fiar

FORUM FOR INTER-AMERICAN RESEARCH (FIAR) VOL. 12.1 (JUN. 2019) 56-72
ISSN: 1867-1519
© forum for inter-american research

# How (Not) to Compare White Poverty: Class Issues, Socioeconomic Suffering, Literature

CARSTEN SCHINKO (UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN)

***Abstract***

*If the renewed academic interest in class-related issues has opened up a vivid scholarly discussion, it has not always generated fresh arguments, often provoking a return to the familiar struggles between Old Left and New Left positions. What is new, however, is the political context of the post-Obama era in which these debates take place. Nowhere have they become more heated than when white workers or white poverty are discussed, which is, in part, a result of Trump's right-wing wooing. This essay seeks to neutralize the conversation, taking a pragmatic approach that seeks to reveal possible blind spots of the contenders in this debate. In a first step, the notion of class will be assessed in the respective camps. Subsequently, I will disentangle the peculiarly U.S.-American blend of "race" and class that has a long semantic history. Taking a look on recent scholarship on poverty as socioeconomic suffering, I will discuss a number of key texts that reflect on the issues addressed above.*

**Keywords**: Poverty, Whiteness, New Left vs. Old Left, "White Trash", Aesthetics

## The Complicated Return(s) to Class

Class and poverty made their comeback as part of the critical idiom, returning to the forefront of scholarly discourses in American Studies once again. The majority of critics embrace this return, or at least welcome it as a necessary development, reflecting the signs of the times: the global economic meltdown, ever-increasing income gaps in the US and elsewhere, Occupy Wall Street, the unlikely resurgence of democratic socialist positions from Bernie Sanders to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as the wooing of poor whites in Trump's populist agenda make such a correction almost inevitable. It is interesting to compare the ideological maneuvers of these political contenders. In his presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Sanders was charged with shying away from racial exclusion when discussing social inequalities, creating what was felt to be a rather loud silence. It is a silence amplified by the fact that Hillary Clinton, his centrist rival in the Democratic party, talked about racial inequality rather freely while dismissing left-leaning positions. In turn, the blatant racism of Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaigning was hardly veiled, especially when directing his speeches at the blue-collar segment ("Trump Digs Coal") and thus we can infer that, at least in the political arena, the discursive return to issues of class is always tinged with the logic of "race." Like Republicans before him, Trump cashed in on a reframing of debates – a strategy that allowed many right-leaning parties to win over leftist voters and dominate formerly progressivist topics[1] by turning from class solidarity to allegedly "American" values.[2]

In the current "populist moment" (Mouffe 11) that has superseded the "post-democratic" neutralization of liberal politics (Crouch), Trump is only the most aggressive politician. Like most other populists, he is catering to the masses by pretending to speak for the "the people" thus claiming "exclusive representation." (Müller 3). But what explains his success in the first place? Pundits might have frequently misinterpreted the statistics, arguing that it was white workers who finally made Trump president- they did not (Davis). Still, it is true that the rhetoric of class

identity was ubiquitous in his public speeches and ham-fisted tweets. Not only that, but even though media was highly critical of the 45th president of the United States, journalists and writers strangely adapted to the drift, creating what to some critics seems an excessively biased interest in white poverty and working-class issues.

Commenting on this upsurge, Rafia Zakaria observes that after the election "a growing call for sympathy with dispossessed white America began to pick up among liberals." Yet, she argues, these invocations of economic need and psychological misery in the writings triggered by such concerns "are rife with glib omissions, tossing up words like 'community' and 'little guy' while only meaning certain communities, certain little guys." Moreover, to generalize about an entity like *the* white working class is problematic in the first place. White workers do exist, but such an abstract collective does not. Thus, according to Michael Bray, we would do better to analyze (and compare) its rhetorical use(s) rather than accept it as empirical fact. The white working class functions as "imagined addressee […] of liberal (post)racial discourse," allowing "liberals to simultaneously believe themselves to be antiracist, deny their denial of racial history, and do nothing much about the racial structures they help to reproduce" (Bray). For a long time, such an othering had only worked if the white working class was projected as a quasi-pathological aberration of decent white folks, i.e. as a racist relict within an otherwise responsible citizenry considering itself to be well-educated, tolerant, and globalization-friendly. Needless to say, this projection of difference within has a history and is currently changing when liberals – irritated by populism – turn inward and scrutinize themselves about such exclusionary acts. If Bray is correct, we should not be too surprised that such a compensatory move has a strong political edge; it appeals mostly to those liberals who are now "eager to bash identity politics" (Zakaria). While it resonates with a given moment – the Trump presidency – it is only one shift in a well-established, steadily emerging repertoire of semantics crystallizing around the twin notions of race and class in the U.S.

Zakaria also points to some of the touchiest questions in politics and in academia today. How do we talk about class structures without dismissing other relevant issues of inequality? Do those who believe that there is "trouble with diversity" need to overcome "race" (and gender) discourses to genuinely talk about distributional justice, as Walter Benn Michaels claims?[3] (Michaels, *Trouble*). In these cases, the return to class is habitually presented as an undoing of the conceptual cultural studies trinity ("race," class, gender) that originally relegated class from dominant social conflict to a position of equivalence with racial and gender-based exclusions. What is highlighted is the conceptual or political incomparability of class with these other social markers, and, as a consequence, the incompatibility of distributional justice with the recognition-based politics of identity. In the following, I will try to answer some of these questions by briefly discussing academic works on class (and poverty), and, more exactly, how class is being used quite differently as a tool of comparison in Old and New Left discourses. Do we live in a class society, i.e. a society whose main defining feature is its class structure, or is class part of a hegemonial structure that ties a horizontal network with other criteria of difference? Do we have to reframe the problem altogether and understand class stratifications as a secondary feature, an outgrowth contingent upon, but not necessarily linked to, the key characteristics of society, e.g. functional differentiation?

Bray's idea of class identity as rhetoric will provide an entry point into the subsequent parts. Tracing the peculiar entanglement of race and class in U.S. from Reconstruction to the recent populist moment, I will assess the rhetoric of class-related identity. Many of the tropes and problems are eerily repeating throughout history with a culmination point of "white trash" emerging as an "unpopular culture" (Hartigan 109) at the end of multiculturalist developments as we know them. A strange variant of an alleged "culture of poverty" (Lewis), it helps us understand white (self-) identifications and disaffiliations as a kind of changing same of U.S. cultural evolution: the separation of the good versus the bad poor, the latter a tribe apart, beyond hope and reform. A

comparison of the focus on class and poverty as conceptual tools will lead me to read key literary texts that deal with the questions prepared above. Juxtaposing the writing of authors as diverse as William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and Bobbie Ann Mason along the way, I will describe the multiple ways of fictionally rendering poverty.

## Doing Class, Undoing Class War?

There are times when nothing seems as old as the difference between the Old and New Left. Heated debates that have taken place since the 1970s are reactivated lately as if nothing has happened and the reason for this repetition compulsion is a seismic shift in the political imagination. The identity politics that have emerged with new theories, but also with the impact of new social movements, has helped cultural studies to grow strong in the humanities. As a New Leftist political reflection, their success includes a specific treatment of class. In the beginning, class still was the most important axis of research, as in the studies on youth and subcultures and relations to their assigned classes. If models of class *stratification* had already turned into models of class *belonging* in the hands of Dick Hebdige and others, thus drifting off to the realm of identity and meaning, these early proponents were criticized by a second generation of scholars for sticking to an idea of Englishness unfit to meet the reality of multicultural societies.

