’s sense of hopelessness. Unlike the traditional bildungsroman protagonist who progresses in a specific direction

and who after taking a step backwards usually regains lost ground to move ahead, Mazie, bound by her class position, can at best maintain the economic, intellectual, and emotional plane on which she begins. If Mazie changes at all, the direction is regressive. Our protagonist peaks in the third of the eight chapters, finding temporary happiness and comfort before the family fails on the farm, and a year later, it is to this period that she returns mentally to obliterate the horrors of the packinghouse neighborhood. “Still she lived on the farm in June, in early June, when a voluptuous fragrance lay over the earth . . . . Enveloped in the full soft dream of the farm, she was secure” (58). In keeping with this regression, Mazie’s early interest in school and learning is extinguished by age eight (49-51).

But the most innovative interrogation of popular assumptions about time and class is lodged in the rhythms of the novel’s action. The reader is plunged into “Holbrook time” with the novel’s first sentence as the mine whistle startles Mazie out of sleep and into the tempo of the coal camp, a tempo regulated by a whistle that Mazie already knows signals either a shift change or a miner’s death. This is not a teleological time developing in causative temporal order, but a time in which, as Mazie describes it, “Day comes and night comes and the whistle blows and payday comes. Like the flats runnin on the tipple they come--one right a-followen the other” (4). Moreover, the changes the Holbrooks make are horizontal, not vertical, and they involve shifts in space more than movement in time. The plot is driven by these horizontal moves, as the Holbrooks abandon the mining camp for a “new life” on the farm, defeated farming, depart for yet another “new life” in

life” in the city. In turn, each spatial move is structured by a cycle of optimism and despair. When their situation reaches a nadir in one place, Jim bolsters the family with hope that it will improve in the next. But disappointment inevitably follows, until Mazie, by age eight, has been conditioned to react to any good news, such as Jim’s being hired at the slaughterhouse, by bracing herself for the next blow: “Now something bad’s going to happen. Again” (107).

Eventually, Olsen conditions us as readers to react similarly. Undermining the way audience expectations are satisfied in the classical bildungsroman, Olsen positions her readers to undergo the very different working-poor rhythm of anticipation and letdown. An especially striking example of this positioning occurs at the end of the disturbing first chapter. Jim announces to the family that they will move to South Dakota soon and “make a new life in the spring” (15), setting up the reader to expect to turn the page and, relieved, begin the journey to better fortunes in Dakota. However, our expectations are promptly dashed as we discover the Holbrooks not packing their bags, but marooned in the mining camp for several more tedious months and another full chapter. In short, the narrative is never a series of building blocks mounting towards the future, but an endless round of effort and disappointment, rise and fall, with no discernible progress.

Reinforcing this cyclic repetition of optimism and “new life” superseded by utter defeat are seasonal rhythms. Predictably, spring and early summer are the seasons when the Holbrook’s expectations rise, the time they move to the farm and again when they attempt a new life in the city; fall and winter bring ruin and death. And shadowing the

circular tempo of the seasons are those gendered rhythms that will be even more important for LeSueur. The anti-progress of the family's pursuit of wage labor for Jim is complemented by the biological cycles of Anna's reproductive labor, and Anna's "narrative" is as disrupted as her husband's. She becomes pregnant, gives birth, immediately reconceives, develops complications due to malnutrition, is raped by Jim, miscarries, and has not finished recovering from the miscarriage when the novel ends.

Yonnondio further revises traditional novel temporality in terms of what Raymond Williams calls "wholeness of account." By this he means how much and what kind of prehistory and projected history a narrative "requires" or omits, and he explains that such inclusions and exclusions reveal "radical social assumptions of causation and consequence" (176). Yonnondio at no point provides a prehistory for Mazie or the Holbrooks, and opens in media res with only a pair of italicized prefatory lines establishing the decade and place. The absence of exposition denies the reader a past linear account from which she can deduce the reasons for the Holbrook's sad state of affairs. The novel's only "projected history" comes not at its end--as I've already mentioned, the text is literally unfinished--but in two narratorial intrusions that refer to none of the Holbrooks. These projected histories also subvert dominant notions of temporality as they are what narratologist Seymour Chatman calls in general "anachrony"--a disruption in normal narrative sequence--and in particular an especially unusual form of anachrony--"prolepsis," or flashforward (64). For example, when young Andy Kvaternick sets off for his first day in the mines early in the novel, the narrator takes the liberty of vaulting decades into the

future to offer Andy, and the reader by proxy, two pages describing the boy's inescapable demise: "and perhaps you will be slugged by a thug . . . or death will take you to bed at last, or you will strangle with that old crony of miners, the asthma" (6). At least Andy is given a few options. The Jim Tracy passage discussed earlier closes with the proleptic assurance that Tracy will meet his sordid end on a chain gang in Florida (64). The flashforwards not only reaffirm the difficulty of "rising" from certain class strata, but augment the text's sense of repetitive life patterns with predetermined ends. Jim and Andy will not follow a "teleology of individuality," gradually discovering "internal essences," but will fulfill destinies fixed by their classed positions.

Finally, Olsen crafts even syntax and tense to subvert conventional narrative time. In addition to the fragmented, stream-of-consciousness prose rhythms that give the novel its hallucinatory, impressionistic atmosphere, Olsen is deliberately loose with its tenses. Although the core of the narrative is in simple past tense, it shifts freely and often to simple present and progressive so that a single page may use all three tenses. The overall effect is a cavalier attitude towards linear time, and the swerves into present progressive produce a sense of weightiness, of being stalled, again contributing to the overriding theme of stasis and repetition. To capture this feeling in a brief excerpt is difficult, but the following, taken from the final chapter set during the heat wave, offers some idea.

Jimmie is moaning, scratching his mosquito bites, doing a dance on the mattress with his body, waking and sleeping again, waking and sleeping; and Mazie wakes from the terrible lands of dream to feel the heavy heat still there.

Outside it is better, dragging her quilt out beside Will, but the dark mysterious night scares her and the mosquitoes bite worse and worse and

lying there awake she is thinking of the smoke and fires curling up around the lady in the movie tied to the stake. (112)

In other passages, syntax and sentence tempo foreground proletarian worktime, the most overt being Olsen's representation of "Beedo," a speedup system of the 1920's. Here is one exemplary paragraph of six that all deploy this staccato, rapid-fire style.

Choreographed by Beedo, the B system, speed-up stopwatch, convey. Music by rasp crash screech knock steamhiss thud machinedrum. Abandon self all ye who enter here. Become component part, geared, meshed, timed, controlled. (114)

Nor does Olsen attend only to the factory time of productive labor. Only a few pages later, she rounds out the tempo of wagework with that of a housewife and mother, capturing the repetition, the demands of performing several tasks at once.

Skim, stir; sprinkle Bess; pit, peel and cut; sponge; skim, stir. Any second the jelly will be right and must not wait. Shall she wake up Jimmie and ask him to blow a feather to keep Bess quiet? No, he'll wake cranky, he's just a baby himself, let him sleep. skim, stir; sprinkle; change the wet packs on Ben; pit, peel and cut; sponge. (128)

Yonnonidio's narrative tactics disrupt the linear temporality and vertical progression of the middle-class bildungsroman on every level, generating a high degree of what narratology terms "redundancy," or the recurrence of a particular "message" in a text, both within a single level and among levels (Suleiman 150). Literary redundancy serves as a powerful persuasive mechanism (Foley 268), and in this case, the text's "persuasion" is a thorough-going rejection of the faith in linear individual trajectory and

social mobility. The novel suggests no future for the Holbrooks and offers neither a bourgeois teleology of personal evolution nor a Marxist teleology towards class consciousness and revolution. However, such a radical treatment of temporality brings with it questions about the political consequences of total absence of process and closure, questions I'll address after discussing The Girl.

In The Girl, LeSueur traces approximately a year in the life of a young working-class woman who is never named. As Yonnondio does, The Girl picks up in media res with the girl having just moved to the city and working as a waitress in a bootleg joint. While Yonnondio completely eschews linear progress and vertical mobility, LeSueur deliberately invokes the American Dream and the "succession of orders" of which Bourdieu speaks in order to reject them in favor of a narrative development structured by the girl's heterosexual maturation and pregnancy. This gendered temporality, in turn, is associated in both a metaphorical and causal way with a teleology of class consciousness and a vague notion of societal upheaval. Its ending has troubled critics, but before reading the text's temporality, I'll treat something else it shares with Yonnondio: the way The Girl's composition and publication history duplicates the novel's theme of deferred promise and disrupted progress.

From a middle-class, educated family with radical tendencies, Meridel LeSueur in the 1930's produced reams of reportage, short stories, and poems in support of the Left, leading both the Communist Party and mainstream critics to recognize the importance of

her work. In 1939, she wrote the first draft of The Girl only to have it rejected by a New York publisher who claimed the bank robbery depicted was inauthentic, but parts of the book were published as short stories in 1935, '39, '40, '42, '45, and '47. The breach in LeSueur's career derives more from political repression than from the demands of work and children, as was the case with Olsen (although Olsen, too, suffered under McCarthyism). With the advent of the Cold War in 1947, LeSueur was blacklisted by most publishers, and the harassment she and her family received from the FBI made it nearly impossible for them to earn a living. Like Olsen, only in the political climate of the 1970's, now with the support of the Women's Movement instead of the Communist Party, and after a quarter-century suspension of her career, was LeSueur resurrected, leading even her to refer to herself as "Mrs. Lazarus." In 1977, LeSueur once again picked up The Girl, revising mostly its beginning and end, and the novel was published in 1978 thirty-nine years after it was drafted (Coiner 72; 81-82; 91-92; 109; 252).

Although The Girl is not as experimental with time as Yonnondio, Coiner argues that LeSueur has "an unconventional relation to time" (86). She attributes this relation to LeSueur's living periodically with Native Americans from whom she adopted the belief that time is "fluid" (86), but she also sees it as part of LeSueur's feminism and the novelist's association of linear time with masculinity (126; 129). Specifically, Coiner identifies feminine form in LeSueur's short stories with a "cyclical, lyrical flow" (126), "[i]mages mov[ing] in circles" (129), and circular narration (132). But while the nontraditional narrative structure of The Girl's last third develops organically from

gendered biological rhythms, it is clear that LeSueur's critique of linear temporality is also influenced by her working-class sympathies, a factor Coiner, usually acutely attuned to class dynamics, neglects.

One can begin to read this critique in the syntax, tense, pacing, and omitted punctuation at the novel's micro-level, much the way one can read it at this level in Yonnonidio. Fragmented conversations comprise a fair amount of the text, some occurring in the novel's present time, others in flashbacks of the girl's, and none of the dialogue is framed by quotation marks. In the first two-thirds of the novel, the absence of transitions, of adverbs marking time, and of any narratorial voice outside the girl's first-person limited perspective leave the audience confused about how much time is passing and how much has lapsed between one scene or exchange and another. Like Olsen, LeSueur disregards tense consistency, writing primarily in simple past but shifting freely to simple present. Breathless run-on sentences, omitted commas, question marks, and periods, choppy paragraphs, and a cacophony of non-sequiturs imitate the girl's frantic work pace at the bootleg joint and repeatedly disrupt readers' traditional temporal expectations.

The desire for money and status, along with the worship of competition and winning, drives the narrative for the first two-thirds of the novel, illustrating everything Bourdieu writes about the way the dominated legitimate and help reproduce the system that oppresses them by buying into the "race" and "waiting" for their turn on top in the order of successions (164-65). LeSueur communicates this common-sensical blind faith in

the promise of upward mobility through a veritable ocean of clichés, aphorisms, and conventional wisdom, much from direct character comment and some from the girl's internal observations. Repeated references to gambling and luck contribute as well. Although Coiner accuses LeSueur of constructing a binary in which all men are stereotyped as competitive and all women glorified as cooperative (118-121), the desire for and confidence in a progressive class trajectory is articulated by women as well as by men. We hear it from the girl's mother--"She said I must better myself, get up in the world . . . . meet some nice men" (44)--and we hear it about her father--"He worked, he tried, he was always looking for something better . . . thinking he was going to fall into something great, something that would end all our troubles tomorrow" (30-31). Butch's brother Bill expresses it--"Beating's everything, everything there is . . . . Gold, baby. We're sure gold. We're natural winners, ain't we Butch" (5), and Butch agrees again and again: "I'm gonna buy a service station of my own. Be my own man" (9); "You better go with me. I'm a winner" (7); "I like to beat everybody in the world . . . . beating's everything. Everything there is" (16). Clara, the girl's aging prostitute friend who speaks in the epigraph at the beginning of this section, is the most desperately optimistic of all. As the girl notes, "she wants everything she sees . . . . She has more kinds of hankering than I ever saw . . . . She is always looking to the future" (9). And Clara: "Be like me, always looking to a bright future and peace" (4); "There's always a silver lining. Something better in the future" (118); "There's winning and the good feeling it gives you,

and the love of a good man, Clara cried, who has a house in Florida and a swimming pool. I think two bedrooms is enough” (6).

However, every turn in the plot’s action undermines such faith in an ascendant class trajectory, repeatedly exposing the false promises of hegemonic notions of social position and temporality. The girl’s father dies so poor the family can afford neither an undertaker nor flowers. Bill is killed while scabbing. Butch is unable to find work, much less save money for a service station, which he later learns is a Standard Oil scam anyway (99-100). Clara, getting “used-looking,” has more difficulty picking up men (58). The plot development prior to the bank robbery is nearly as unprogressive, episodic, and stalled as the plot in Yonnonidio. The only linear evolution in these chapters is patterned on another sort of desire: the girl’s attraction to Butch and her sexual awakening. While everyone else is looking for the pot of gold, the girl is always simply looking for Butch. While the girl expresses subtle, but increasing, skepticism about the American Dream-- “We are growing in a field that is cold, bitter, sour and no chance for life” (59); “I don’t want to be a success like Butch. I want to be . . . I love to be . . . “(80)--she does realize her dream of being with Butch, and she does mature sexually, from an initial kiss, through intercourse, to pregnancy. In the meantime, the men, unable to wait any longer, plan a shortcut for getting ahead: a bank robbery. The account of the bank robbery climaxes with a spectacular failure that leaves all the men dead and the girl and her female friends jobless, destitute, and on relief.