The discursive turn finally changed the whole outlook of cultural studies practices. Society was seen as a fluid product of articulations, rather than as a solid set of a priori structures. Not only did class lose its privileged place as master concept in the writings of Stuart Hall and his colleagues, but – taking their lead from the linguistic turn – the idea of structure was textualized and increasingly opened up to contain multiple agencies. This had a strong impact on the legitimate players differently located in the social field, and on the possibility to present "a *unified discourse* of the left," as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe wrote in 1985: "If the various subject positions and the diverse antagonisms and points of rupture constitute a *diversity* and not a *diversification*, it is clear they cannot be led back to a point from which they could all be embraced and explained by a single discourse." (191; emphasis in original).

Marxism's focus on the core antagonism between workers and those who control the means of production has had this unifying potential; it needed to repudiate the politics of difference – a vision of the political, which, according to Marxist critic Sharon Smith, regards class as

> "just another form of oppression, separate from all others. Furthermore, each separate system of oppression has its own unique set of beneficiaries: all whites benefit from racism, all men benefit from sexism and all heterosexual benefit from homophobia – each in a free-floating system of 'subordination'." (Smith 43)

Smith presents us with a familiar either/or: either we accept the hierarchy of antagonisms with class as key to all other conflicts, or we end up with disarray and lack any perspective to systematically fight injustice. What we would end up doing instead is treating symptoms as root causes.

How to present progressive politics when these Marxian foundations are deconstructed? When classes can no longer safely correspond with objective social positions, when, in fact, no semantics can be deduced from an a priori structure at all (Stäheli, *Die Nachträglichkeit* 315)? For Laclau and Mouffe, society as such does not exist, and most certainly it is not an objective entity from which social structures could be inferred. In their post-foundationalist theory, society has become an "impossible" object; it cannot be represented as a "unitary and intelligible object which grounds its partial processes" (Laclau 90), but needs a "constitutive outside" (ibid.:9). But this epistemological problem does imply a lack of such representations. Far from it, the very impossibility generates society in the first place, as it is nothing but the various attempts to construct it as a unified object. By necessity, these attempts at closure are deeply political acts, and the different discursive efforts – e.g. left vs. right – are antagonistic interventions. Antagonism, then, should not be construed

as rivalry between a set of already existing camps (as in many dangerously essentialist versions of multiculturalism) nor as a Marxian contradiction between wage labor and capital (Stäheli, *Poststrukturalistische* 36); but, more fundamentally, as conflicts emerging through the articulations themselves. Their affective mechanisms include the marking-off of an "us" against "them" – a rhetoric strategy that invites identifications by pitting an in-group against an excluded other habitually conceived as a threat. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as Laclau and Mouffe are at pains to make clear, for nothing threatens democracies more than a centrist, consensus-oriented Third Way. We simply need to construct "the people" in ways different from the Right's appeal to nation and "race."

Yet, what if the conflicts have multiplied, if the discourses on the Left simply do not add up to great utopian projects like the classless society anymore? The task becomes more complicated: any unification is the political product of complicated struggles to establish a "chain of equivalences" (Laclau and Mouffe 130), combining working class demands with those of the new movements. In such a reconfiguration of Marxist thought, Jacobin fervor has given way to a reformist project, a radical democracy true to the fundamental promises of liberty and equality for all. Instead of class war and the overcoming of capitalism, the task is to work against the grain of what Laclau and Mouffe – taking their lead from Antonio Gramsci – call hegemony. Counter-hegemonic interventions as those proposed by Mouffe in her latest book *For a Left Populism,* try to attack the current neoliberalism and are now presented as challenging the current populism from the Right. The apologists of Marxism will maintain, however, that "'class struggle' presupposes a particular social group (the working class) as a privileged political agent" and insist that such "privilege is not itself the outcome of hegemonic struggle, but is grounded in the objective social position of this group" (Zizek 554).

## Comparing Trump, Reading Sanders

These debates return even more heatedly in the Trump era when the whole democratic project seems to be at stake. How do commentators read his presidency? Which political alternatives are available to combat the new surge of nationalism, racism, and ultra-neoliberalism instrumental in maintaining the status quo? Writing for *The Atlantic,* Ta-Nehisi Coates created a rough sketch of an America haunted by "race," an America whose white supremacist leanings had to undo the first black presidency. Trump is nothing but "the negation of Barack Obama's legacy" (Coates). According to this logic, Trump can be considered "America's first white president" because "his entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president."

Coates himself introduces an alternative, class-related interpretation of Trump's way to power, the weakness of the Democrats who have "abandoned everyday economic issues" and established an "elitist sneer at blue-collar culture." Consequently, Trump's success is not so much the result of supremacist biases, as he is "the product of a backlash against contempt for white working-class people." Recognizing their urge to disaffiliate from the less fortunate, liberals suddenly feel sorry for deriding the other white half and having created a rich imagery of the bad poor. It is no surprise that Coates does not buy this argument, not the least because "black people, who have lived for centuries under such derision and condescension, have not yet been driven into the arms of Trump." Considered by many the legitimate heir of James Baldwin, Coates is keen to dissect the self-delusions of America. If, at the present moment, these include "the myth of the virtuous white working class," this mythmaking needs to turn a blind eye to its complicity in American racism.

The article points out, however, that the statistics strongly suggest that it was not the workers who put Trump in the White House – often they did not vote at all (Davis) – but whites across the whole economic spectrum. Hence, "when white pundits cast the elevation of Trump as the handiwork of an inscrutable white working class, they are being too modest, declining to take claim for their own economic class" (Coates). What we should speak about, however, is the lower stratum of blacks, and more importantly, keeping those two distinct. "Black poverty," Coates insists, "is fundamentally

distinct from white poverty," and thus any attempt to fight economic inequality must tackle racism. David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* helps him to delineate "the tightly intertwined stories of the white working class and black Americans" throughout history. Coates notes "the temporary bondage of indenture" as point of departure for the former in the prehistory of the U.S., and grants a remarkable lack of "racist enmity" in the 17th century. Soon, however, the "full benefits of whiteness" kicked in and, as a result, the need of white workers to distinguish themselves from slaves grew stronger on a personal level, but also in the political imagination beginning in the 18th century to this day. His defeatist verdict is the most brutal comparison possible: "White slavery is sin. Nigger slavery is natural."

What does such a generalizing sweep of U.S. history mean for politics, especially in the populist moment when centrist positions are criticized from Left and Right as never before? Seminal for this line of argument is Coates's firm belief "that white supremacy was a force in and of itself, a vector often intersecting with class, but also operating independent of it," so that, if actually instated, any democratic socialist program might well be a welcome amelioration of society; however this would not fundamentally alter anything about white supremacy. Nor would "the problems of economic inequality dissipate," as Coates quickly adds, scornfully nodding to Bernie Sanders. He reads Sanders' reluctance to opt for reparations as yet another instance of an "enduring solidarity of whiteness."

It is easy to feel the impatience in many of these columns, the rightful anger at the situation of black America especially after the Trump backlash. Rhetorically, however, he faced contenders not always given to sober articulation themselves. Walter Benn Michael had already made himself a name outside academia as a public commentator with a strong penchant for polemics. While the vastly popular *The Trouble with Diversity. How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (2006) is a hotbed for quotable slogans and one-liners, its "rhetorical excess" (Wolfe) should not make us blind to the political philosophy behind this book. It is laid out in earlier academic studies like *The Shape of the Signifier* in which Michaels historically traces the obsession with identity and subject positions back to the late 1960s. This fascination rests on a larger shift in political outlook from ideology to ontology, that "replaced the differences between what people think (ideology) […] with the differences between what people are (identity)" (24). If ideology implies disagreement and conflict, ontological differences do not. Conceptualized like languages or cultures, one identity is not better than the other: they are different but equal.

It is silly to call such critical self-positioning "liberal racism" (Gordon and Newfield 737) – but the agenda that followed in *Trouble* and also in polemical essays for the online journal *nonsite* pit Michaels irreconcilably against Coates. In fact, a short piece co-authored with his Chicago colleague Kenneth Warren directly takes aim and denounces his call for reparations as "right-wing fantasies" (Michaels and Warren), completely in line with the neoliberal credo they see at work in identity politics. Now, in a reversal of Coates's logic, they urge the public to see identity politics not as "an alternative to class politics but a form of it: it's the politics of an upper class that has no problem with seeing people left behind as long as they haven't been left behind because of their race or sex" (Michaels, 'The Political Economy'). Michaels is evidently not championing the status quo, but he does recognize the social ills Coates diagnoses. Narrowed down to the political realm, his position "just means that fighting discrimination has nothing to do with fighting economic inequality" (Michaels, 'Identity Politics').

Michaels finds support in Adolph Reed, Jr., a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania. It is an important back-up, to be sure. If Michaels is dismissed by some as yet another old white male trying to turn back the clock to a time before identity politics, Reed, a black scholar, takes specific issue with Coates as the newest among the "freelance race leaders." This is Reed's term for public figures disengaged from concrete politics, who are part of the "professional-managerial strata," and thus the natural adversary of black workers and unemployed. Unconcerned with pragmatic solutions to the problems at hand, theirs is a totalizing perspective on U.S. society, Reed

argues, offered as "an alternative to *political* action." One might argue that Michaels, too, presents totalizing arguments or that general intervention might give direction for political work to come. As a socialist with interest in the connection of theory and praxis, however, Reed finds unique flaws with theories of so total a vision that their grand moral statements – their "fatalistic outlook" – interdict rather than incite political agency. "Among this cohort of racial voices, the essential qualification for recognition seems to be inclination to declaim on the intractability of undifferentiated, ahistorical racism as a fetter on all black Americans's life chances across the sweep of the nation's history." To diagnose such universal "systemic effects" (Fluck, 'Wissenschaft' 116 et passim) is prone to have disastrous effects for those in need, and create jobs only for those already capable of self-fashioning as representatives of the black intelligentsia.

Indeed, the most interesting of Reed's points for our discussion is a strange return of class-related rhetoric within black leadership. He shows great disdain for the "top-down model of black discourse" that runs from DuBois to Coates, and that today works as a "new assertive liturgy of dependence" in which white liberals and well-off black public intellectuals have advanced a "profoundly race-reductionist" politics "discounting the value of both political agency and the broad pursuit of politics." What we end up with, surprisingly, is a disdain for the black underclass that is cast as "a population mired in pathologies and hemmed in by an overwhelming racism." What we end up with is an almost universal problem in discussions of economic need, a dubious return to the culturalization of need – a culture of poverty that refrains from materialist perspectives. If we follow Reed, white and black views of the(ir) other half(s) are dangerously comparable. Consequently, almost all influential black leaders "envisioned their core constituency as a politically mute black population in need of tutelage from their ruling-class-backed leaders." Such tutelage produces a troublesome "underclass mythology" which "grounds professional-class claims to race leadership, while providing the normative foundation of uplift programs directed toward enhancing self-esteem rather than the material redistribution of wealth and income." We are back at one of the key questions of progressive politics: do we want to start with the minds of people or with the situations they are trapped in? Plus, we face the rivalry of an identity politics that has often neglected class-issues with the materialist doctrine of the Old Left. And, paradoxically, we are in an odd situation in which cultural studies-bred scholars accuse Old Leftists of not paying enough attention to "race;" while Michaels and Reed would find fault with the very separation of "race" and class in the liberal camp, which allows them to decry white supremacy as a historical phenomenon.

Mouffe would urge these different camps to let go of their conflicts and create "the people" from the Left instead. In the moment neoliberalism and centrist parties are successfully weakened from a populism on the Right that has read their Gramsci and Foucault only too well, this seems to her the only plausible option. In this form of political agency identity, claims are much invited, yet the problem is to connect their differences. It is a dilemma all too obvious when it comes to Coates: to see white supremacy as an all-encompassing force and talk about privilege when addressing unemployed or working-class whites will get you only so far. With Michaels and Co. the problem runs even deeper: class-consciousness engenders a different form of identity, if at all. Once a class in itself turns into a class for itself, this shift might cause a sense of belonging. Moreover, even if Marxist critics nowadays can concede that class, too, is contingent on processes of meaning but is not cultural in the same way the politics of recognition is (Chibber), one would very willingly let go of its defining lack – poverty or powerlessness in the face of capital – while to be recognized for, say, black achievements is something you would want to maintain even if your situation changes.

One could take another perspective and try to disengage from directly talking about class and "race" and understand the popularity of identity in the first place. If we assume that class stratification exists but that it is not the prime distinction of current society – i.e. that it's modus operandi is not the perpetuation of class differences – we could argue that society

until today is defined by functional differentiation (Luhmann). Individuals in such a society are addressed differently in the distinct function systems: politics, economics, religion, art, and the medical system all take a different interest in a person. Thus, instead of individuality, the proper modern self-experience is as a dividuum: modernity means the fundamental lack of an address (Fuchs 50ff.). In premodern times, such an address was the tribe, clan, or caste. Premodernity implies total inclusion – worst-case scenario as a slave – which means that one's place completely determines one's address(ability). Modern society, while not devoid of stratification and exclusionary mechanisms is centerless; it has no foundation that could determine one's place and thus it enforces the "self-conditioning of the individuum" (Nassehi, *Geschlossenheit* 99). It does so because in the function systems, it is only considered relevant in specific dimensions. Any individual is thus created in its exclusion individuality, beyond the function systems, but hardly outside society. This openness allows for radical self-fashioning, e.g. a Dandyism, but it also includes more mainstream forms of self-identifications –in our present time, along ethnic lines. Evidently, some can choose more freely than others the ways in which they want to live out their individuality. Still, all forms are contingent on this fundamental rule of modern society: individualization is something that happens to individuals whether they want to or not. Far from being a semantic correlating with bourgeois society, then, it is the sine qua non of modernity. Hardly any single person will perform this self-fashioning from scratch. Most use the established patterns, and we can observe "that, in order to be addressable, the compensatory (and simplifying) reference to class-, stratum- and gender experience is used in comparatively stable fashion" (105). We must add "race" and ethnicity to these collectivist categories, even more so as "structural individualization not necessarily has to result in semantic individualist self-descriptions" (106).