With this dramatic rejection of competitiveness and vertical mobility, the narrative action defaults to a gendered temporality structured by the girl's pregnancy. Now, with more than half of the novel finished, time does begin to progress in a specific direction. But the "arrival" will be a baby's birth instead of social success. As they did in Yonnondio, seasonal rhythms shape the narrative in this part of The Girl to highlight the new emphasis on cyclic woman's time. The earlier stagnant action takes place in winter, while the girl gestates mostly in spring and summer and delivers in summer. The accumulation of capitalist monetary value and the resulting ascendant trajectory the men seek in the bank robbery LeSueur replaces with the very different value and "compounding interest" of reproductive labor. As the girl reminds herself, referring to her unborn child,

I had already robbed the bank. I had stolen the seed. I had it on deposit.  
It was cached. It was safe.

I had to laugh. It was in a safe. I had the key. (85)

I had just outfoxed the cops . . . cracked the vault, made my getaway with  
the loot under my belly. And I am the treasure. (134)

LeSueur positions the reader in this last third of the bildungsroman to participate in the girl's anxiety over her fetus's health and to anticipate not her social rise, but the infant's safe delivery. Here LeSueur makes a conscious effort to fuse "female time" with a working-class/Marxist teleology by directly associating the girl's growing baby with both the girl's increasing class consciousness and imminent social revolution. The association is cause and effect--the girl becomes more aware of her class position as she struggles to get

milk, avoid sterilization, and evade welfare spies--and also symbolic, as critics like Rabinowitz have noted. LeSueur presents pregnancy and birth as metaphor for evolving class consciousness and revolution mostly through the mentor character Amelia, a midwife and an organizer in the local Worker's Alliance. As early as the first chapter when the bootleg crowd watches a cat have kittens, Amelia comments, "One thing comes out of another, that's the way it is. One dies, another is born" (7). If the statement seems cryptic at this point, by the time Amelia remarks that "the breasts of our women are deep with the great life of the people," the reader has experienced enough to know along with the girl that by "the people" Amelia means the working-class masses (54), and when near the novel's end Amelia tells the girl "a new heart is growing," we recognize this as a triple entendre signifying the baby, the girl's class consciousness, and a new socioeconomic order (136).

In the end, despite these gestures towards a teleology of class consciousness and Communist revolution, LeSueur undermines the idea of teleology altogether, in both its Marxist and capitalist incarnations, in favor of what Adrian Oktenberg, speaking here of LeSueur's work in general, calls "the natural cycle of birth/death/rebirth, that repetition that has no beginning or end"(102). The narrative closes not with a newly class-conscious protagonist setting off to organize, as would be typical of the conventional proletarian bildungsroman, but with a birth scene packed with allusions to cyclic time. These include, but are not limited to, Clara dying as the baby is born, and the girl naming the child Clara; the baby's paternal grandmother being present at its birth; the girl seeing her own mother's

face in the child's; the girl calling the infant "o, girl"; and the girl, when she hears the baby's first sound, thinking "Was it my cry, the cry of the women, the cry of a child? The last breath of Butch, the first of a child" (148; 147). These final pages reject linear time in both form and content, refusing narrative resolution beyond the baby's birth and privileging a circular "natural" temporality embodied in the cycle of generations.

The Girl's ending has been attacked for its utopian depiction of motherhood and female solidarity. Coiner is especially unforgiving, about the novel's wholesale demonization of men (118), its unexamined "espousal of separatism" (119), and its "strain of biological determinism" (120). Rabinowitz is more charitable, undoubtedly because she is describing how female proletarian novelists rework male proletarian conventions, but she, too, admits that LeSueur's treatment of women "verges on essentialism" (123), and Foley quotes Rabinowitz in agreement (239-240). These critics, however, are not concerned with LeSueur's strategic restructuring of hegemonic narrative time. The female essentialism argument aside, LeSueur explicitly derides characters' hopes for vertical mobility and their faith in the kind of linear progress that assures a "succession of orders," and she implicitly rewrites this "time" at the sentence level, in the narrative tempo, and in the novel's action. As I mentioned earlier, Oktenberg and Coiner attribute LeSueur's propensity for nonlinear temporality to her feminist politics, and certainly time in The Girl is heavily informed by female biological rhythms, but the author deliberately and repeatedly challenges the teleology of upward mobility. Therefore her attitudes toward time are also influenced by her advocacy of working-class politics and her antipathy

toward bourgeois values. LeSueur attempts to present the intersection of female and working-class temporalities, and the finale's feminist bias shouldn't discount the attention LeSueur has given class earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The political problems LeSueur introduces with an ending that glorifies gender solidarity at the expense of class recall the different political problems Olsen causes by closing without resolution or any intimation of a future. Though I describe the narrative tactics these women develop to negotiate dominant narrative temporal conventions that are incompatible with their own experiences of their gender, the working class, and their leftist politics, I am in no way endorsing some postmodern celebration of open-endedness and ambiguity as subversive in their own right. "Progress" and "process" are not "bourgeoisie" by definition; a radical politics demands some sort of temporal change in a clear direction. Yet the "direction" classical Marxism trusted for so long, the teleological march of historical necessity towards revolution, socialism, and ultimately Communism--a teleology repeated on small scale in many proletarian novels, but omitted by Yonnondio and The Girl--has been thoroughly discredited by both Marxists and nonMarxists since the 1930's. Such "time" is not a viable alternative to the mythical time of upward mobility so effective in justifying class inequities and so fostered by the traditional story-time of the bourgeois bildungsroman.

It is not a question of whether Olsen's and LeSueur's interventions in narrative temporality offer a progressive alternative to American Dream-time or merely more "accurately" represent the static time and deferred promise characteristic of working-class

existence. Although The Girl and Yonnonidio do not provide a clear alternative temporality that is progressive in terms of class and gender equality, by disrupting the linear temporal order and vertical movement of the traditional bildungsroman in both form and content, the novels interrupt the temporal expectations a reader brings to the genre. The interruption helps readers understand how these conventions have denied working-class women their voices. It also leads us to see how the substitution of a working-class women's "time" enables writers to express their own experience and open up a new range of possibilities. Further, the interruption exposes dominant temporal conventions for what they are--simply conventions--be they generic literary conventions or the ideological conventions the literary genre reinforces: the conventional American "story" that explains permanent economic inequalities as transient differences always to be rectified, in due time, for obedient hard-working individuals willing to wait.

## Notes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup>Burkom and Williams (50), Rabinowitz (124), and Foley (327) all describe Yonnondio as a bildungsroman. In addition, Foley, who is the most careful about genre categories, terms The Girl this way.

<sup>2</sup>The influences on these authors to rework time/class dynamics are, I believe, threefold, the first being the availability to both authors of modernist texts with their formal innovations. More pertinent to my argument is how the intersection of women's class and gender positions shapes their handling of temporal conventions. In addition to Olsen's coming from the working-class, LeSueur's strong sympathies with it, and the women's involvement in the Communist Party, personal journals and interviews prove that both writers were aware of and interested in the debates raging in 1930's radical periodicals like The Left, New Masses, and Partisan Review over the new forms expected in the proletarian novel (Coiner 91-92; Rosenfelt 56, 70; Foley 54-63). LeSueur also participated in John Reed Clubs which encouraged in their writers "formal inventiveness as a necessary companion to revolutionary politics" (Foley 56). Inflecting these classed attitudes towards time are the women's feminist politics. The association of linear temporality and teleological historical time with masculinity, and cyclic, "natural," nonlinear time with femininity has become a commonplace of feminist theory since the "French feminism" of the 1970's, especially as practiced diversely by Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Although I think these associations, especially when made without specific references, lean toward essentialism, such nonteleological "women's time" clearly affects

both Yonnondio's and even more so The Girl's intervention in traditional "novel time."

The gendered influences unfold organically from the novels themselves, intersecting very closely with class positions, and I'll treat them as they arise.

<sup>3</sup>Coiner points out that LeSueur made The Girl more "anti-male bias[ed]" when she revised it in the 1970's (119). I would venture to guess that this revision was influenced by the support she had from the feminist movement at this time, support that supplanted what she had from the Communist Party when she first drafted the novel.

## Chapter Four

### White Families, White Water, and White Trash: Class Common Sense in Contemporary Film

#### I.

For the first time since the Depression, the socioeconomic climate of the 1990's has called into question the dominant American understanding of time and social position: that the future assures class ascent for individuals who deserve it. As the recession climaxed in the late '80's and early 90's and corporations downsized middle-class workers, many middle-class Americans began to equate the future with a lower social position for themselves and their children, a social position traditionally perceived by the middle class as "past": a place they left behind if not earlier in their own lives, at some point in an earlier generation.<sup>1</sup> This reversal of class expectations constitutes a crisis in middle-class Americans' conception of the nation's class organization and their places within it.

In 1994, Secretary of Labor Robert Reich took the opportunity of his annual Labor Day speech to diagnose the psycho-economic climate and forecast continuing

gloom. The old middle-class, he announced, was now splitting into three levels: an “overclass” of highly-educated professionals; an “underclass” for whom the “American Dream” was irrecoverable; and a new middle-middle class, the largest of the three, which Reich dubbed “the anxious class,” families working two or three jobs, living in fear of layoffs, experiencing a falling standard of living, and worried about their children’s futures (Swoboda F1).

At about the time of Reich’s speech, Hollywood offered anxious audiences a surprising number of films in which the anxious class interacts with white working-class characters, although these characters were never referred to as working class and seldomly shown working. That such representations should show up in the early 1990’s seems significant because, according to Stanley Aronowitz, they were nearly erased in the 1980’s (136 and 141). (Barbara Ehrenreich confirms that “Hollywood’s decade-long meditation on the working-class” lasted from “roughly 1970 to the early ‘80’s” (Fear 117).) Further, these characters are returning not as the tough and admirable--although at times racist and violent--workers of the ‘70’s Norma Rae, F.I.S.T., and The Deer Hunter, but as, for the most part, simply “white trash.” In the same periodicals that cover Reich’s doomsdaying, the anxious class could read reviews of and advertisements for mass-murdering white trash in Natural Born Killers, sexually abused, then sexually promiscuous Southern white trash Jenny in Forrest Gump, poor Appalachian noble savage Nell, the desperate trailer trash family of The Client, and trashy ex-cons terrorizing a vacationing middle-class family in The River Wild.

By reading two 1994 films through the theoretical lens of Gramsci's common sense, I will explore how American common sense is shifting to account for the recent disruption of the American mythology of time and social position. In particular, I will discuss how the disruption is related to contemporary Americans' fascination with "white trash." At the same time, recognizing that such a disruption could open a space for a more progressive class politics, I will probe for the "good sense" in the films: class common sense that might serve as a first step towards a politics with the objective of greater economic equality.

## II.

### A Wrinkle In Time

Reich's diagnosis was the culmination of two decades of a dramatic class restructuring in this nation, a restructuring that crescendoed after 1989 until the widening gap between rich and poor became not just a liberal rallying cry, but a commonplace of American media discourse. Three decades of phenomenal economic growth that followed World War II created a large, well-paid, and secure primary sector of mostly white and male upwardly-mobile workers and reconfirmed for white Americans the viability of the American Dream. However, around 1973, the U.S. economy began a radical transformation. With the shift to transnational capital, investors gradually abandoned manufacturing in the United States and also destroyed unions, tactics that hurt blue collar

workers first, but eventually undermined even the middle class (Rouse 369; Ehrenreich Fear 206-207). As the primary sector eroded, not only did the gap between rich and poor widen, but also the middle class itself split up and down. Capitalists and the upper level of the professional-managerial class--Reich's "overclass"--reaped the benefits of the transition, while the middle class and working class watched their incomes fall. Katherine Newman, in Declining Fortunes, marshalls statistics from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics that prove that "[b]y the end of the 1980's, only six out of ten Americans were middle class--a 20% decline in barely a dozen years" (44). Newman further illuminates the fate of the middle class by citing a 1990 Business Week article that claims 65% of unemployed workers at that time were "managers, professionals, and the clerical workers who work for them" (Declining 47; see also Doug Henwood (178-190) and Tad Friend (26) for more statistics on middle-class, especially white middle-class, downward mobility).

Although the downward mobility of the middle class doesn't mean the middle class has a worse standard of living than the working class does, or even a lower standard of living than the middle class's grandparents did, the precipitous fall itself has important political, ideological, and psychological consequences. The reversal in how white middle-class Americans see their social futures is an especially bitter pill to swallow given their descent from a generation of postwar parents who so spectacularly embodied the mythology of upward mobility that Newman calls them "one of the few living examples of the Horatio Alger story" (Declining 50). (Sociologists Coleman and Rainwater have

found that one way Americans gauge their own class standing is by contrasting it with their parents' (226).) Bourdieu clarifies the ideological fallout of class decline, as opposed to simple poverty or steady economic hardship, when he argues that a person's attitude towards the class position he or she occupies depends not on some objective definition of that position, but on the person's trajectory: how the person feels about where she is now compared to where she was and where she feels she ought to be in the future. For example, an individual who has moved from the lower middle class into the middle class is apt to be more satisfied with her class position than an individual who has fallen from the upper middle class into the middle class, even though from an objective sociological point of view, both occupy the same class position. Moreover, people's subjective images of their class positions carry more than private consequences. Bourdieu goes on to illustrate that a person's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his or her class trajectory directly influences how the person formulates political choices (Bourdieu 453-54).

Most pertinent to my discussion of the attitudes of a middle class in decline towards the working class and poor are Bourdieu's comments about the trajectory of the petty bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> According to Bourdieu, downward mobility is especially distressing for the petty bourgeoisie because "[his] whole existence . . . is the anticipation of a future" in which his efforts will finally pay off in upward mobility, if not for himself, at least for his children (352). If the promise of class ascent in the future is denied the petty bourgeoisie,

Bourdieu claims, he tends to respond with pessimism, resentment, conservative politics, and “regressive dispositions” (353; 342).

The current crisis in middle-class Americans’ perception of the nation’s class structure and their futures in it forces hegemonic processes to scramble for material and discursive strategies that can re-educate citizens to understand class in ways that won’t threaten current hegemonic dominance. The kinds of conservatism and regressive political dispositions Bourdieu describes as characteristic of middle-class decline can be directed to consolidate the hegemonic status quo as long as they don’t metastasize into Timothy McVeighs and Montana militia. As a matter of fact, two months after Reich’s “anxious class” speech, the Republicans achieved their so-called “Revolution”--their fortification of the New Right hegemonic bloc through their takeover of Congress-- and some analysts concluded that the Republicans won precisely by articulating and mobilizing anxious class fears for their own agenda.<sup>3</sup> Fusing economic anxieties with paranoia over escalating crime and the “decay of the American family,” the Republicans’ “Contract With America” promised the anxious class--a class that had voted Democratic for decades prior to the 80’s and 90’s--tax cuts, higher wages, a crackdown on crime, and relief from supporting Welfare layabouts. The “Contract” even included an “American Dream Restoration Act” (“The Text” 827). Although the anxious class’s problems were mostly economic, the New Right rewrote the economics as ethics, blaming lazy and promiscuous Welfare recipients, pathological criminals, the decadent liberal elite, self-serving politicians,

unqualified Affirmative Action hires, and avaricious illegal aliens, and, in turn, they coded much of the ethical deterioration racially.

The same crisis in social mobility, however, might also provide an opportunity for the middle class to develop a more progressive understanding of the class structure. Even though political realities of the last eighteen years seem to confirm Bourdieu's political diagnosis of the petty bourgeois in decline, other sociological studies call into question the assumption that downward mobility inevitably leads to conservative political attitudes.<sup>4</sup> For Erik Olin Wright, who reads the middle class not as a class in the traditional Marxist sense, but as a contradictory class location sharing interests with both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, a crisis like America's recent corporate downsizing and transition to a service economy could facilitate the American middle class's recognition of the advantages of an alliance with the working class.

Particularly under conditions where contradictory locations are being subjected to a process of "degradation"--deskilling, proletarianization, routinization of authority, etc.--it may be quite possible for people in these contradictory locations . . . to see the balance of their interests as being more in line with the working class than with the capitalist classes. (Wright Classes 125-126)

Wright's 1985 concept of "contradictory class location" has come under fire, particularly from post-Marxists, like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who criticize Wright for preserving the idea that economic interests are primary (Laclau and Mouffe 82). Nevertheless, regardless of the primacy of economic interests, Wright offers two excellent insights. First, the middle class does share interests with both the classes above

it and the classes below it, and so could be recruited into an alliance with either group. (The Ehrenreichs, as I've discussed in Chapter Two, draw the same conclusion about the upper segment of the middle class, the professional-managerial class ("The Professional-Managerial Class" 21; 33).). And, second, a degradation of middle-class work and in its perceived standard of living leads to a level of dissatisfaction that the middle class could see as the fault of a capitalist economic system that benefits only capitalist classes. Finally, to add my own perspective on the crisis, if the mythology that promises to solve American poverty through time--through inevitable upward mobility in the future--has as much efficacy in justifying American economic inequality as I've argued in my preceding chapters, the contemporary negation of the mythology should offer an excellent opportunity for the middle class to understand permanent economic inequality--for both the "deserving" and the "undeserving"--as part and parcel of a capitalist system. To speak bluntly, if the Left could mobilize anxious class common sense as skillfully as the Right has done during the recent economic transition, the middle class might see the benefits of allying itself with the working class and poor, and such an alliance could work to contain capital.<sup>5</sup>

Roger Rouse, an anthropologist studying the same economic and social changes I'm treating, underscores the power a middle-class/working-class alliance could carry. Rouse traces how the American capitalist class overcame the problems it began to face in 1973 with changes in the global economy. While he concludes the bourgeoisie have solved the economic part of their dilemma, he also feels they have yet to represent their

self-serving solution to the public in completely convincing terms. And one outstanding item, Rouse believes, are the greater American social inequalities left in the aftermath of the strategies the capitalist class used to preserve its dominance (371). Because of this weakness in the hegemony, Rouse maintains that the biggest threat to the bourgeoisie today are coalitions that might challenge it, particularly a middle-class/working class alliance. Consequently, hegemony works very hard to prevent such an alliance and to encourage coalitions that might reinforce it (378).

As I mentioned earlier, contemporary popular culture offers endless representations of the middle class interacting with classes “below” them. However, the representations configure the lower classes not as the “working class” or as “the poor,” but as “white trash.” Before proceeding to the films I will treat, I want to contextualize the contemporary phenomenon of white trash within a historical perspective on American common sense understandings of poor whites. I will also discuss very recent cultural studies attempts to account for the revived interest in white trash in the 1990’s. Finally, I will look at white trash from a classed point of view, exploring the kinds of hegemonic work white trash representations might perform for anxious middle-class Americans.

### III.

#### White Trash

In the 1990's, representations of white trash culture, characters, and aesthetics have circulated in the American cultural mainstream with such popularity and frequency that Tad Friend, in a 1994 article for The New York Times Magazine, has dubbed the decade "the age of white trash" (24). I should make clear that when I use "white trash" to describe this fad, I'm not referring to some "actual" subculture of lower-class whites in America. The "white trash" I'm treating is a cultural construct of dominant U.S. culture, more a projection of the middle-class imagination than a "real" lifestyle typical of the American working class or poor. To cast the phenomenon in terms more appropriate for and specific to my theoretical approach to the subject, I see white trash as an element of American middle-class common sense, in the Gramscian definition of that phrase: part of the view of reality that appears reasonable to middle-class Americans. In other words, white trash is a kind of common sense folklore Americans hold about classes lower than themselves, a way Americans simplify and make sense of white poverty.<sup>6</sup> I am not claiming that all characteristics the middle class associates with white trash are completely figments of middle-class imagination, characteristics entirely absent in the cultures of the working class and poor. But I am less interested here in objective descriptions of working-class/poor cultures and more interested in how the middle class subjectively perceives working-class/poor class cultures. Regardless of how "real" white trash is, middle-class conceptions of white trash do illuminate real attitudes and beliefs that people

who consider themselves middle class hold about classes “below” them in the U.S. class hierarchy.

One can see white trash as a cultural phenomenon circulating on FOX network programs like “King of the Hill” and “South Park,” on MTV’s “Beavis and Butthead,” in myriad talk show topics and talk show guests, in grunge and retro fashions, in Jeff Foxworthy’s popular “You Know You’re a Redneck” books and routines, in media constructions of Tonya Harding and of Bill Clinton. As these examples suggest, white trash is not a monolithic cultural category. Most configurations encourage audiences to distance themselves from white trash, but others involve identification with it, and the kinds of cultural capital one might achieve through the identification vary. The configurations include, for example, white trash identity as “victim chic,” a phrase Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray use to categorize successful whites who self-identify as white trash so that they, too, can participate in a simplistic version of multiculturalism that such whites perceive as including only people with a victim status (5). Other Americans adopt white trash poses to take advantage of what they see as white trash’s freedom to break taboos and flaunt conventional morals without feeling guilty (Friend 24). Generation Xer’s and other disenchanted youth play at white trashness, especially white trash fashion, to subvert middle-class propriety through what Bourdieu calls “ostentatious poverty” (220), a mode of rebellion that has been around for a very long time--consider James Dean in the 50’s and hippies in the 60’s. Notably, white trash--not rebellious bikers or ragged East Indians--signifies lower-class culture in the 1990’s. Because it’s not the actual “culture” of an

objective class position, “lower-class culture” can be redefined by dominant culture in a variety of ways, and white trash is simply the most popular imagining of lower-class culture in the 1990’s. Another longterm practice that has adopted white trash as the most recent model of lower-class culture is the avant garde’s recuperation of white trash aestheticism to achieve social distinction through an ultimate reversal. Instead of distinguishing itself from those below them in the social hierarchy, the more common form of consolidating or confirming one’s social status, the avant garde turns tables and wins social distinction by embracing the low: an “audacious imposture of refusing all refusals by recuperating in parody or sublimation the very objects refused by lower-degree aestheticism” (Bourdieu 61). Relevant to my argument that dominant common sense associates the poor with the past is the way both youth culture and the avant garde understand white trash fashion to be the fashion of the past--”retro” fashion. (The association creates for me a disorienting class-scrambled *deja vu* as I watch hip Seattleites strut around in articles of clothing identical to those worn by working-class and poor kids in my 1970’s West Virginia junior high.)

Because I want to read anxious class common sense, however, I am less interested in identification with white trash and more interested in that configuration of white trash that seems most popular with mainstream middle-class American audiences: the configuration that presents white trash as a spectacle for Americans to witness, then distance themselves from. We see this configuration more than any other in blockbuster movies, popular sitcoms, and on talk shows: “actual” white trash characters, “real”

representatives from the white underclass, who reinforce established common sense about poor white people as monstrous, or as pitiable and in need of middle-class help, or as ridiculous and comic, or as all three at once.

Inevitably, the white trash fad trickled up into the academy, where a small number of cultural studies critics have taken up the topic for a large audience of cultural studies consumers. Despite the demand for theory and criticism on white trash, little exists. To theorize the cultural figure, one must account for, on the one hand, whiteness and race in general, and, on the other, class. Whiteness and race issues continue to be politically charged and risky areas for white critics, although strong work on whiteness has appeared in the last several years. Class as an identity position has been overlooked and undertheorized in American cultural studies since cultural studies' inception in favor of work on gender, sexuality, race, and nation. While U.S. cultural studies has been willing to engage in critiques of capital and consumption, it has largely ignored serious discussion of classed cultures, especially the classed cultures, real or imagined, of the working-class and poor. Consequently, at this writing, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz's 1997 White Trash: Race and Class in America remains the only anthology on the cultural phenomenon of white trash. The anthology is already widely-known and, assumedly, often read.<sup>7</sup>

As I think through white trash as a part of both historical and contemporary class common sense, I will work very closely with Wray and Newitz's introduction to White Trash and with some of the other essays in the collection. I call into question their work not to play at one-upmanship. I want to critique White Trash in detail because the

anthology, with a few exceptional essays, presents the dangerous combination of being the only full-length work on this very popular topic and being incompletely researched, shallowly theorized, and poorly historicized. As the first and, at this point, only book of its kind, I fear that critics might use it, and especially its introduction, as a foundation for more cultural studies on white trash. I would advise readers of White Trash to approach the introduction in particular with circumspection. I'd like to put into a broader context some of the claims the introduction makes and gesture towards a fuller, more accurate, and more complex background for other cultural critics who want to work with white trash.

First, Wray and Newitz truncate a centuries-old genealogy of poor white stereotypes very similar to contemporary representations of white trash when they locate the origin of "current stereotypes of white trash" in "a series of studies produced around the turn-of-the-century by the Eugenics Records Office": the Eugenic Family Studies (2). Wray and Newitz get their information about the Eugenic Family Studies--information that continues to determine how they theorize white trash in their introduction and in Newitz's solo essay "White Savagery"--from a 1988 compilation of fifteen of the Family Studies that Nicole Rafter edited and titled White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies. All the studies sought to explain social class scientifically through biology. Poor families, the studies "proved," remained poor because they were "cacogenic"-- "bad-gened." In contrast, wealthier families-- "the aristogenic"--maintained their social status through their good genes (Rafter 1). Rafter stresses that the Eugenic Family Studies greatly influenced

the courses eventually taken by criminology, psychology, criminal justice, sociology, and social work (30). While I'm sure Rafter is right about the impact of the Studies, the stereotypes found in the Eugenic Family Studies and still a part of contemporary common sense about poor whites--that they are lazy, stupid, immoral, sexually licentious, sly, dirty, grotesque, violent, and simultaneously horrifying and comical--date back hundreds of years before the turn-of-the-century. (Most of these traits are simply part of how dominant culture Westerners see their "Others" generally: not only the poor, but also African-Americans, colonial peoples, and so on.) Duane Carr cites a passage from Juvenal's Satires III, composed in first-century Rome, to demonstrate that the poor were considered comical even then (3). He also presents evidence that Americans saw poor whites as lazy and immoral as early as the seventeenth-century (1). Sylvia Cook, in From Tobacco Road to Route 66, describes the poor white stereotype as one of America's "oldest and most enduring folk figures" (ix), and she finds in William Byrd's 1728 journals accounts of poor whites on the Virginia/North Carolina border very similar to those of poor whites in the Eugenic Family Studies. Byrd's descriptions are also reminiscent of contemporary representations of white trash.<sup>8</sup>

Kathleen Stewart dates a more specific attitude towards white trash, the tendency of the middle class to find white trash simultaneously repulsive and perversely attractive, to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Although Stewart never uses the term "white trash," she claims that during these centuries, the European bourgeoisie established for themselves "a new social and discursive space of rational judgement and enlightened

critique” and consolidated the integrity of this sphere by contrasting it with a sphere they represented as disorderly and as physically, mentally, and politically dirty. Into this latter sphere, Stewart continues, the bourgeoisie group “lowly and excluded elements,” including the poor, creating a group of Others who still evoke in the bourgeoisie the paradoxical emotions of desire and dread (117-118)--a contradictory response that characterizes well how the American middle class still reacts to white trash.

In short, although the Eugenic Family Studies certainly reinforced and perpetuated stereotypes of poor whites and also lent the stereotypes the authority of “science,” current stereotypes are much older than a hundred years and more deeply ingrained in American common sense. White trash seems a latent part of common sense that is resurrected and given more prominence in certain periods than in others. The cultural critic of white trash might ask why denigratory stereotypes of poor whites resurface with intensity in specific historical periods; how the resurrection relates to the period’s attendant common sense about class and race; and how, in turn, that common sense derives from the period’s economic and cultural circumstances.

Perhaps Wray and Newitz trace contemporary images of white trash to the Eugenic Family Studies because Rafter calls her book White Trash. Yet a close examination of the Studies themselves reveals that the actual phrase “white trash” appears a single time in the research, and that time it is used by a doctor interviewed by a researcher, not by the researcher herself (Rafter 240). Apparently, Rafter chose her title for the resonance it would carry in 1988, not because the Eugenic Family Studies

established the first systematic use of “white trash.” The etymology of “white trash” is a contested issue and another place Wray and Newitz fumble their research. Relying on a forty-seven-year-old source, A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles, Wray and Newitz pinpoint 1833 as the earliest recorded use of “white trash” and claim black slaves coined it to refer to white servants (2).<sup>9</sup> The second edition (1989) of the Oxford English Dictionary finds the earliest use of “trash” meaning “a worthless or disreputable person” in Shakespeare’s Othello, and it traces “white trash” to the 1831 American Comic Annals 88 (439). Perhaps more productive for cultural criticism than when “white trash” was first used is the question of who created and circulated the term and why. Its coinage by slaves seems conventional wisdom. Eugene Genovese also attributes the neologism to slaves (22)<sup>10</sup>, and most “white trash” citations in the OED are taken from texts written by white authors who put “white trash” in a black character’s mouth. (Remember that in John Fox, Jr.’s, The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come (1903) only the slaves refer to Chad as “white trash.”) However, that slaves would have the power to invent such a term about whites and then circulate it among antebellum upper-class whites is questionable.<sup>11</sup> Serious cultural critics of white trash might explore why middle-class and upper-class whites in the nineteenth-century would want to imagine the term as invented and used by slaves. What does this tell about classed forms of racism and classism, and how might the term have helped the white status quo divide blacks and whites who shared class identities after Emancipation?