The fact that there is no center of society controlling either the distinct function systems or the way people create such addresses does not mean that there is no asymmetry or conflict in society. It is only that these conflicts are an outgrowth of this fundamental principle of modern society. Once the various asymmetries are politically semanticized and crystallize as part of political discourses, chances are that social agents will appropriate them for their self-identifications. Why then, should such agents choose identity-based markers rather than class semantics to do so? One plausible answer is that we have entered an age of "expressive individualism" that champions has superseded the "economic individualism" governing the 18th and 19th century (Fluck, 'Humanities' 59). The shift is contingent on the transformed status of money as a standard medium. Anyone can, at least potentially, become economically successful and gain social respectability in a regime of Franklinian self-discipline and psychic self-regulation along the lines of a protestant work ethic. In the more recent "expressive individualism," the goal has become "cultural self-realization." Unlike money, however, culture thrives on difference; it separates, no matter how much one highlights the hybridity of ascriptions and identities. Culture, after all, relies on a "difference-identity-function" (Gürses 21), it knows of its contingency, yet simultaneously masks its constructedness, thereby suggesting a paradoxical (post)modern authenticity. Further, the more culture is used within *politics*, the stronger the focus on binding representations of groups, spokespersons, collectives will be, as part of the function of the political system is to create visible collectives (Nassehi, 'Themenbindung' 40). In this arena, cultural identities often do not even compete for the better argument, as Michaels correctly diagnoses, even though his politico-aesthetic philosophy misunderstands the root causes of modernity as well.

## The Close-Knit Ties of Race and Class: White Loyalty vs. Interracial Solidarity

For a long time, historical accounts of slavery have regarded the "peculiar institution" as a pre-modern phenomenon, a kind of gruesome, mostly Southern exploitation preceding the modern capitalism that soon took center stage and generated class stratifications. It is one of the great achievements of theoreticians of an

Afromodernity to have refuted this neat separation of periods. Slavery is not merely comparable to capitalism, nor simply preparing it, Paul Gilroy claims in his important study *The Black Atlantic*; it is better conceptualized as the "inner essence" of labor exploitation. Far from being a Southern peculiarity, then, the "empire of cotton" (Beckert) along with its horrible racial logic was "a system that paved the way for laboring under capitalism" (Gilroy 55). If we accept this revisionist criticism – and thus not only make comparable but even metaphorize slavery as key to an understanding of the modern economic system – then class was always already tinged with race. The essential question to be taken from these discussions is how to relate the Afromodernity to the classical accounts of modernization, i.e. division of labor, stratification, functional differentiation of value spheres, etc.

Gilroy's thoughts about the comparability of slavery and capitalism had been prepared long before the publication of W.E.B. DuBois' study *Black Reconstruction*. Published in 1935, the book invites readers to regard slaveholders primarily as capitalists and not so much as an aristocratic elite. In line with this Marxist reframing, slaves, too, had to be recast as class antagonists, as "it followed that the laborers were proletarians" (Ignatiev 243). Accordingly, the first chapter of *Black Reconstruction* refers to "The Black Worker" rather than black slaves. Yet, it is also important to note that in the follow-up chapter, "The White Worker" is given specific attention. While both collectivities were logically bound by their class status, DuBois illuminated important differences. Again, the category of "race" is highlighted to explain specific developments of social stratification. Just as in his diagnosis of double consciousness – burden and gift for those behind the veil – DuBois provides black people with a troublesome privilege, turning them into the quasi-avant-garde of resistance. This time, it is not so much the sociopsychic disposition, but a subversive form of agency. During the Civil War, constant struggles with their masters led to increasingly subordinate slave behavior, from escape to sabotage and upheaval. These actions were far from accidental, but, as Guy Emerson Mount has explained, they can be described as "a form of politics. They emanated from a class conscious slave community" (Mount). Class consciousness entails both, the understanding of their exploitation as workforce and the yearning for existential freedom as a man. Mount eloquently summarizes: "The end game of any slave insurgency was not just to own the means of production, but to own one's very self."

The general strike thesis thus presented a revolutionary proletariat, which – because the slaves' understanding of their situation ran so fundamentally deep – was a potential inspiration to others. "At stake was the centrality of self-emancipation of slaves and the knowledge that this motion created the possibility that white workers might seek something more than being 'not slaves.'" (Roediger, 'Critical History' 23). We have reached the essential point of the debate: the potential disaffiliation of white workers, who can now begin to understand that they have more in common with black workers than with "their folks." In his day, DuBois's challenge of received historical knowledge was – to put it mildly – not enthusiastically received. The Dunning School with their white supremacist views was still in full effect, and it certainly would take quite a while to undo the myth of the Lost Cause. DuBois knew he openly fought these influential camps and ideologies. What he basically did was to attribute agency to slaves, thereby actively undoing the racist comparisons of William A. Dunning & Co. which "held that the slaves were docile, unprepared for freedom, and racially inferior" (Mount). Even more, he presented slave insurgency as a heroic and inspiring act completely corrupted the familiar racial hierarchy.

In the same year that saw the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, Scribner's magazine featured a story in its February edition called "Kneel to the Rising Sun." Erskine Caldwell, the author, had reached critical acclaim with his early works about the rural poor of the South –the novels *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933) fared especially well – yet the highly prolific writer was also a gifted writer of short prose. The Scribner's story is a real gem, a poignant tale of poverty and interracial friendship that neatly corresponds with DuBois's revisionist piece of historiography. Set in the

Reconstruction era, Caldwell invites us into a world of need. Lonnie, a white sharecropper, has trouble supporting his wife Hatty and Mark, his disoriented grandfather. Thus, he urgently needs to ask the landowner for an extra ration. Lonnie is friends with Clem, a black sharecropper. Right at the beginning of the story, Caldwell efficiently blends the themes: "A shiver went through Lonnie. He drew his hand away from his sharp chin, remembering what Clem had said. It made him feel as if he were committing a crime by standing in Arch Gunnard's presence and allowing his hollow face to be seen" (Caldwell 71). The sharp chin, an image repeatedly used throughout the story, reminds us of the physical hurt. But it is also referenced by Clem who reminds his friend that "your face will be sharp enough to split the boards for your coffin" (ibid.). Clem, however, not only sees things more clearly than Lonnie, but he is introduced as an authority – a status well-deserved. Walking up to the sinister and sadistic landowner, Lonnie wishes "he could be as unafraid of Arch Gunnard as Clem was" (ibid.). Even though "a Negro, he never hesitated to ask for rations when he needed something to eat," and this strength, we infer, is a result of the existentialist struggles of an ex-slave that set the sharecroppers apart.

If this earns Clem the respect of his comrade, the landowner is hardly amused and only waits for a chance to get rid of the insurgent black worker. When the time has finally come for Arch to take action – Clem refuses to step down – the irate proprietor organizes a lynch mob. Lonnie, too, faces danger, for he is supposed to help the landowner track down Clem. At the moment of decision, the white sharecropper is trapped in a deadlock: blocked both mentally and physically, words completely fail him and we find him incapable of even making the slightest move. Clem urges him to send the angry mob on a wrong path and his friendship is now tested in front of their class antagonist. Slowly, but surely, Lonnie regains mobility (not agency) only to get caught up in the surge of the lynchers. Because he has failed to do what is ethically right (and politically progressive), he becomes one with the white mass again, simultaneously securing the hierarchic status quo: white dominating black and white landowner dominating those dependent on his will.

Quite efficiently, Caldwell has dramatized a key conflict played out in the white mind, the either/or of white loyality and interracial solidarity of Jim Crow society. While, in real life, such dangers were not always a matter of life and death, the disaffiliation often included violence in interactive situations and also on an organizational level. Any formation of black and white workforce into unions had to face this and the short-lived nature of many an alliance tells us more about the forces to break them than about the willingness to cooperate. In "Kneel to the Rising Sun," Lonnie's choice seems to work against his whole personality, he is de-individualized, a passive medium re-modeled as a part of movement he does not actively embrace. There is no doubt that his friendship with Clem is genuine and that he understands their mutual plight. Still, in spite of all his unquestionable integrity, as specimen of the "good poor," Lonnie can be broken and Arch's dominance – an erratic figure symbolizing the continuity of evil mastery from slavery to capitalist domination – is firmly in place.

In her parable "Two Men and a Bargain" Lilian Smith has succinctly captured the psychosocial dynamics of exclusion at work in the protocols of racial loyalty. Smith describes the strange symbolic transactions at play in a severely stratified South. The bargain invokes nothing short of a Southern white conspiracy against the ex-slaves – a move that would prevent them from becoming rivals for the poor whites. "There's two big jobs down here that need doing," the rich man explains, "somebody's got to tend to the living and somebody's got to tend to the nigger" (Smith 176). In his esteem, Mr. Poor White is "too no-count to learn […] things about jobs and credits, prices, hours, wages, votes, and so on," but what "any white man can" surely understand is "how to handle the black man." Or, more explicitly: "You boss the nigger, and I'll boss the money." More than simply presenting economic gain – jobs guarantee through exclusion – the bargain includes a strong sense of supremacy, as it allows even the lowest whites to boss around his black neighbors. This, then, is the dividing line between the good and the bad white poor; Lonnie's conversion comes close to a rebooting. His literally loses any sign of selfhood before

blending in with the white horde.

Surprising to some, Caldwell was much more careful creating black than white characters. While considering himself the champion of the poor and exhibiting an interest in class issues far greater than that of his Southern peers, the portrayal of white poverty is much more ambivalent and presents both, the good and the bad poor; realist representations of sharecroppers and farmhands find a counter-current in a rivaling strand of panning depictions. At least there are no black characters that feature the depravity of some of the figures occupying the pages of his popular novels. These are a set of poor whites lacking decency and integrity, and who openly embrace the gift of white supremacy involved in Smith's bargain. Caldwell's writing might be populated by specimen of Southern "white trash," yet the richest and most memorable inventory of this strange breed has been created by William Faulkner. His 1936 *Absalom, Absalom!* tracks the rise of poor white Thomas Sutpen to gentry. It describes the intricate relationship between Sutpen and Wash Jones, his "redneck retainer" (Hönnighausen 177), whose self-respect profits from the subjection of black into an inferior position. In "Wash," a short story published two years before the critically acclaimed novel, the psychodynamics of belonging are presented quite efficiently. In one elongated flashback, Faulkner invites us into the mind-set of this character, and we see how the precarious identity is played out. Wash affirms the racist order of slavery, and he needs to do so to maintain his self-image as part of the white society. As long as the master dominates the blacks – who hardly find any respect for Wash at all, freely calling him "white trash" – the working hand feels affiliated to whiteness. This is not a reciprocal feeling at all, however, as Sutpen does not hold his worker in any higher esteem than his slaves. Instead, he himself "magnifies racial difference" (Marcolin 60) in order to purge the shame of his own poor past, projecting it on a person at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. It is a dual exclusion at work here, then: the familiar white versus black, and a class-based yet racially tinged one within whiteness.

If Faulkner had a keen eye for the psychodynamics of such exclusions, Caldwell included these stereotypical portraits of abject poverty more directly in his fiction. His father, who in 1929 contributed to the magazine *Eugenics*, might have influenced him. Writing about a dysfunctional family "The Bunglers," Ira Caldwell "reluctantly suggested selective sterilization as a means to slow the proliferation of desperate lives" (Cook 70). Running from 1880 to 1920, Eugenics Family Studies tried "to validate that large numbers of rural poor whites were 'genetically defective' (Wray and Newitz 2). This troublesome pseudo-scientific background had a strong impact on the othering of an "odd tribe" (Hartigan 4) so completely beyond the realms of decency that the gap between "us" and "them" could not be bridged anymore. The distinction is not a question of class, even though economic stratification is very much part of the reality that produces this gap; nor is it merely a culture of poverty that has created a vicious cycle of dependency. Fundamentally, it is presented as a matter of genetics, a matter of blood that forbids any reciprocity between decent white folks and this variant of the bad poor.

**Racist Re-Entries: White Trash as Key Trope**

Underlying this demarcation was a strange re-entry of the core racist asymmetry – white vs. black – on the side of whiteness. Much of the discriminatory criteria used to set apart blackness – e.g. animal-like features, a lack of inhibition and restraint, the lust, laziness and irrationality beyond decency – returned to set some whites apart from others, creating a semantic and iconography to be used in different contexts, by different people, to different ends. The term's exclusionary drift first served both black slaves and white gentry in the colonial era, much in the manner depicted by Faulkner: the aristocratic slaveholders could render invisible the shared ancestry with the lower classes and the slaves could distinguish themselves from a set of people even lower in status than themselves (Poole 257). Considered more hurtful than similar monikers such as redneck or hillbilly, the slur seems to "allow little room for valorized self-identifications" and invites only the strongest of reactions: "contempt, anger, and disgust" (Wray 2), not only for the debasement that is part of

its baggage, but also for an alleged racism of those who are considered "white trash." And still, the history of this term has seen a number of appropriations, culminating in a national "hip authenticity" (Wray and Newitz 6) in popular culture. From *Roseanne* to white rappers to the recent memoirs and histories (Hochschild; Isenberg; Vance), "white trash" has become a sturdy means of self-fashioning that conveys much of the logic of multiculturalism.

The recent short-lived revival of *Roseanne* can be used as a vivid vignette for this change of political imagination. Initially running from 1988 to 1997, the ABC sitcom depicted working-class life in an Illinois town. It used conventional realist storylines – Roseanne Barr and John Goodman play hardworking parents of four kids – to convey its inclusive universalism. With a humor instrumental in creating its humanist appeal, *Roseanne* occasionally used "white trash" as marker, as in an 1993 episode called "White Trash Christmas" or in an ironic self-identification that fundamentally seeks to deconstruct the term and similar monikers: "Hey, black people are just like us. They're every little bit as good as us, and any people who don't think so is just a bunch of banjo-picking, cousing-dating, barefoot embarrassments to respectable white trash like us." At its heart, it presents its obese and often foul-mouthed characters as decent people, turning what some consider as "others" into people like us. This "inclusionary laughter" ("Hereinlachen"; Gumbrecht 823) is thus comparable with the Cosby Show's rendering black middle-class life familiar to the average viewer. The revival of *Roseanne* however failed to continue on this path. Not only has U.S. American humor changed with national politics, but Roseanne Barr herself has incurred the wrath of the public for her explicit backing of Trump and for her racist tweets about a former Obama official that, in the end, led to the dumping of the sitcom. Thanks to its leading actress, the show that had done its best to do away with a slur, has turned into an epitome of the bad poor again.