White Trash: Race and Class in America presents other problems, in particular the

way some of the essays pander to the middle-class American appetite for the spectacle of white trash, an appetite the introduction purports the book will critique, not titillate. (Constance Penley's piece on pornography and Gael Sweeney's article about Elvis are particularly guilty in this respect.) Other pieces, especially Laura Kipnis's interview with "White Trash Girl," simply re-enact the very "victim chic" Wray and Newitz deride in their introduction. But the book's biggest weakness is that, despite its subtitle, most pieces in White Trash: Reading Race and Class in America treat only the "race" part of the figure with any theoretical sophistication.<sup>12</sup> The anthology's introduction, for example, makes only nominal connections to class, never bothering to think through the relationship between contemporary class structure, contemporary class-inflected ideologies, and the American public's obsession with white trash. To be sure, white trash, as a part of middle-class American common sense, is a highly overdetermined intersection of whiteness and poverty, and both the class and race poles of the figure must be theorized. And Wray and Newitz make some useful observations about the "whiteness" in white trash, especially the point that because white trash is an identity position that prevents whiteness from standing unmarked, it might help whites in general recognize their own raced identity, which could, in turn, lead to less racism. (This idea also appears in John Hartigan's 1992 "Reading Trash" which Wray and Newitz list in their bibliography but don't credit in the text of their introduction.) However, they ground one of their prominent theories about the racial dimension of white trash in yet another misreading or misrepresentation of the Eugenic Family Studies. Starting the book with an attention-

getting epigraph from John Waters--"white trash' . . . [is] the last racist thing you can say and get away with" (1)--Wray and Newitz go on to state: "White trash is not just a classist slur--it's also a racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves" (1-2). They support and complicate their claim by contending that in the Eugenic Family Studies, researchers usually traced poor white subjects' "genealogies back to a 'defective' source (often, but not always, a person of mixed blood)" (2).

The Family Studies did indeed cast poor whites as a "breed apart," as biologically inferior to other whites, as did many studies of poor whites at the turn-of-the-century. Henry Cabot Lodge's A Short History of the English Colonies in America (1881), Theodore Roosevelt's Winning of the West (1889-1896) and John Fiske's Old Virginia and her Neighbors (1897), as well as Fox's novel The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come (1903), for example, all accounted for "mean whites" by blaming their flawed genetic stock: poor whites' ancestors, these men argued, included immigrants from London slums, convicts, and indentured servants (Shapiro 91-97). But to classify "white trash" as a breed apart, as biologically inferior, is not equivalent to categorizing them as "mixed blood," as racially different in the ways we define race in the 1990's. Again, a careful reading of White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies shows that neither Rafter nor the studies claim what Wray and Newitz paraphrase them as saying. Instead, Rafter states that the mixed blood theme was "less insistent" than the theme of "rural degradation" (7). Some authors of the Studies, she continues, blamed the genetic defect on miscegenation,

but others were careful to express explicitly that the problems of defective rural whites could not be blamed on foreigners and people of color (Rafter 8). As I read the actual texts of the Studies, I discovered that most often instead of tracing poor whites' defects back to a person of color, the Studies suggest that a white person's desire to have sexual relations with a person of color is a symptom of the white person's defectiveness, not the genesis of a defective family line. In short, the "defective source" of white trash, as represented by the Family Studies researchers, is not "often . . . a person of mixed blood" as Wray and Newitz would have readers think. To argue that Americans see white trash as degenerate because they see white trash as not entirely Caucasian is to rewrite class as minority status, a very common American strategy for avoiding class and explaining class differences without criticizing capitalism. It also simplifies the cultural figure of white trash and erases or distorts many kinds of classed and raced hegemonic work the figure might perform for Americans.

To deepen the work in Wray and Newitz's anthology, my discussion of the classed dimensions of white trash will occupy most of the rest of this chapter. As I've already mentioned, however, I know that white trash is not only about class. For the sake of balance and thoroughness, and because I'm trying to lay groundwork for other cultural critics, I want to mention some other reasons for white trash's current popularity before I move into my treatment of class. I believe, for example, that "white trash aesthetics," which include the lurid, the grotesque, the excessive, the sensational, and the perverse, play well in an image culture seeking the ever-more-outrageous spectacle. In addition,

because the figure of white trash is essentially an oxymoron, as Sylvia Cook reminds us, the yoking together of a race identified in America with respectable class status and a class position traditionally associated with people of color, it satisfies postmodernism's passion for irony. White trash as "kitsch" feeds the ironic impulse as well. White trash mania may also be, as Tad Friend believes, a cultural backlash against the 80's yuppie (28). Wray and Newitz's point that white trash identity is a simplistic response to multiculturalism also explains part of its current popularity (5-7). Although Newitz's essay "White Savagery," confuses race with biology, it provides insights on how white trash, especially in films that feature higher-classed characters as victims of white trash violence, helps whites who are not white trash feel innocent of racism and brutality (138). In addition, Newitz contends, representations of white trash could be a place where whites imaginatively act out racial self-hatred and self-humiliation, penitential emotions that can lead to feelings of redemption and guiltlessness for middle-class white audiences (139). Finally, as both Newitz (152) and John Hartigan ("Name-Calling" 49) point out, white trash substitutes as a target for displaced racism from whites who now "know better" than to express openly their racism against people of color.

Without denying any of the determinants I've already mentioned in the middle class's contemporary appetite for white trash, I now want to focus specifically on how white Americans' experiences of their classed identities, in addition to their experiences of their raced identities, contribute to the cultural demand for white trash. I will treat that configuration of white trash most common in mainstream popular culture: the

representation of white trash characters who are usually some combination of violent and horrifying, needy and infantilized, and absurd and comical, and, in all cases, simultaneously repulsive and fascinating. I will theorize white trash and white middle-class Americans' classed identities within the framework of the reconfigured U.S. class structure and the way the reconfiguration calls into question ingrained American common sense connections between social position and temporality. Wray and Newitz do mention the link between contemporary economic conditions and the popularity of white trash, but they pursue the economic factor only in a broad and circular fashion.<sup>13</sup> I will argue a direct connection between recent economic changes that have left many middle-class Americans "anxious" over their class positions and the American obsession with white trash. First, I will discuss how analyzing white trash illuminates American tactics for decoding class positions and reading class hierarchies, especially in the 1990's, and how to rewrite white poverty as white trash is a logical consequence of those tactics. Next I will demonstrate how white trash helps "anxious" Americans define, consolidate, and preserve their own subjective class positions in an objectively unstable class structure. Finally, I will address the temporal dimensions of white trash, exploring how the stereotypical "backwardness" of white trash evokes in the middle class both a fear of class regression--a fear of slipping back in time to an "earlier" class position--but also a nostalgia for white trash "past" values including loyalty, family integrity, and a slower lifestyle.

Although Marxists traditionally define "class" as a position in relations of production, and although educated Americans, when directly asked how they define

classes, usually name occupation and income, in actual practice, Americans define and decode class position neither by relations of production nor by occupation and income. Americans--and especially middle-class Americans--perceive class differences as differences in behavior, values, morals, and taste: in other words, as differences in "lifestyle."<sup>14</sup> In the early 1970's, Richard P. Coleman and Lee Rainwater researched Americans' subjective evaluations of class status. (Sociologists usually make empirical evaluations of class.) Not only did they discover that Americans pay much more attention to "standard of living" or "lifestyle" than they do to occupation, education, or income when they are asked to classify other Americans (27; 47; 90-91), but they also found that the elements that compose a perceived "lifestyle" vary depending upon whether the classifier is ranking those above him or her in class status or those below him or her. When Americans talk about those higher than themselves, they tend to define that class by what they envy in it. However, and most pertinent to middle-class attitudes towards white trash, when Americans classify those lower than themselves, they focus on the absence of or weaknesses in characteristics they most pride in themselves (Coleman and Rainwater 23), especially deficiencies in "cultural levels, refinement, taste, speech, grooming, manifest intelligence, morals, values, characters, and ambitions" (Coleman and Rainwater 85). Moreover, the study found that the middle class, even more than the upper classes, stressed character, morals, and ambition when ranking people below it in status (Coleman and Rainwater 86; see also Bourdieu 333 and 337 on the importance of morality to the petty bourgeoisie).

If, as Coleman and Rainwater have proven, Americans, and especially middle-class Americans, decode and define class using outward signs of morality, taste, and behavior, that Americans would rewrite white poverty as “white trash” follows logically. Moreover, the “classed” dimension of white trash (in addition to its raced dimension) comes into sharper focus. White trash, with all of its impropriety, ignorance, flamboyance, laziness, licentiousness, and atrocious taste, is degenerate in precisely those categories Coleman and Rainwater insist middle-class Americans consider when ranking people below them: taste, morality, ambition, manners, behavior, grooming, and so on. The categories would carry more weight when white middle-class Americans classify poor whites than when they classify people of color because when they do rank people of color, white Americans can point to “race” as both a reason for and a symptom of lower-class status. When confronted with poor whites, however, white Americans are more apt to resort to “lifestyle” differences as a sign of a lower-class position.

Of course, Coleman and Rainwater performed their research twenty-five years ago, and the longevity of poor white stereotypes suggests that Westerners have always judged class, at least in part, by “lifestyle.” Yet cultural and economic changes over the past twenty-five years have popularized “class-as-lifestyle” even further and have exacerbated Americans’ tendency to view white poverty not as an economic condition, but as an ethical/behavioral condition. Americans have been increasingly socially constructed to spend rather than to save, to think of themselves as consumers rather than producers, and the re-education encourages people to class others by the ways they consume rather than

by the ways they produce. The dismantling of U.S. manufacturing also contributes to Americans' predilection to use "lifestyle" instead of "work" as a class marker. The old stereotypical "working-class" individual--blue collar, male, white, tough, perhaps violent and racist, but often noble, and seldomly trashy--was associated with a site of production: a factory, a mine, a mill. The stereotype had some connection to work. With factory, mine, and mill now overseas, the blue collar stereotype has become an anachronism and no popular image of the new working class--service industry workers, temporary workers, parttimers, often women and people of color--has replaced it. The middle class perceives those below them not as "working class," but as white trash, a figure almost entirely defined by its habits of consumption, its choices of consumer items, and its deployment of consumptive practices: trashy clothes, tacky taste, boorish manners. As economic production is erased, and class is more and more defined by lifestyle, sub-middle-class status becomes even more commonly seen as either a choice or as the inevitable and deserved result of white trash's weak morals and lack of ambition.

As Coleman and Rainwater intimate when they explain that Americans usually rank other classes by what they envy in those classes or by what those classes lack when contrasted with the classifier's class, Americans tend to define their own class position relationally. In other words, an American constructs and imagines his or her own social position in terms of its difference from other social positions.<sup>15</sup> The relational nature of the perceived class structure figures prominently in the cultural work representations of white trash perform for white middle-class Americans. Bourdieu claims that each class

tends to identify with the class immediately above it as the possessor of legitimate culture, while each class distinguishes itself most fervently from the class immediately below it (246). John Hartigan's research in Detroit ("Name-Calling" 50), as well as Coleman and Rainwater's study, corroborate Bourdieu's point that people understand and confirm their classed identities by distinguishing themselves from other classed positions, and in particular that classed identity just under them. One might argue that white trash is not "immediately" under the middle class, and if we take white trash as an actual class position, this is true. However, if we take white trash as a part of middle-class common sense, and especially the common sense of a middle class facing impending downward mobility and having only "lifestyle" as a way to conceptualize class, white trash might very well appear to the anxious class as just across the line from their own tenuous position.<sup>16</sup> Hartigan agrees. Within a context in which "class identities are relationally formulated," Hartigan writes, "[t]he social differences embodied by white trash do not exist in a vacuum; they are elements that the white middle class relies upon to distinguish themselves from the lower orders: 'We are not that'" ("Name-Calling" 51). In another article, Hartigan suggests how the idea of "trash" fits into the relational construction of class identity. He reminds readers that "an identifying boundary for culture is the material notion of pollution or trash; cultures articulate their form and content by the material which they consider 'out of place' and dangerous, thereby subject to exclusion" ("Reading Trash" 8). White trash he interprets as "an explicit instance of the operation of pollution ideology" ("Reading Trash" 8). In other words, Americans consolidate and assert their

own perceived class position by drawing a boundary between themselves and classed subjects they see as “trash.”<sup>17</sup>

While poor white stereotypes have circulated for ages, I believe they have resurfaced with such fervor, tenacity, and frequency in the 1990’s because the experience of downward mobility for white middle-class Americans has made more imperative that they imaginatively and discursively defend their own subjective class identities. With class relationally defined, the anxious middle class preserves and confirms its identities by distinguishing itself from that amorphous class it imagines just below: white trash. Watching the spectacle of white trash and the debacles of white trash, ridiculing white trash, vicariously experiencing white trash being defeated, humiliated, and put in its place, all help the middle-class audience perform imaginative distinction. At the same time, however, I think part of the middle class’s desire for white trash images originates in a perverse inability to resist a glimpse of where one or one’s children may end up if the middle class doesn’t do its utmost to police class borders and safeguard class integrity.