Once whiteness had lost its status as an invisible center and had been relegated onto a horizontal plane as just one ethnicity among others, a whole new game of identity had to take its place. Whites, after all cannot not know that they are white by now. No longer merely a signifier for privilege, whiteness (via "white trash") enabled the "me-too-claims to victim status" (Nelson 6), which dominated the mechanics of recognition for quite some time. It became "a term which names what seems unnamable: a race (white) which is used to code 'wealth' is coupled with an insult (trash) which means, in this instance, economic waste" (Hartigan 9). This way of putting it, we might still find in material realities the most decisive element, but in a political arena obsessed with identity claims – and, most assuredly, that counts in Trump's own brand, not just the New Left's – the cultural work of the trope soon blended in with demands of recognition rather than redistribution.

Who is doing the comparison between good and abject poverty? When used as self-identification, the "white trash" semantic dramatically changes in its functions. In literature, the "White Trash Gothic" school – negative portrayals in much Southern Gothic fiction to be contrasted with decent white folks – gave way to writers like Dorothy Allison who claimed the label for herself. Allison drew ambivalent pictures of abject poverty and wrote about her troublesome family history in much of her essays. Used as critical affirmation, the slur is appropriated much like the N-word in the hands of black rappers. Indeed, it was in rap that the symbolic transactions became most visible. Eminem used the slur as coinage in exchange for the N-word, i.e. as a token of authenticity. The logic behind the maneuver is evident: "I, too, have been despised and degraded, I, too, speak the language of the oppressed." The essential moment is not so much any of the tracks of the lyrically gifted performer. It is in the movie *8 Mile*, based in good measure on Eminem's own upbringing, that the slurs become compatible as currency in hip hop and the larger culture it seeks to represent. B-Rabbit (Eminem) is consistently labeled "white trash" until he starts using it himself. The whole movie is building up to the moment of the final battle, when B-Rabbit fights his strongest competitor, Papa Doc, a black rapper, whose upper middle-class background he uses as the final insult. Blackness, at this key moment, comes to signify privilege, while the hurt suffered from humiliating insults is on par.

The cultural work is done: B-Rabbit is below his opponent class-wise and thus deemed more authentically "streetwise," so he takes the prize. The fact that his fictive name recalls the cunning of trickster Br'er Rabbit, whose connotations with black folklore is well-known, is as telling as naming Papa Doc's posse "Leaders of the Free World" who – given the economic benefits of their member, now sounds like a paleocapitalist think tank. After this cultural transaction, "white trash" seems almost a safe place to turn to in pop culture, as the playful invocation by New South artist Bubba Sparxxx reveals in self-ironic videos like "Ugly." It is a fairly peaceful universe we enter, that includes blacks and whites riding pigs, mudfights, black artists like Missy Elliott on a tractor with Bubba. Even the occasional Confederate Flag seemed like part of a self-musealizing gesture – until it was not. Trump's idea of America has revealed that pop culture might only be one part of reality, but certainly incapable of transcribing the country's politics in full. Eminem went viral with a lengthy anti-Trump rap and Sparxxx mourned that much of the achievements of "Hick Hop" – the interracial co-operation in a shared music culture that encompasses differences – were profoundly revoked. Indeed, some "fans" asked the New South rapper why he would not go viral with a pro-Trump piece, to which he responded in shock, reminding listeners that his "attempt to find common ground between the poor white people and poor black people he'd grown up about" has been perverted by people who need him to be "the Donald Trump of white rappers" (Peisner). Today, after the Charlottesville Riots, the "Rebel Flag" might still be a much-contested symbol, but no one in their right mind would say it resembles something peaceful or remotely musealized. Is it still possible in such a climate to explain "white trash" as an "allegory of identity … deployed to describe the existence of class antagonisms in the U.S." (Wray and Newitz 8)? Needless to say, it is an antagonism that will not become part of any progressive "chain of equivalence" in the near future. No matter how we opt to interpret the allegory, it is complicated to return to class as a social structure devoid of its deeply racial tinge.

### The Literature of Poverty

Recently, poverty has been addressed as an alternative or supplement to the category of class in literary criticism. In his seminal *American Hungers*, Gavin Jones provides a sketch of how a focus on the multiple facets of poverty can bring together the materialist concerns of the Old Left, cultural studies concerns, and literary sensibilities. The term of his choice to explain the potential damage "of poverty as a specific state of social being" is "socioeconomic suffering" (Jones 2). While he acknowledges the materiality of poverty as in a state of lack, Jones is also keen to show how "[t]he materiality of need opens up into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture, with poverty moving away from the absolute and the objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical" (3). The awareness for these transition points facilitates readings of texts far less schematic of the allegories of theories often encountered in Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretations. Jones, in other words, helps us trace the implications of need in rich psychosocial registers, taking into account the different phenomena of a life lived. Among them are doubtlessly class relations, the status anxieties these cause, and the respective class habitus of social agents (Bourdieu). Without falling back into a notion of individuality cut off from the social, he can correct the problem often found in "class analysis" which "often fails to focus sharply on what poverty means as a social category" (Jones 8). Jones correctly points out that Marx (and parts of later Marxist criticism) has an ambiguous relation to notions of poverty at best: habitually the poor are reduced to a quasi-naturally miserable and passive "Lumpenproletariat," cast "in images of residue and waste" (ibid.), or they are kept down by force only to return heroically – these are the undeserving poor that will, as a revolutionary subject, become the privileged agent of history. In both cases, there is a one-dimensionality of (pre-)destination, either the poor are completely outside meaning and reciprocity, playing no role at all and in fact waste to be disposed in the dustbin of history, or they are elevated and turn into the one "thymotic collective" (Sloterdijk 120), capable of channeling its rage in order to change

the world. In this way, and maybe surprisingly, Marxism too, partakes in the troublesome tradition separating the good poor from the bad – a semantic and iconography we will return to below.

Jones also takes issue with the multiple forms of interpellation discussed in cultural studies, the way subjects are being made through social power. Granted that "the composite kind of class analysis" has produced exceptionally good studies – he praises *Love and Theft,* Eric Lott's study of blackface minstrelsy and its function in the formation of the white working class – Jones elucidates how this breed of scholarship "returns us full circle to the forces that have always acted to unsettle socioeconomic awareness of the lower classes" (15). Thus attention is diverted again and we tend to talk more about race and gender than actually about class and poverty, in all its dimensions. The discussion of "white trash" is a case in point. Yet, a complete focus on class is also in danger of getting too one sided: in its emphasis on the economic realities or the narrow focus on emergent class consciousness studies, proletarian literature has sufficiently demonstrated this bias.