My theory that class instability and the threat of downward mobility whets the middle-class appetite for negative stereotypes of poor whites is substantiated by cultural production in the 1930’s, the only decade this century with economic changes more devastating for the white middle class than the 1990’s. The 1930’s marked a surge in the popularity of cultural representations of hillbillies, including in 1934 the birth of Paul Webb’s “Mountain Boys,” Al Capp’s “Li’l Abner,” and Billy Beck’s “Snuffy Smith” (Williamson 40-41). J. W. Williamson, in Hillbillyland, attributes the demand for hillbilly

cartoons to the Depression's forcing middle-class Americans "to consider seriously" that they might "land . . . back in Rural Subsistence Hell"; Williamson contends that Americans gravitated towards the cultural figure of the hillbilly as a sort of talisman "to ward off the evil of failure" (40-42). From the perspective of a relationally constructed class hierarchy, however, one can refine Williamson's point and argue that the anxious middle class in the '30's, like the middle class in the '90's, consumed poor white images not as a talisman per se, but as a means to distinguish themselves imaginatively from what they feared they were slipping towards. Consider, in contrast, how poor whites were popularly imagined in the 1960's, a period of middle-class economic stability, optimism, and upward mobility. The prevailing cultural representations of this decade depicted poor whites not as white trash, but as noble, needy, pitiable, and deserving of middle-class help: a patronizing attitude, to be sure, but not an entirely denigratory one. Because the middle-class social position was not under attack, middle-class Americans had less need to confirm their own subjective class identity by reminding themselves and everyone else of their own social superiority as distinct from obnoxious, immoral, and tasteless white trash. Finally, remember the Murfree short stories I examined in Chapter One. While these stories did not portray the poor in a derogatory way, they did portray the rising professional-managerial class as despicable. The audience for the stories was an elite in decline, and the professional-managerial class, not the poor, is the class "immediately below" the "anxious" elite, the class the elite contrasts with itself to validate its own class status.

Still, white trash not only signifies immorality, impropriety, ignorance, lack of

ambition, sexual licentiousness and other attributes middle-class Americans draw on for class distinction. American common sense also associates white trash with the past, as it does the working class and poor generally.<sup>18</sup> Because American common sense connects future time with class ascent, I argue that the middle class sees the poor as past because the poor occupy a social position the middle class perceives as its own past, a position the middle class has risen from and left behind a generation or more ago. And, if America is progressing the way American mythology dictates it should be, white trash occupies a past social position the middle class should never have to revisit. In fact, to revisit the position would be antithetical to nature; it would be, in a sense, to enter a kind of time warp. Yet the contemporary American economic structure threatens precisely this return to the past for many middle-class members. Predictably, popular culture for the most part represents the menace of temporal regression as a peril the middle class must fear and resist. But at the same time, a possible return to the past awakens in the anxious middle class a nostalgia for desirable “past” values that lower classes, even white trash, are portrayed as still practicing.<sup>19</sup>

It’s no secret that nostalgia for past value systems is easily directed into conservative politics. The New Right has enjoyed tremendous success by tapping into this nostalgia and capitalizing on it to build its own constituency and justify its political agenda. However, because from a middle-class point of view certain “past” values seem the only valorized link between the middle class and the working class and poor, I think it is important to consider how a version of this nostalgia might be articulated for

progressive purposes. To think through such an articulation and to investigate other ways the Left might speak to existing middle-class common sense, I want to turn now to concrete examples of middle-class common sense about white trash.

#### IV

##### Class Common Sense in Contemporary Film

To begin to imagine how recent class reorganization might lead to a more progressive understanding of class in America, I will read two of the films I mentioned earlier that feature middle class/white trash interaction: The River Wild and The Client. Both films played in the summer and fall of 1994, when anxiety over the early '90's recession was at a peak and the New Right was mobilizing for its November takeover of Congress, a takeover that can be contributed in part to its "making sense" to the anxious class.

In earlier chapters, I explored the ways prevailing cultural narratives in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries worked to present the values of a new hegemonic order as common sense to a majority of Americans. As I read The Client and The River Wild, I'll consider what the films reveal about how hegemony is restructuring

common sense to negotiate the present economic crisis. However, common sense theory is also productive because it recognizes the existence of “good sense” within common sense and because it contends that one might detect this good sense in cultural texts. Although Gramsci describes common sense as uncritical and incoherent (324), conservative and neophobic (423), he does not believe it is monolithic, negative, and inexorable. Because it is fragmentary, “ambiguous, contradictory, and inconsequential” (Gramsci 426), always shifting and adapting, it contains within it vague recognitions of alternatives, possibilities for change and growth, even the potential for becoming coherent and critical. From a Gramscian perspective, the task of the politically serious cultural critic is, first, to determine what constitutes contemporary common sense, and, second, to identify within it nascent progressive possibilities that might be rehabilitated for social change.

One place Gramsci directs us to look for common sense is in popular cultural texts, including cultural texts like The River Wild and The Client. Their enormous popularity--both movies were among the five top-grossing films in America for weeks on end (“Top-Grossing Films” 560 and 824)--make them in Gramscian terms the kind of popular culture that is not made by the people, but that the people adopt because “it conforms to their ways of thinking and feeling” (Landy 87). For Gramsci, popular culture is an artifact where we can read cultural stratifications of religion, science, folklore, proverbial wisdom, and history, all of those common sense elements that “continue to play a role in making the world appear reasonable and expedient to individuals and groups

whose interests might be better served by challenging those structures” (Landy 80). And at the same time that popular culture embodies common sense, it produces, confirms, and sometimes even changes it. For these reasons, Gramsci suggests that we examine popular cultural works not only to identify within them the ways the ruling hegemony has convinced other groups that they share an identity, but also those places where hegemony is weak, the consensus fragile or contradictory (Landy 96).

With all this in mind, I will read The River Wild and The Client for what they reveal about contemporary white middle-class American common sense concerning class issues in general and the working class and poor in particular. How does the common sense seem to be shifting to account for recent class reorganization and, specifically, the threat of downward mobility for the middle class? How do the films escalate or defuse present cultural anxieties stemming from class instabilities, and how are these anxieties displaced onto gendered, familial, and national identities? What hegemonic work does white trash seem to perform for the anxious class? What do the films tell us about anxious class attitudes towards cross-class interaction or alliance? Finally, to move toward such an alliance, I will try to detect the embryonic “good sense” in the films, those elements of common sense that might be renovated and redirected towards a progressive class politics.

The River Wild: Cross-Class Transgression and the Reconstructed Family Man

In its beginning, The River Wild presents an American family dissolving under economic pressures from above. The protagonists come not from the anxious class as Reich defines it, but from the professional-managerial class, perhaps a reminder--or a false reassurance--to the film's audience that not even the upper strata of the middle class are free from class anxiety. (Because the professional-managerial class occupies a level just above the anxious class, the anxious class would identify with the PMC as possessing legitimate culture [Bourdieu 246]. This may explain why so many mainstream movies and television programs targeting middle-class audiences use main characters from the professional-managerial class.) We learn that the threatened family's father, Tom (David Strathairn), is so overworked by his architecture firm that he "spends every waking minute at his job," "can't seem to make time for [his family] anymore," and now arrives home on the eve of the family's big whitewater vacation to announce that, once again, his work will force him to cancel. His employer dislikes his most recent project, and he must redo it to protect his job. After a domestic quarrel, his wife Gail (Meryl Streep) and their son Rork leave Boston for Montana without Tom. Gail confides in her mother that she's on the verge of divorcing him, but then Tom, wearing a full business suit and carrying a briefcase, appears riverside at the last minute to accompany them. Almost immediately, the menace to the family shifts from the architecture firm, which the film never directly portrays, to a pair of small-time white trash thieves and the dangers of the river itself. The narrative sets aside the draconian work demands destroying the family, and it redirects the economic

concerns it has introduced into teaching Tom, Gail, and Rork, first, a tough lesson about the dangerous consequences of consorting with white trash, and, second, how to distinguish themselves clearly from the vilified class position and in this way restore their family.

The River Wild is a variation on the film subgenre sometimes referred to as the “hillbilly monster movie” (Williamson 151) or the white trash ambush movie (Newitz 139). The subgenre dramatizes poor white characters hellbent on terrorizing, murdering, and raping higher-classed whites, and Williamson finds this theme in film as far back as early twentieth-century nickelodeon (183). While white trash ambush movies take myriad forms, The River Wild reminds one most of Deliverance (1972). In both movies, white middle-class urbanites venture into nature where they undergo a trial by whitewater; both trials require a reconfirmation of middle-class masculinity; and in both cases middle-class masculinity is called into question by white trash. But the films differ in at least two ways that elucidate 1990’s class common sense. First, The River Wild rescues the middle-class urbanites from white trash contamination and successfully reconstructs middle-class masculinity while Deliverance does neither. In part, Deliverance fails to “deliver” the middle class because it is a more ambitious film than The River Wild, a feel-good Hollywood blockbuster. However, I would also argue that because a real middle-class decline into white trash seemed less likely in 1972 than in 1994, Deliverance’s narrative was not as compelled to do the cultural work of class distinction and was freer to experiment with crossing class boundaries. Second, in The River Wild, white trash

ultimately jeopardizes not masculinity per se, as the hillbillies do in Deliverance, but the integrity of the American family. Because The River Wild imagines masculinity in terms of family, the film represents the white trash threat to masculinity as just one of several steps in white trash destruction of the family.

“Family” and “morality,” the latter closely related to family and often defined through it, figure importantly in both The River Wild and The Client, as they do in New Right rhetoric and, one can conclude, in contemporary middle-class common sense. Susan Jeffords, in Hard Bodies, poses an economic explanation for contemporary films’ tendency to imagine masculinity through family values as The River Wild does. In place of the hard body action hero, the paradigm of masculinity during the Reagan years, the late ‘80’s and early ‘90’s have favored “a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values” (Jeffords 13). Jeffords, who argues that the masculine body is central to national identity, believes the shift in masculine ideals is a reaction to the declining importance of the United States in the world economy. Americans try to compensate for their loss of economic power through the superiority of their moral values, and one place American masculinity can perform and prove its moral values is in the context of the American family (Jeffords 116).

I’d like to narrow Jeffords’ argument about morality and Americans’ place in the transnational economy and pinpoint the middle-class American’s declining importance in the domestic economy. (To be sure, American middle-class decline originates in transnational capital, but I believe the domestic context is more pertinent to how the

middle class sees itself in relation to white trash.) The preoccupation with saving the family from white trash expresses anxious class fears about two issues. First, it expresses anxiety over a declining family class trajectory. An important part of the American Dream, and a part that points up its dependence on temporality, is that if you don't "make it," at least you can achieve the Dream secondhand through future generations. Defending the "family" looms large in these cultural texts because recent trends suggest that not only are individual middle-class members facing social decline, but their middle-class children and their children's children might very well fare even worse. The middle class can't depend on their descendants to recover upward mobility and in that way compensate for the present generation's stagnation or decline. (Erik Olin Wright discusses the importance of intergenerational mobility for capitalism to legitimate the inequalities it causes (Class Counts 169-170).) Second, since at least the nineteenth-century, the middle class has conceived of the family as the private sphere where morals are inculcated, cultivated and guarded. To defend the family is to defend morality. And further, from a middle-class perspective, to defend morality is to defend the middle class. As I explained earlier, morality as a mode of distinction is more important to this class than it is to any other. The middle class holds morality so dear because "morals," especially "self-discipline" and "self-direction" (Ehrenreich Fear 15), "character" and "firm internal values" (Ehrenreich Fear 51) and "virtue," including hard work, good will, sacrifice, and renunciation (Bourdieu 333 and 353) make up the only "capital" the middle class (which generally lacks economic capital and social connections) has to exchange for social mobility. And

although the middle class always prizes morality, Bourdieu points out that morality approaches an obsession for the middle class in decline (353). As I discussed in Chapter One with the case of a declining elite after the Civil War, classes in decline generally cling to “tradition” and a nostalgia for “lost” morality (Bourdieu 111; 455), but the attachment to morality is particularly acute for a middle class in decline because morality is really all they have left (Bourdieu 353). By proving the moral superiority of middle-class families and familial masculinity by contrasting them with white trash, the film works to reconfirm middle-class social position through moral distinction.

To establish this moral distinction between classes, of course, cultural texts must present class as “lifestyle” instead of as a social position related to economics or work, income or occupation. And The River Wild’s portrayal of white trash characters Wade (Kevin Bacon) and Terry (John C. Reilly) does distinguish them from Gail, Tom, and Rork through morals, values, behaviors, and tastes. Wade and Terry’s class position has nothing to do with work. Instead, the film signals the pair’s white trashness through their crude manners, their ignorant consumptive habits (poor taste in clothing and lack of recreational technology), their violation of norms of neatness and cleanliness (they dress sloppily and throw trash in the river), their lack of self-discipline (they drink beer incessantly and seem in no hurry to conquer the river), and their twangy Southern accents. (Coleman and Rainwater point out that speech, including diction, accent, grammar, vocabulary, and conversation topics, showed up in their research as “the most widely singled out ‘way that you tell someone’s social class at first meeting’” (88).) Wade and

Terry's racism against Native Americans, the only people of color in the film, also marks them as white trash, and stands in sharp contrast to Tom, Gail, and Rork's respect and friendliness for Natives. (Displacing blame and guilt for racism from the "enlightened" middle class to poor whites happens routinely in American narratives about white trash and the working class.) But just in case the audience still misreads Terry and Wade's white trashness after all these cues, at one point in the film, Wade and Terry even self-identify as "white trash." After hearing that Gail's nickname used to be "Whitewater," Wade remarks, "We never had nicknames where I come from. Certainly not 'Whitewater.' 'White Trash,' maybe." The admission and Wade and Terry's loud laughter accompanying it supports the common sense assumption that white trash choose their status or lifestyle and then revel in it.

Also characteristic of middle-class common sense about white trash, the film depicts Wade and Terry as inhabiting a time more "past" than the time the middle-class family inhabits. The movie signifies their "pastness" through their consumptive practices and tastes, such as their unfashionable clothing, Terry's bad haircut, and their chainsmoking, a habit eschewed decades ago by many in the health-conscious middle class. Wade demonstrates his prowess at the old-fashioned skills of fishing and shooting, but proves inept at the more up-to-date sport of whitewater rafting, at which Gail excels. In addition, Wade and Terry's lack of technology casts them in a period "before" the middle-class family, who carry with them wetsuits, Texas, high-tech camping equipment, and even a lap-top computer. The middle-class audience can also comfortably see the

white trash's racism as a part of white trash "pastness." Moreover, as I explained in Chapter One, social distinction includes distance in "time." By perceiving themselves as more "up-to-date" and "progressive" than backwards white trash, the middle class gains a sense of class superiority: they are cultured enough to "choose" modernity, while the ignorant poor choose the past (Bourdieu 246-49).

That Wade and Terry are "past"--a temporal state which in part, as I argued earlier, represents to the middle-class audience a social position they should have left permanently behind--makes even more imperative that the middle-class family prevent its contamination by the white trash. Yet their "pastness" is also denoted by their infantilization, a common stereotype of the poor that Barbara Ehrenreich claims derives from and reconfirms the middle class's association of classes below them with their own personal past (Fear 51). The infantilization tempts Gail to risk contamination. With Neanderthal brow--as though he's even an evolutionary throwback--and quivering lips, Terry acts the naive simpleton, at times near tears over the crimes he and Wade commit. Wade plays more the teenager, cocky, volatile, and sexy. Gail, at first, even defends the two to Tom by saying "They're just those kind of guys who never got over their adolescence." Their infantilization leads logically into their being needy, another ingrained common sense notion about the poor. The white trash can't maneuver their raft, and Wade can't even swim. Again and again, they beg Gail, a former whitewater guide, "We need you to get us down the river." What can well-intentioned Gail do but respond with American middle-class magnanimity?

The results of Gail's assistance contrasted with the results of Progressive Era narratives reveals a great deal about declining middle-class common sense concerning the lower classes as opposed to the common sense of a middle class on the rise. Progressive Era narratives, as I've discussed in Chapter Two, often portray needy infantilized whites as not only appreciatively accepting middle-class help, but also successfully rising through it. Gail's offering help, however, turns out to be a terrible mistake that may cost her family their lives. Terry and Wade disclose that they are criminals, and they start to personify many anxious class fears about the dangerous consequences of showing sympathy to the underclass. Roger Rouse would read this dynamic of the film as exemplifying one of the models he claims contemporary movies use to reconstruct American ideology so that it reconceptualizes the class structure in a way that forestalls cross-class interaction and sympathy. (As I mentioned earlier, Rouse believes contemporary hegemony's highest priority is discouraging class alliances that might challenge its dominance.) In this model, a member of the professional-managerial class is thrown together with some portion of the underclass, and the higher-classed character must work as hard as possible to defend the boundary between the two classes. However, Rouse continues, moral flaws in the middle-class person usually keep him or her from maintaining the boundary. (Note that, again, morality is the pivotal distinction.) When the middle-class character does trespass, the result is a "tumbling descent into horror" (Rouse 388). Gail's cross-class transgression has exactly this effect: after she makes the mistake of aiding the white trash, she finds herself sexually attracted to Wade--the moral flaw--and

the rest of the film narrates the family's harrowing escape from the white trash. The lesson, of course, is that in the contemporary socioeconomic climate, where the middle class occupies a very unstable social position, the middle class cannot risk blurring or crossing class boundaries. Instead, it must focus on clearly distinguishing itself from white trash, in this way reconfirming its social position and hardening class lines.

However, as a way into the "good sense" one might detect in this cultural text, some fragment of middle-class common sense that might be renovated towards a cross-class alliance, I want to look at the few characteristics Wade and Terry possess that seem to evoke sympathy or even desire in the film's middle-class protagonists and, by proxy, in the audience identifying with these protagonists. These few favorable characteristics have to do with the white trash's pastness, and they prove very seductive to both Gail and Rork. Wade, we're shown, has masculine virtues associated with the past that make him a better husband and father than Tom. Some of these virtues are simply conventional macho physical attributes that draw on common sense stereotypes that link a more exaggerated or "purer" form of masculinity with the working class and femininity with the bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> But they also include Wade's having the time to be more patient with and attentive to Gail and Rork than Tom has, trapped as Tom is in the contemporary rat race. Wade's old-fashioned slow pace permits him to give Gail all the romantic attention she desires and to teach Rork traditional father/son lessons like fishing. In short, at first, Wade has better family values than Tom.

Wade's "past" virtues tempt Gail and Rork to join the lower class, and the

possibility of their acquiescing to the temptation gives the film much of its tension and suspense in the first half. At a key moment in the plot, for example, the family has an opportunity to escape the white trash once and for all, but they fail because Rork, still under the white trash spell, insists on riding in Terry and Wade's raft. Rork's allying himself with the two at this crucial juncture dramatizes the downwardly mobile middle class's worst nightmare: its children choosing to cross over. Gail wises up more quickly than Rork when Wade's initially appealing sexuality takes a predictable turn into white trash pervertedness. (The film highlights the shift from sexy Wade to perverted Wade with a spur-of-the-moment thunderstorm that irradiates Wade like some monster in a Bela Lugosi movie as he spies on Gail bathing.) Still, it becomes clear that to rescue the family and resolidify class boundaries, contemporary middle-class masculinity must prove itself morally and physically superior to lower-classed forms of masculinity. Unfortunately, this means the film does not play out the anxious class/white trash conflict in terms of class directly, but conveniently displaces it to and resolved it in an arena much more familiar to an American audience: the arena of gender. The film reconfigures the class conflict into a masculinity competition between macho Wade and effeminate Tom.<sup>21</sup>

Wimpy Tom, wearing feminine shorts and always clutching his briefcase, appears awkward and out of place in the wilderness. He clenches the raft sides in terror and is toppled out in the first rapids. Nevertheless, when he sees his wife and son abandoning him for Wade, Tom finally takes a stand that launches the reconstruction of his masculinity. Again, significant in terms of contemporary middle-class concerns and

values, masculinity here has more to do with “family” than it does with “sexuality.”

Tom: “It’s just not working out between us.”

Wade: “And why is that? Because your son wants to be with me instead of you?”

Tom: “Look, I’m taking my family and we’re going down the river. That’s what we’re going to do. We’ll send somebody back for you.”

Wade: “Who died and made you stud dick all of a sudden, Tom?”

A fist fight follows during which Wade baits Tom with several “stud”’s, and after Wade wins, he ties Tom, Gail, and Rork up, and declares himself “head of the family.”

Then begins the fantastic sequence of Tom’s remasculinization. Much of this sequence involves Tom’s proving himself the physical equal of Wade by performing virile, manual acts that common sense associates more with working-class males than with the middle class. Yet Tom’s initiation also takes on bizarre national and racial inflections, as if he is reconfirming the nation and defending it from the threat from “below” through his own reconstructed masculinity. To prove his manhood, Tom enacts the generic Native American “Vision Quest” story Gail told at the campfire the night before. He starts a fire with a magnifying glass to send a smoke signal like the one in Gail’s story and draws “petroglyphs” as a secret message to the family, all the while accompanied by the family dog, clearly Tom’s “animal helper.” Tom’s “Vision Quest” supplements the national icons the film has featured all along: picturesque shots of Boston contrasted with panoramic views of the West; the family’s sighting of a bald eagle; the American flag T-shirt Gail wears for much of the adventure. Tom’s reconstructing his masculinity through

a romanticized notion of Indians, nostalgic symbols of a primitive, strong, noble and pure America, substantiates Jeffords' argument that because the masculine body is central to national identity, the American imagination often "link[s] the crisis of a nation with a crisis of manhood" (12). In this case, Tom's enfeebled middle-class masculinity--directly challenged by a lower-classed masculinity--embodies the national crisis of impending downward mobility for a class of Americans who have long defined "America" in terms of "opportunity," "success," and "a better future"; indeed, who have long defined "America" as "middle-class." To rebuild his body through a national narrative about noble Indians recreates for the middle class a "past" version of America that is stable, strong, and moral--and, assumedly, still retains the traditional promise of the American Dream. (In addition, the adoption of the Indian motif by the middle class--bear in mind that Wade and Terry reacted disrespectfully when Gail first told the story--again helps distance the middle class from the history of American racism and colonialism.)

Although it is actually Gail who gets Rork through "the Gauntlet"--a deadly set of rapids--alive,<sup>22</sup> and even Gail who finally shoots Wade (after sending Rork and the dog away to hide their eyes as all moral middle-class mothers would before committing murder), when a policeman at the end of the film asks Rork, "And your dad? What did he do?" Rork answers, "My dad? He saved my life!" Tom saves his family by distinguishing it morally from lower classes through combining the best of both traditional working-class and middle-class male identities to reinvent himself as the ideal sensitive family man. He has appropriated certain "past" masculine virtues conventionally associated with old

working-class roles--strength, courage, the ability to survive in the wild, and commitment to family--purified of white trash immorality like racism, violence, ignorance, and pervertedness.

The River Wild closes with Tom, Gail, Rork, and their golden retriever all embracing under rescue blankets, backlit by a sunset. The middle-class nuclear family is reunited and repaired, class boundaries between it and white trash renegotiated and resolidified, Gail and Rork reeducated about the risks of violating class lines. The white trash are obliterated, Wade dead and the more childlike and malleable Terry carted off to prison. The narrative transfers economic pressures on the family originating in the sphere of production--the architectural firm's work demands--to the private sphere of the family, morality, and "lifestyle." In this private sphere, while the family is on vacation, away from work and the "real world," the economic threat to the family can be resolved by the family's reconfirming its social position by distinguishing itself from white trash.

#### The Client: Good Family People and the Government Bootstrap

Eleven-year-old Mark Sway is, as he would say, in deep shit. His abusive, alcoholic father has long ago abandoned his family, his mother can barely pay the rent on their rundown trailer, he and his little brother have just witnessed a gory suicide that puts the brother in a coma, and now he's being chased by the Mafia and the FBI. Fortunately, he stumbles upon Reggie Love (Susan Sarandon), a white middle-class lawyer who has

had economic and family problems of her own. Love manages to rescue the Sway family not only from gangsters, the U.S. government, and slimy politicians, but from their white trashness as well.

An adaptation of a John Grisham novel, The Client portrays anxious class/white trash interaction, but it does not follow the white trash ambush formula. Instead, The Client fulfills a more liberal, reform-oriented narrative reminiscent of the Progressive Era improvement narrative. This narrative dramatizes middle-class characters, especially women, saving the disenfranchised, including the working class and poor. It has at least a one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old history in middle-class American common sense.<sup>23</sup> While one might be tempted to read Reggie and Mark's collaboration as precisely the good sense I'm searching for--a middle class/working-class alliance--their relationship is actually the more familiar and patronizing bond between munificent parental professional-managerial class and needy childlike poor. The movie thoroughly infantilizes the Sway family, as The River Wild did Terry and Wade: our white trash hero, Mark, is literally a child; his mother, Diane, is incompetent and adolescent, forever struggling around with her mouth hanging open and unable to make the simplest decision; and his little brother, seven-year-old Ricky, personifies the infantilization of the whole white trash family as he spends the last hour and forty-five minutes of the film in a fetal position with his thumb in his mouth. Consequently, Reggie Love must intercede as nurturing mother figure to save the family. These patronizing savior narratives, as I discussed in the context of the Appalachian improvement narratives, can have very politically regressive fallout. They tend to efface

systemic and economic reasons for social problems and transfer those problems into the private sphere where they are imaginatively resolved for audiences through the rescue of exceptional individuals and families.

Yet The Client introduces three dimensions very specific to contemporary class common sense that suggest where we might look for what Landy terms a fragile or contradictory point in the middle-class consensus to the hegemony (96). First, as The River Wild did, The Client privileges the restoration of the family above all else. While such privileging lends itself to conservative politics, it's also important to notice that the usual negative traits of the white trash Sways are offset by "past" values they possess that make them, like Wade, "good" family people. Second, also like The River Wild, The Client makes references to work and calls attention to how contemporary work conditions destroy families. Third, and perhaps most peculiar to 1990's common sense, the film's evocation and fuelling of audience hatred towards the government--a familiar strategy in popular film since Reaganism--takes an unusual twist that hints at how common sense about the government might be moved in a more productive direction.

Indicative of middle-class anxiety over family social trajectory and their reactionary refuge into "morality," The Client spotlights the family as most threatened and as most deserving of restoration and protection in the current American climate. Further, the film tells us that both Mark's and Reggie's families have broken down or are breaking down under economic exigencies. Even though the film's depiction of the Sways caters to the middle-class tendency to read class generally and white trash especially through cues of

“lifestyle”--the Sways live in a trailer; they use foul language; all three smoke; Diane dresses in tight jeans and sleazy low-cut tops; and Ricky is hospitalized in the “Elvis Presley Wing”--the movie does not entirely distance white trash from work. We hear that Diane labors for a “sweatshop” “asshole” boss who pays her five dollars an hour without benefits and fires her after she misses one day of work because her son is in the hospital. Her low-paying job leaves her sons unsupervised all day to roam the woods and stumble onto suicides. Reggie Love presents an even more complex case, especially since as the professional-managerial class protagonist, she portrays the character with which a middle-class audience is most likely to identify. We learn that after slaving away to put her husband through med school, Reggie was dumped for a younger woman. Not yet a lawyer at that time, Reggie worried so desperately about “feed[ing] her kids”--an economic anxiety--that she turned to drugs and alcohol and, as a result, lost custody of her children. Reggie Love, the audience realizes, has already suffered the fall so many anxious class Americans dread, a fall out of the middle class and into, if not exactly white trash, the immorality and substance abuse associated with it. But Reggie Love’s story has a hopeful ending. She went to law school, and with a little help from her mother, Mama Love, who hails from an older and more stable generation, Reggie pulled herself back into the middle class. Because Reggie has already survived and redressed her class decline, she can relate better to the white trash family and, as though her downward mobility were a sort of inoculation, she seems at little risk of being contaminated by them.

Family is so central to The Client that it substitutes for the more conventional

narrative focus on a heterosexual romance the development of a mother/son relationship between Reggie and Mark. The film draws on all the audience's conditioned expectations about fictional lovers and redirects the expectations to the familial love between Reggie "Love" and Mark. We follow along as Reggie and Mark gradually build trust, having fights and making up as they go. We sympathize at the end when the pair parts in tears on an airport runway, declaring their love for each other. Finally Mark flies away into a sunset while Reggie waves wistfully from the tarmac.

Mark makes such a fine surrogate family member for Reggie in part because the Sways, like Wade, still cling to "past" family values. Again, in addition to out-of-date clothes and a social position the middle class sees as "behind" itself, white trash "backwardness" includes some old-fashioned ethics that arouse middle-class nostalgia. The Sways fight hard to keep their family together, and they seem more adept at it than the "modern" middle class, represented here by Reggie Love. Admittedly, the white trash father has abandoned his family, but Mark tries heroically to take his place. He parents Ricky and the childlike Diane, and when Mark is nearly murdered, he pleads for his life not for his own sake, but the sake of his family: "Don't kill me! I got my mother and little brother to take care of!" Diane and Mark initially resist Reggie's interference in their family, defending their familial privacy and demonstrating good old-fashioned American family self-reliance. Again, in part because of their "pastness," the Sways seem to know how to do this naturally, while modern middle-class Reggie has had to learn the hard way.