**Fictions of Poverty: Undoing Naturalism**

Still, if poverty implies socioeconomic suffering, and is thus a material reality as much as a psychological one, literature is a good object for study. Literature, after all, is language-based art that "reveals how poverty is established, defined, and understood in discourse, as a psychological and cultural problem that depends fundamentally on the language used to describe it" (Jones 4). The focus is on the peculiar reflexive qualities of literary texts, its capability to do more than repeat an already existent world. Thus, Jones correctly insists on the meta-linguistic potential, the way a literary text might reference a "real" phenomenon while simultaneously reflecting on both the discourses that shape our conception of said reality, as well as on literature's own means to evoke such phenomena. And this understanding of an aesthetics (rather than sociology or cultural studies) of poverty can help us dissect a bulk of fiction often misunderstood: the minimalism of the 1980s, especially Bobbie Ann Mason's short stories with their focus on (Post-)Southern blue-collar life. One reason for these critical misjudgments is minimalism's break with naturalism which has long been regarded as the closest ally of those in need. Because of "its predominant interest in the underprivileged and the downwardly mobile," naturalism "necessarily follows the more enlightened view of the poor – as victims of their physical environment – found within turn of the century social science and Progressive reform" (Jones 5).

Yet, if literature's role is seen less as mimetically reproducing an already existent reality and more as allowing us to see the world through the eyes of its manifold aesthetic designs, there is no necessary ethico-aesthetic link between naturalism and poverty narratives. Moreover, written at a decisive moment in American history, when the Republicans began to "talk constantly about class – in a coded way, to be sure" (Frank 245), Reagan is one of the key figures of what Thomas Frank calls "the Great Backlash" that set out to undo the achievements of the sixties:

> While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues – summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art – which it then marries to pro-business economic policies. Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends. (Frank 5)

This redirection of anger informs Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), which zoom right in into a milieu that is catered to by such discourses. Yet, instead of providing a full-fledged portrait of any of her working-class or unemployed characters, Mason's signature style does the opposite: vignettes rather than spot-on characterizations of regional existence, disconnected glimpses of everyday life shot through with the decontextualizing powers of popular culture. This narrative strategy has led some of Mason's critics to dismiss her (and other minimalist) writings as "Kmart realism" – a form of literature devoid of the promises of traditional realist or naturalist discourse and their reliance on metonymic detail. The minimalist willingness

to dodge the protocols of verisimilitude and abandon motivational progression in plot and characterization is a decision, of course, not a flaw. What is left unsaid must be considered to be part of the aesthetic experience, for what is actualized on the page becomes form only when compared to the virtual background of possible choices. And her decision to refrain from, say, describing the formation of a class consciousness might well be a reflection of the Reagan moment.

One of the best stories, "Still Life with Watermelon," deals with unemployment and psychological damages caused by socioeconomic suffering in a society in which Southern rootedness has given way to nationwide late capitalist consumerism. The lack of identity is thus attributable to both, the actual need of collecting food stamps and the loss of a sense of place. Buried behind the shallow plot is a story of possible emancipation discernable enough for the acute reader. Her partner has left Louise, the protagonist, a plight she shares with her flat mate Peggy. While the latter is killing time reading Harlequin romances with the TV on, thus inattentively consuming trivial entertainment, Louise has taken to painting watermelons. If at first we cannot fail but notice a strong distinction between activity and passivity instrumental in shaping the twin characterization, we are led to observe how her hobby soon turns into an obsession. The initial split between – again – the good poor (disciplined, inward-directed, actively pursuing the arts) and the bad (lack of restraint, utter consumption, passivity and popular culture) is thereby shattered. Louise now paints as greedily as her friend consumes pop culture; what is more, her newly-found interest prevents her from doing what seems to be the only plausible solution in her situation: actively looking for a job. Mason cleverly juxtaposes brute material need with psychological emancipation and self-sufficiency and forces her readers to reflect on whether the close at hand really is the best option.

Before going to the unemployment office, Louise makes a stop at a retailer, buying some new paint. She has high hopes of selling her stock of images to a man who – as she is informed by Peggy – collects watermelon paintings. Two questions follow these aspirations: the first one is, of course, one of oddly making-it, finding someone of idiosyncratic tastes who actually buys the art of a self-taught novice. "Why not?" we might ask; there is a market for any kind of product in a highly individualized culture in need of distinction. That it is Peggy, however, who functions as contact, adds another layer of meaning, expert that she is for de-hierarchized popular culture. Good at heart, Louise often has to wait for her to pay the monthly rent; thus, there is an intersection between material necessity and a hobby that is not just a hobby (anymore) if it turns out a profit after all. How are we to read this intersection?

While a first reading could suggest that Louise's aspiration is a good and uplifting one – who does not dream to work without alienation? – Mason's depictions of Louise's autodidacticism are more nuanced. It is not just the sheer act of painting, of doing something meaningful with her life; the story's subtext is one of aesthetic education. We observe Louise recognizing a number of different things: the materiality of paint and canvas, the emergence of form, etc. Once she sets out to apply the colors and strokes, she begins to grasp the differences of style and, in doing so, sees her beginning capability to make sovereign distinctions and increasingly self-affirmed choices. This emancipatory process is threefold: initially, it applies to the painting itself, her growing awareness of artistic potential and stylistic repertoire. Put to test in a more pragmatic context, these changes also affect her relationship. When her boyfriend returns, having tried to find himself, she is forced to reflect on her role in this relationship – a task she is better prepared to face now after having found a kind of self-realization herself. It is, in short, an awareness that if there is a mutual future, she will need to have a say in it. Even more, she knows that this future can be actively shaped, despite the fact that material lack will remain a consistent concern.

Finally, on a more abstract level, the text reflects on itself, on the economics of art. This applies both to the stylistic qualities of minimalism – its omissions, reliance on present tense, and lack of narrative coherence – as to the idea of art, its merits as a form of expression

negating direct use-functions. In art, we find a different kind of economics at work, in which – to follow minimalism's credo – less actually is more. And if the filling of gaps is part of any readerly response, these gaps are the vital element of minimalist prose. Scarcity of means does not imply lack of achievement. More essentially, while art is dismissed as luxury by most, Louise's growth is pit against the bare necessities of the market. Had she simply succumbed to the economic logic, she would have never gotten an idea of amelioration. For all the "Kmart" routines, for the adherence to the uneventful everyday of blue-collar life, there is a strong subtext of re-evaluating aesthetic experience against the proto-capitalist logic of necessity.