Predictably, since The Client is a mainstream Hollywood movie, the economic

threats to the American family remain background static for the more immediate menace of, on the one hand, the Mafia, and, on the other, a constellation of lawyers, politicians, and the U.S. government. The Mafia seems less important in terms of contemporary common sense. An anachronistic villain, the Mafia's outdatedness is parodied in the character of "Barry the Blade Maldano," whose gold chains, silk shirts, and other paraphernalia mark him as a throwback to the '70's. The government as villain reveals more. Anti-government sentiment has been common in American film since the 1980's as a popular culture response to Reaganism, which reconstructed American common sense to create consent for a new hegemonic bloc by, in part, blaming the nation's ills on "big government" and "politics as usual." Such common sense reconstruction requires a stunning sleight-of-hand through which government convinces the people that it is working in the people's best interests against none other than . . . the government, despite the reality that the government maintains tremendous power and benefits directly from the reconfigured hegemony (Landy 130). (Never mind that "shrinking the government," especially through deregulation and the slashing of social programs, has been partly responsible for middle-class economic decline.)

The three figures so despised by the contemporary middle class--lawyers, politicians, and government--all coalesce in federal attorney Roy Foltrigg (Tommy Lee Jones) who is leading the FBI investigation into the Mafia murder of a politician. Mark, while witnessing the suicide of a Mafia lawyer, was told where the politician's body is hidden. Foltrigg is rabid to solve this case because a victory should ensure his gaining the

Louisiana governorship and eventually a seat in Congress. Consequently, Foltrigg is in hot pursuit of Mark to force the information from him. A back-slapping good ole boy, Foltrigg orchestrates press conferences, rides in a stretch limo, admires his own image, and orders around a small army of sycophants with political aspirations of their own. Foltrigg epitomizes everything the contemporary middle-class audience has been encouraged to loathe about “self-serving politicians” and “big government,” and his ruthless pursuit of Mark personifies government as menace to ordinary Americans. Gallant Reggie Love several times speaks directly to the government threat, proclaiming that she “will not let [Foltrigg] use this child to climb into the governor’s seat” nor will she let him “trample on the constitutional rights of an eleven-year-old.”

From yet another perspective, though, the root of the Sway’s problem, Reggie explains twice, is not the government, nor the deadbeat dad, nor the sweatshop boss, nor even really lack of money. The Sway’s problem is that they’ve “never had a break.” Here the film revisits the dilemma of economic inequality, but it does so the way Progressive Era improvement narratives do: people are poor because they lack opportunity. A temporary condition, poverty will be rectified in the future when the middle class creates opportunities for the deserving poor. With the promise of upward mobility even for white trash, the film raises for the anxious-class audience the hope of restoring the American Dream. At one point, Diane confides in Reggie that “all I ever wanted was a white house with a walk-in closet . . . . Isn’t that stupid?” “No!” Reggie Love assures her (and the audience). “Having a dream is never stupid!”

Valiant Reggie Love proceeds to get the Sways their “break” and their “dream”-- quite literally, their white house and walk-in closet (the traditional “picket fence” apparently replaced with space for more consumer items). But unlike most white savior narratives--in which redemption comes through a teacher or a missionary or a social worker or a housewife or a good-hearted capitalist--and at apparent odds with the rest of the movie, the Sways are saved by the government. Reggie wins upward mobility for the Sways by negotiating with the evil government forces that have terrorized the Sways and Reggie through most of the film. And instead of going on Welfare, the Sways are bootstrapped straight into the middle class via another government service, the Witness Protection Program, which provides them not just a higher standard of living, but a completely new middle-class identity. Within minutes, demonic government turns messiah, Mark and Foltrigg become buddies, and slovenly Diane Sway, as soon as she is granted admission to the middle class, demonstrates good middle-class mother values: “I can watch my boys grow up . . . maybe even join the PTA!” Reggie, in a final gesture of middle-class maternal guidance, gives Mark her “mamaw’s compass” so “[he]’ll never lose his way again” as he navigates new middle-class waters.<sup>24</sup>

As The River Wild does, The Client concludes by privatizing social crises and resolving them in the family. For this reason, like most popular narratives, the film poses nor challenge or alternative to the power structures that seemed so ominous for most of the film. As I will explain in my conclusion, what both films do do is suggest nascent “good sense” within common sense that might be rehabilitated for social change.

## V.

## Conclusion: Making Sense

Much cultural studies work falls into two types. In one type, which characterizes my first two chapters, the critic reads cultural texts for what they reveal about discourses and strategies that preserve extant social structures or that help audiences come to terms with crises in a hegemony and make a shift to a modified consensus. In the second type, which characterizes my third chapter, the cultural critic detects and examines subversive tendencies in cultural texts, discourses and strategies that challenge or revise dominant ideologies and practices.

I would like to close this chapter, and this dissertation, with a third approach, an approach that I believe might prove more productive and practical than the other two in the long term. As I've intimated all along, I want to identify in cultural texts elements of common sense that might be excavated and catalyzed for a more progressive politics. Within the context of this dissertation, I mean by "progressive politics" a politics with the objective of a more economically equal society. To move towards economic equality, the politics would have to work to contain capital, and containing capital demands, in part, an alliance between noncapitalist classes: between the middle classes and the classes under them in the class hierarchy.

A project that explores the "good sense" in "common sense" can make no more

than a tenuous argument. The critic can't convincingly confirm or support the conclusions she draws because the exploration deals only with possibilities. And I'm aware such a project may seem naive. Nevertheless, because I believe identifying "good sense" might lead to real practical consequences--a practicality absent in most cultural studies--I feel it's imperative that I conclude with this approach.

To reiterate what I said earlier, Gramsci believed that all common sense contains buried in it incipient "good sense" that, if recognized, educated, and directed, can lead to progressive change through a new historical bloc. Moreover, Gramsci insisted that any effort to construct a new hegemony must start with common sense as it is. As he writes in the Prison Notebooks, "it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making critical an already existing activity" (330-331). He explains more in a footnote:

It is a matter therefore of starting with a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and the sinew of individual philosophies.  
(330)

Stuart Hall, in Hard Road to Renewal, his Gramscian analysis of the new historical bloc known as Thatcherism/Reaganism, also reminds us that to form a new hegemony, whether conservative or liberal, one must take ideologies already in place and then change "the position, the relative weight" of the existing elements and reconstruct them to fit a different logic (56). The Right, Hall argues, has done exactly that. It has reconstructed

existing common sense to suit its own agenda. The Left, on the other hand, Hall believes, has declined in large part due to its inflexibility and its disdain for popular culture and popular sentiment. Instead of starting with progressive potential in common sense, the Left--dogmatic, puritanical, preoccupied with being "lifter-than-thou"--has held out for, in Gramsci's terms, "introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought." Hall pleads that the Left learn to work with ideas and images already present in common sense. The continuing success of the Right--and failure of the Left--now, a decade after Hall is writing, makes his appeal even more urgent.

Adopting Gramsci's and Hall's advice, I find one potentially progressive "already existing" fragment of contemporary common sense in the middle class's growing recognition that the future no longer assures class ascent for it and its children. As I hope I have proved in earlier chapters, the American mythology that promises to solve economic inequality through time has tremendous ideological efficacy. With the "time" solution suddenly called into question for so many Americans, the Left might take advantage of the crisis in faith and redirect attention towards the fact that permanent (and actually escalating) economic inequality is inherent in the logic of capital.

I also see as hopeful the fact that class is an issue at all in recent films. In this country since World War II, class identity has been increasingly de-emphasized (Lipsitz 90; 113) until by the 1980's the media did not directly represent class as such at all (Aronowitz 141). The River Wild's and The Client's invoking economic pressures, featuring exploited working-class and poor characters, and naming characters' class

origins, even though those origins are often represented as class-as-lifestyle, may signify that a sense of class identity is becoming a more salient part of American common sense, especially as the middle class grows more insecure about its own class standing and more aware of an expanding “underclass.” Recognition of a class identity would be an essential first step towards the middle class’s perceiving shared interests with the working class and poor.

In addition, the contemporary popularity of white trash representations indicates that middle-class Americans have rediscovered white poverty. (Their last discovery of poor whites was in the 1960’s.) Although 1990’s Americans perceive white poverty largely in the disparaged form of white trash, the consciousness that not only people of color are poor in the United States is an extant element of common sense that the Left could “renovate and make critical” (Gramsci 330-31). Minorities do comprise a disproportionate part of the poor in this country, but in 1990, 49% of the U.S. poor were white (Lavelle 214), 38% of Welfare mothers were white (Lavelle 21), and between 1980 and 1990, the number of poor whites overall rose 29% (Friend 24; this statistic is somewhat misleading because it includes white Hispanics). Calling attention to the fact that whites, too, are poor in America would help undermine the notion that only “race” holds people back in the U.S., a belief that exonerates the capitalist system from responsibility for economic inequality. An informed understanding of white poverty would also dispel the stereotype that minorities remain poor because they are somehow biologically or culturally inferior, and it would weaken the racist hatred the Right channels

towards the poor when it conflates people of color and poverty in general and African Americans and Welfare in particular.

The Client's inciting and stoking audience anger toward the government, then turning on a dime and rescuing its characters through the government, dramatizes a kind of middle-class ambivalence that could also be redirected to contain capital. On one hand, the middle class are receptive to the New Right's rhetoric about corrupt politicians, government profligacy, and overregulation, but on the other they also expect the government to save programs and funding that improve their own lives. Within this context, I want to take another look at Reggie Love's cheerful, chubby, sixty-something mother, Mama Love, with her picket fence and big comfortable white house where anxious-class Reggie must live while she regains her social position. Mama Love represents that post-World War II generation who achieved the American Dream of upward mobility with such spectacular glory that the middle-class trajectory since seems to have no place to go but down. What the Left might remind the middle-class audience, and what the film acknowledges in a very broad sense by transforming government as demon into government as helper, is the direct role of the government in the success of the '50's and '60's middle-class rise. "Indeed," Katherine S. Newman writes in Declining Fortunes, "it could easily be argued that no generation was so profoundly blessed by national investment in their well-being as that one," through programs like the G.I. Bill, the Federal Home Loan Program, and the Works Progress Administration (88). Yet, Newman adds, the post-World War II generation erases the help of the government "from

the moral tales they tell about how they became the prosperous citizens they are” (89).

The government’s hand in earlier middle-class success needs to be reinscribed as a coherent part of common sense. The Left might capitalize more actively on the middle class’s contradictory attitudes towards government size and government aid and foreground how government might protect the middle class, and the classes below it, from the kinds of economic exigencies and unfair work demands that the middle class clearly understands as eroding their social positions and their relationships with their families.

“Family” and “morality” figure so prominently in contemporary middle-class common sense that the critic probing for nascent good sense cannot ignore them. Again, the preoccupation with family and morality should come as no surprise given all Bourdieu, Ehrenreich, and Coleman and Rainwater have discovered about how the middle class turns to morality to defend itself or distinguish itself in a social or economic crisis. Further, explains Stuart Hall, placing “morality” in a common sense framework, “[p]opular morality . . . is the most practical material-ideological force amongst the popular classes.” It touches the immediate experience of people, but without education, it turns complex social problems into “unambiguous moral polarities” (Hall 143). The New Right continues to mobilize the practical force of this noncritical, black-and-white kind of morality to demonize its enemies, cultivate support for repressive state practices, and stimulate racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Indeed, the Right has been so successful it has made “morality,” especially in its “family values” incarnation, anathema to the Left.

However, if I take seriously Gramsci's exhortations that we must work with what already exists in common sense, I must take seriously "morality" and "the family." Not to take them seriously, I feel, would be to lapse into the kind of Leftist inflexibility Hall condemns. Fortunately, if I follow a Gramscian logic, especially as elaborated and refined by Hall and by Laclau and Mouffe, common sense notions of "morality" and "family" need not be conservative and regressive by definition. Laclau and Mouffe, working within their governing theory that all social identity is unfixed and available for articulation to various historical blocs and discursive formations, also argue that "every antagonism, left free to itself, is a floating signifier," without a predetermined way it might be used politically (171). As Hall puts it, "the ideological sign is always multiaccentual . . . it can be discursively articulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently" (9). In short, fragments of common sense, including the preoccupation with "morality" and "family," are not "naturally" Right or Left, not "inevitably" conservative or progressive. Whether the elements serve the Right or Left depends upon how they are excavated, educated, organized, and put into practice.

Hall goes so far as to insist that the Left must have a moral agenda that "actively shape[s] and educate[s] desire" like the Right does (283). And within moral common sense, Hall points out, lie not only conservative values like simplistic "good" vs. "evil" and the allure of retributive justice, but also more encouraging tendencies like aversions to injustice and oppression, charitable impulses, and a keen awareness of "us/them" divides, divides which "can be represented through a number of different political ideologies"

(179). All of these tendencies, Hall implies, might be put into action by the Left.

Returning to “family” and “morality” from the perspective of a Left politics, I find promising in The River Wild and The Client the subtle cross-fertilization of “family,” “morality,” and “work.” Early in both films, we hear a great deal about the unfair demands of work and the tyranny of employers, clearly a common sense “philosophy which already enjoys . . . a certain diffusion because it is connected to and implicit in practical life” (Gramsci 330). Even more propitious for a progressive politics because “family” has such resonance for the middle class, is the recognition that “work” is destroying or has destroyed three families. Of course, the movies eventually abandon work and displace family crises onto other villains. But the films insinuate that middle-class common sense includes the awareness that contemporary working conditions and “values” endemic to a capitalist culture are not just anxiety-producing for individuals, but undermine families, especially marriages and parent/child relationships, and in this way lead to a certain “moral degeneration.” The Left could work harder to expose this link between family/”moral” disintegration and corporate policies. The Right, for its part, has doggedly effaced the connection by separating economics from the private sphere and rewriting social and economic problems as self-contained ethical problems.

The Left could also target the way capitalist practices break down families as a shared interest between the middle classes and the working class and poor, a common ground that could facilitate a cross-class alliance. As Hall makes clear, the “us/them” mentality is a deep part of common sense that can be represented in a number of ways

(179). At present, the anxious class seems to see itself as an “us”--moral, clean, hardworking, tasteful--distinguished from the white trash “them”--immoral, trashy, lazy. However, especially considering how important “family” is to the middle class, the Left could underscore capitalist attacks on all working families and reconstruct middle-class common sense to perceive a different “us/them”: noncapitalist classes vs. capitalist classes. And middle-class common sense seems primed to accept “family values” as a shared interest with lower classes, at least as that common sense is embodied in The River Wild and The Client. Both films, even The River Wild, which mostly demonizes white trash, present it as still retaining certain “past” family values that the middle class finds desirable and admirable, like loyalty, commitment, and patience and time for other family members. The Left might articulate the middle class’s nostalgia for perceived “past” values in the working class and poor towards a recognition of shared values and interests that could lead to interclass cooperation.

Finally, I have to consider the “charitable impulse” that Hall also identifies as a potentially useful part of middle-class common sense. The River Wild expresses “charitable” common sense in Gail’s initial willingness to help the white trash, and the theme of “helping those less fortunate than oneself” drives most of the plot of The Client. As I addressed in depth in Chapter Two, strategies of charity often indirectly aid the expansion of capital and increase economic inequality by alleviating middle-class consciences without changing capitalist structures. They also help facilitate the move from a rule by coercion to a rule by consent. Still, Hall advises that the Left suspend its

suspicion towards the “helping those less fortunate” theme. Because the structure will never change without personal commitment, and because personal giving leads to personal commitment (Hall 256-57), Hall concludes that a “broad-based” anti-New Right politics can’t be constructed “without politicizing the charitable impulse” (257). Barbara Ehrenreich, with her comparison between the Progressive Era professional-managerial class and the contemporary PMC, puts into even sharper perspective the necessity of revitalizing the charitable impulse in the 1990’s. While the PMC at the turn-of-the-century had a strong sense of social responsibility towards the working classes, as I discussed in Chapter Two, Ehrenreich believes that the PMC now has almost none (250-51). Before the Left can build a progressive politics that is more than just reform-oriented, it has to rehabilitate some sense of social responsibility, and cultivation of the charitable impulse would be a step towards social responsibility. And, as the films suggest, Americans do have latent capacity for generosity and sympathy, and a sense of the common good.

Of course, identifying potentially progressive fragments of common sense is the easy part. It is the mobilizing of that good sense, to paraphrase Marx, the making the ideas a material force, that is both imperative to a Gramscian politics and so difficult for a cultural critic. Yet New Right ideas have gained such material momentum that we must take seriously the Right’s squealings about liberals’ being “out of touch with the American people.” The class anxieties, class sensibilities, and class identifications that seem to be taking on more significance in American common sense and that the Right is already misdirecting for its own agenda need to be theorized by cultural critics who usually

exclude class analyses. The simultaneous attraction and repulsion that “white trash” holds for the American middle-class imagination, the desires and frustrations of “the anxious class,” the recognition that “time” no longer promises a solution for economic inequality nor a reward for economic sacrifice: Gramsci would regard all as part of an incipient and disjointed philosophy waiting to be made coherent and critical.

## Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup>Kathleen Newman, in both Declining Fortunes and Falling from Grace, documents middle-class attitudes towards their contemporary downward mobility.

<sup>2</sup>As I explained in Chapter Two, endnote 8, Bourdieu uses “petty bourgeoisie” in a broader sense than the orthodox Marxist definition of this class. Bourdieu’s “petty bourgeoisie” seems to encompass most of the middle class, especially its lower strata.

In Chapter One, I discuss Bourdieu’s observations about the ideological and psychological predilections of a bourgeoisie, or elite, in decline.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Doug Henwood’s “RIP Dems?”; Ruy A. Teixeira and Joel Rogers’ “Who Deserted the Democrats in 1994?”; and Jonathan Alter’s “Caught in the Class Warp.”

<sup>4</sup>A 1959 landmark study by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix entitled Social Mobility in Industrial Society concurs with Bourdieu’s theory that the downwardly mobile tend to be politically conservative. Later works directly challenge Lipset and Bendix’s findings, including Social Mobility and Political Attitudes (1992) a collection of essays edited by Frederick C. Turner. My conclusion to this chapter will explain why I believe downward mobility does not “naturally” lead to either conservative or to liberal politics.

<sup>5</sup>I’m speaking here of how the Left might present the alliance to the middle class. I don’t mean to presume that working classes and the poor automatically want a coalition

with middle classes nor that the working classes would necessarily see the advantage of such an alliance the same way the middle class might. My project here is to read middle-class common sense, and although I don't believe particular classes have a pre-given class consciousness or pre-given interests, I also believe that the common sense of the working class or poor is different from that of the middle class. See the Ehrenreichs' "The Professional-Managerial Class" ( 42-45) for insight on why the working class resists alliances with the middle class.

<sup>6</sup>Marcia Landy explains that "folklore" for Gramsci is a part of common sense that reduces "knowledge to cliches and proverbs legitimated by tradition, repetition, and widespread use"; it tends to eliminate complexity (133).

<sup>7</sup>The anthology, for example, has already been "reviewed" in the November 30, 1997 edition of The New York Times Magazine (Margaret Talbot's "Getting Credit for Being White") and the November 17, 1997 issue of Forbes (Ben Pappas's "The Ontology of Spam").

<sup>8</sup>Cook's book remains at twenty years old the best introduction to the production and circulation of images of poor whites in America. Wray and Newitz, unfortunately, never mention Cook's work.

<sup>9</sup>Mitford Matthews, ed., A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

<sup>10</sup>Genovese writes “it was probably the slaves who dubbed the poor whites ‘trash’” (22), and he cites James Stirling’s Letters from the Slave States (London, 1857) as his source.

<sup>11</sup>Thanks to Susan Jeffords for pointing this out to me.

<sup>12</sup>John Hartigan’s piece is an outstanding exception, as I will discuss later. Jillian Sandell’s “Telling Stories of ‘Queer White Trash’” also genuinely engages with the “classedness” of white trash and dominant American attitudes towards white trash as a classed phenomenon.

Both the Forbes and The New York Times Magazine articles about the White Trash anthology perceive the book as entirely about whiteness, not about economics or class.

<sup>13</sup>Wray and Newitz’s observations about white trash and recent economic changes include “white trash is an allegory of identity which is deployed to describe the existence of class antagonisms in the U.S.” (8); white trash is a way popular culture represents the discovery “that whiteness in itself is no longer a sure path to a good income” (7-8); white trash is “one way people living in the U.S. try to describe class identities and the material conditions of poverty” (8).

<sup>14</sup>See Evan Watkins’ Throwaways for an excellent account of class-as-lifestyle.

<sup>15</sup>Coleman and Rainwater’s study further supports the theory that Americans define class structure relationally with the answers they received to their question, “How many classes exist in America?” Most respondents listed two to nine, but others named

up to thirty. The point is that Americans seem to perceive class not in a Marxian or Weberian or even a conventional sociological sense, but as a “continuum,” an “almost infinitely graded hierarchy” (Coleman and Rainwater 24-25).

<sup>16</sup>In Chapter One, I suggested that audiences in the 19th-century may have favored local color because its representation of people “behind” mainstream America provided the audience a mode of distinction, a way to confirm its own modernity and superiority. However, I rejected that theory because the audience of local color--an elite--did not occupy a social position immediately above the poor people portrayed in local color. Here I endorse a similar argument because the “anxious class” does seem to occupy a position immediately above white trash.

<sup>17</sup>In addition to Hartigan’s “Name-Calling,” the essays by Berube (18-21) Penley (90-91), and Sweeney (255) in Wray and Newitz’s anthology all mention how higher classes or dominant culture define themselves through distinction from white trash.

<sup>18</sup>I’ve discussed Americans’ recasting poverty as pastness in Chapters One and Two. John Hartigan’s “Reading Trash” also mentions that white trash carries connotations of pastness or “backwardness” (9). Newitz notes the connection between white trash and the past, too, but because she reads white trash as almost entirely a racial figure, she explains the pastness of white trash as a kind of primitivism arising from white trash’s racial “Otherness” (“White Savagery” 134).

<sup>19</sup>Chapter One treats how a declining bourgeoisie sees the poor as still retaining alluring traditional values.

<sup>20</sup>Paula Rabinowitz, Stanley Aronowitz, and Bourdieu all discuss, from different angles, associations between genders and classes.

<sup>21</sup>The displacement of classed struggles onto gendered ones is a common strategy in American literature and popular culture, in part because Americans have far fewer ways to talk about and imagine class than they do gender. David Leverenz and Amy Schrage Lang discuss this displacement in nineteenth-century texts. Paula Rabinowitz mentions its appearance in 1930's fiction, and Stanley Aronowitz treats it in American film.

<sup>22</sup>Although the boss disappears early in The River Wild, I would argue that the ominous, boulder-strewn, water-fall-riddled gorge known as “the Gauntlet” that Gail must negotiate to save her son's life may represent the pressure the anxious class feels eroding their families on all sides. In other words, “the Gauntlet” plays out the anxious class belief that they are being crushed between corporate whims and demands on one side, and on the other, the wasteful, immoral underclass who commit crimes against them and gobble up their taxes in social program.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Lang's “The Syntax of Class” and “Strategies of Sympathy.” Grisham's very popular novels often fulfill this formula, depicting how marginalized lawyers defend even more marginalized characters, both black and white, against corrupt people, corporations, and power structures. A Time to Kill and Rainmaker are especially representative.

<sup>24</sup>The compass also reminds one of New Right rhetoric about America losing its “moral compass.” William Bennett has written a book that borrows its title from the “moral compass” theme.

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## Vita

Ann Pancake

### Education

- Ph.D., English, University of Washington, 1998
- M.A., English, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1992
- B.A., English, West Virginia University, 1985

### Publications

#### Articles:

- "Taken By Storm: The Exploitation of Metaphor in the Persian Gulf Crisis." Metaphor and Symbolic Activity 8.4 (1993): 281-95.
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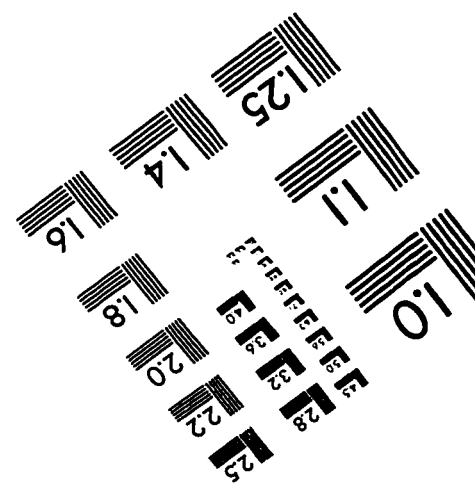
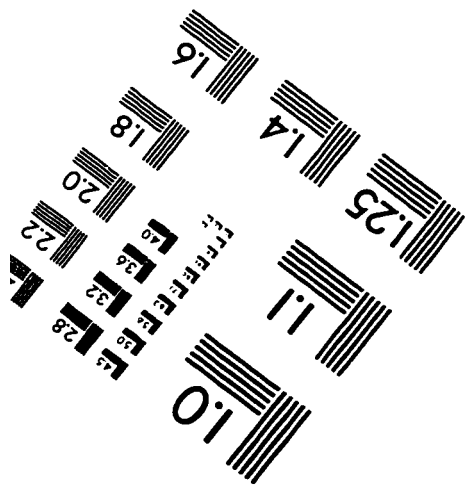
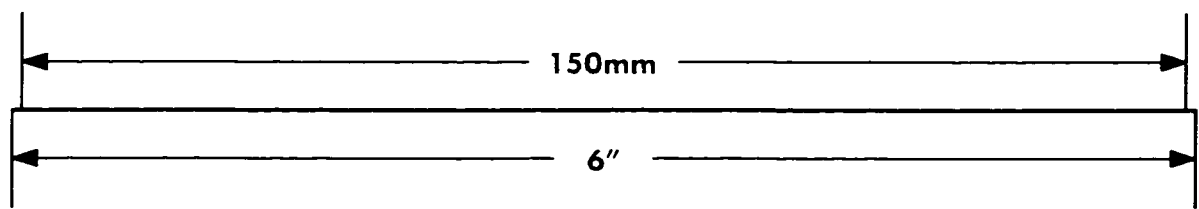
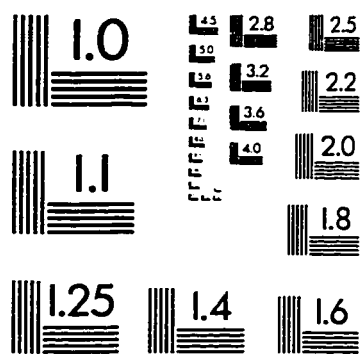
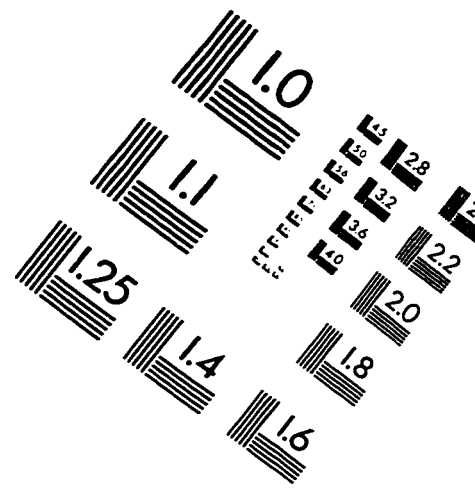
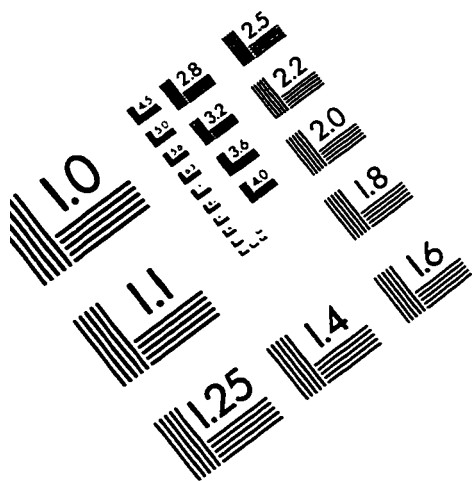
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