"Still Life with Watermelon" hides its story of (self-)emancipation from plain sight and needs the gift of readerly attention to unbury its narrative subtleties. Mason, thus, has stripped down the classical class-affirmative writing, taking away much of the usual contextualization, e.g. information that would embed its tales in larger socioeconomic realities or explicitly instill hope for class formation. By not living up to these standards, Mason might either respond to aesthetic challenges (postmodernism) or react to the politics of the day, in which traditional class consciousness was besmirched by Reaganomics, with its downsizing and anti-unionist agendas but also its re-direction of working-class anger into national pride and family values. What turns her writing (at least for some of today's recipients) into such an uncomfortable read is the very absence of an expressive individuality corresponding to any of the available cultural scripts. Louise's painterly expressions notwithstanding, what she (and other Mason characters) lack is the will to make themselves readable in the available semantics of belonging – either class-related or in a multiculturalist idiom. The idea of whiteness as identity corresponding the multiculturalist matrix was not yet available in the Reagan era, even though "Shiloh," the title story, very subtly points in that direction. Mason's characters are frequently trapped in the moment-to-moment of a life of lack. The habitual present tense of the storytelling confirms our initial hunch that they neither know their past nor have a sense of future, which – politically – is a dangerous ignorance. It might create a void filled by gifted storytellers who create the (political) narratives for them. Her reluctance to fully flesh out context and character and her invitation to readers to fill in the gaps reveal poverty as

> intertwined with questions of selfhood, being, and language, yet always in a struggle against a universal, metaphysical understanding of *lack*, and toward an understanding of *need* as a specific kind of suffering that is at once materially bounded, socially inscribed, and psychologically registered. (Jones 4)

## Endnotes

[1] See Eribon 2013.

[2] See Frank 2004.

[3] See Michaels' The Trouble with Diversity (2006)

## Works Cited

Beckert, Sven. *The Empire of Cotton: A Global History.* New York: Knopf, 2014. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Bray, Michael. "The White Working Class Does Not Exist." *Historical Materialism.* 20 Sept. 2017. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Caldwell, Erskine. "Kneel to the Rising Sun." *Scribners.* Feb. 1935. 71 – 80. Print.

Chibber, Vivek. "Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn." *Catalyst* 1.1 (2017). Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Coates, Ta-Nehesi. "The First White President." *The Atlantic.* Oct. 2017. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Crouch, Colin. *Post-Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity, 2004. Print.

Davis, Mike. "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class." *Catalyst* 1.1 (2017). Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880.* New York: Free Press, 1998. Print.

Eribon, Didier. *Returning to Reims.* Los Angeles: MIT Press, 2013. Print.

Fluck, Winfried. "Die Wissenschaft vom systemischen Effekt; Von der Counter-Culture zu den Race, Class,

and Gender Studies." *Der Geist der Unruhe: 1968 im Vergleich: Wissenschaft – Literatur – Medien.* Ed. Rainer Rosenberg et al. Berlin: Akademie, 2000. 111-24. Print.

Fluck, Winfried. "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism." *The*

*Futures of American Studies.* Ed. Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 211-30. Print.

Frank, Thomas. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America.* New York: Metropolitan, 2004. Print.

Fuchs, Peter. "Adressabilität als Grundbegriff der soziologischen Systemtheorie." *Konturen der Moderne.*

*Systemtheoretische Essays II.* Ed. Marie-Christin Fuchs. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005. 37-62. Print.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* London: Verso, 1993. Print.

Gordon, Avery and Christopher Newfield. "White Philosophy." *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994): 737-57. Print.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. "Amerika, wie es lacht." *Merkur.* 641/642 (2002): 821-32. Print.

Gürses, Hakan. "Funktionen der Kultur. Zur Kritik des Kulturbegriffs." *Grenzen des Kulturkonzepts:*

*Metagenealogien.* Ed. Stefan Nowotny and Michael Staudigl. Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2003. 13-34. Print.

Harrington, Michael. *The Other America: Poverty in the United States.* New York: Scribner, 2012. Print.

Hartigan, John. *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People.* Durham, NC. Duke University Press, 2005. Print.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right.* New York: The New Press, 2016. Print.

Ignatiev, Noel. "'The American Blindspot': Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W.E.B. Du Bois." *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (1993): 243-51. Print.

Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America.* New York: Viking, 2016. Print.

Jones, Gavin. *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.

Laclau, Ernesto. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times.* London: Verso, 1990. Print.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.* London: Verso, 2001. Print.

Lewis, Oscar. "The Culture of Poverty." *Scientific American* 215 (1966): 19-25. Print.

Luhmann, Niklas. *The Differentiation of Society.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.

Maisano, Chris. "The New 'Culture of Poverty'." *Catalyst* 1.2 (2017). Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Marchart, Oliver. *Cultural Studies.* Konstanz: UVK, 2008. Print.

Marcolin, Pia Masiero. "'White Trash': The Exemplary Naming of a Class in William Faukner's 'Wash'." *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture.* Ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz. Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2003. 57-72. Print.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. Print.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality.* New York: Metropolitan, 2006. Print.

---. "Identity Politics: A Zero-Sum Game." *Nonsite.* 11 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

---. "The Political Economy of Anti-Racism." *Nonsite.* 11 Feb. 2018. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

--- and Kenneth Warren. "Reparations and Other Right-Wing Fantasies." *Nonsite.* 11 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism.* London: Verso, 2018. Print.

Mount, Guy Emerson. "When Slaves Go on Strike: W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* 80 Years Later." *African American Intellectual History Society.* 28 Dec. 2015. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Print.

Nassehi, Armin. *Geschlossenheit und Offenheit: Studien zur Theorie der modernen Gesellschaft.* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003. Print.

---. "Von der Milieu- zur Themenbindung." *Die politische Meinung* 498 (2011): 39-41. Print.

Peisner, David. "Rhymes From the Backwoods: The Rise of Country Rap." *Rolling Stone.* 24 Jan. 2018. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Poole, Ralph. "Southern Gothic Updated: Zerrbilder verstörter Männlichkeit im white trash-Roman." *Amerikanisches Erzählen nach 2000.* Ed. Sebastian Domsch. München: edition text + kritik, 2008. 256-82. Print.

Reed, Jr. Adolph. "The Trouble with Uplift." *The Baffler* 41. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Roediger, David. "Accounting for the Wages of Whiteness. U.S. Marxism and the Critical History of Race." *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital.* Ed. Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler, David Roediger. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010. 9-36. Print.

---. *Class, Race, and Marxism.* London: Verso, 2018. Print.

Schwinn, Thomas. *Soziale Ungleichheit.* Bielefeld: transcript, 2007. Print.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation.* Trans. Mario Wenning. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.

Smith, Sharon. *Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States.* Chicago: Haymarket, 2006. Print.

Stäheli, Urs. "Die Nachträglichkeit der Semantik: Zum Verhältnis von Sozialstruktur und Semantik." *Soziale Systeme* 4 (1998): 315-39. Print.

---. *Poststrukturalistische Soziologien*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2000. Print.

Vance, J.D. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016. Print.

Wolfe, Alan. "Should We Shut Up About Diversity?" *Slate* 3 Oct 2006. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Zakaria, Rafia. "How US authors worried about White Poverty in 2017 – and forgot about everyone else." *The Guardian. 28* Dec. 2017. Web. 15 Sept. 2018.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Against the Populist Temptation." *Critical Inquiry* 32.3 (2006): 551-74. Print.

## Author's Biography

Carsten Schinko received his PhD from Tübingen in 2006 (Research Training Group „Pragmatization and Depragmatization of Literature) and his Habilitation from the University of Stuttgart (2016). He has been a temporary/visiting professor at the University Wuppertal and the HU Berlin. In April 2019 he returned to Tübingen for a three-year stint as Associate Professor/Akademischer Rat. He specializes in African American Literature, Literary Theory, Systems Theory and Popular Culture.