



BOOK REVIEW:

Jolene Hubbs. *Class, Whiteness, and Southern Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. 191 pages. ISBN: 978-1009250658. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781009250627>.

A comprehensive study of the literary representations of poor white southerners across the twentieth century, Jolene Hubbs's book *Class, Whiteness, and Southern Literature* anatomizes ideological containment and subversion within such representations. Central to Hubbs's argument is the assertion that poor white literary characters serve as "barometers of the cultural anxieties gripping middle-class white people in the periods in which they are produced" (7). Through this lens, Hubbs illuminates how stereotypical tropes have been employed by creators and consumers alike to uphold white middle- and upper-class superiority. Poor white southerners, Hubbs posits, circulate in the middle-class white imagination as *others* that contribute to making and demarcating exclusionary models of whiteness. Hubbs tracks the works of authors across generations who have challenged such tropes and models through innovative portrayals of poor whites in the South. These alternative renditions constitute what Hubbs terms "a formally innovative counter-tradition," bodying forth the social disruptions that undermine white middle-class social solidarity (8). The greatest contribution of Hubbs's project thus lies in the intricate symbiosis between sociocultural apparatuses and formal literary devices—highlighting literature's pivotal role in white class formation and self-presentation.

Class, Whiteness, and Southern Literature investigates southern literary works across four different periods: the Gilded Age, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Era, and the 1990s. Its primary object is to interrogate the white classist hegemony undergirding the production of the stereotype. Reading the white middle class less as a category than as a phenomenon that happens only "when better-off people . . . define themselves against the figures depicted," Hubbs stresses the malleability and plasticity of the prevailing stereotypes of southern poor whites (15).

Hubbs's four chapters encompass an eclectic range of authors. While each chapter explores popular texts of the era that promulgate negative representations of poor white southerners, each chapter also engages with a specific writer who rebuts classist conceptions entrenched in their contemporaries' works. The opening chapter attends to the imagery of poor white southerners as depicted in late nineteenth-century literary magazines, *The Atlantic Monthly* in particular. Hubbs examines how plantation fiction writers and local colorists such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page routinely pathologized white poverty in the post-Reconstruction period and categorized it as a medical condition and a sign of biological or racial inferiority. In contradistinction to this dominant literary tradition, Hubbs notes, is the pioneering formal innovation of Charles Chesnutt, who introduced a polyvocal narrative structure that diverged from

the frame narrative technique commonly found in plantation stories. As Hubbs cogently lays out, by modifying plantation fiction's dialogism between a white upper-middle-class character and a Black speaker—which typically emphasizes political alliances between Blacks and white patriarians—Chesnutt's tripartite narrative form addresses multiple audiences whose members are of disparate and often incompatible ideological predispositions. Hubbs acutely observes that this "[p]olyvocality frustrates any attempt to draw a straight line from characters' utterances to textual or authorial politics"; it challenges plantation fiction's nostalgic fantasies of a rosy antebellum order in particular (42).

Chapter two turns to modernist representations of poor southern whites during the Great Depression. According to Hubbs, middle-class white writers, eugenicists in particular, responded to modernism's call to "make it new!" by projecting poor white people as antiquated and obsolete. Taking William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* as an exemplar of the period's counter-discourse, Hubbs argues that Faulkner's novel invokes deep-seated ideas about poor whites in the rural South as an anachronism, only to then undermine and recast them. In her remarkable reading, Hubbs demonstrates that the novel's investment in a sweat economy and its undivided attention to filth expose how middle-class "townspeople establish their modern identities through . . . signs of obsolescence that throw into relief their own cutting-edge practices and possessions" (55). Furthermore, Hubbs maintains that Faulkner's subversive stance takes shape formally, in the novel's radically innovative representational techniques. The novel's use of stream-of-consciousness narration, according to Hubbs, contests the stereotype of unintelligent country poor whites by allowing these characters to articulate their sophisticated, even avant-garde sensibilities. Additionally, Hubbs sharply notes that the novel's repeated use of

stylistically structural suspension further underscores the social stagnation and cultural marginalization experienced by poor white individuals. These thematic and formal strategies work in tandem to destabilize received ideas about class in the South by "lay[ing] bare how the figure of the poor white serves as a foil to Anglo-American modernity" (46).

Chapter three engages with racist representations of poor white southerners during the Civil Rights era. By meticulously examining the acts of racism perpetrated by marginalized poor white characters in the works of middle-class white southern women writers—namely, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Eudora Welty's short story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" and Lilian Smith's autobiographical *Killers of the Dream*—Hubbs maps out the ideological framework of the period's dominant discourse. According to Hubbs, these authors "represent racism as personal prejudices blighting poor white people, rather than as policies and practices architected . . . by middle- and upper-class white people" (69). Hubbs contends persuasively that these authors, regardless of their intentions, inadvertently absolve the true perpetrators of institutional racism, rendering themselves complicit in the racial violence and racial suffering of the era. Hubbs then turns her analysis to Flannery O'Connor's short stories "Revelation" and "Good Country People," which break rank with the prevailing denigratory aesthetic of the white middle class during the Civil Rights movement. O'Connor turns what Hubbs terms "middle-class monologic," the narrative device employed by Lee, Welty, and Smith, on its head (79). Instead of utilizing middle-class monologues to overdetermine poor whites as the sole enforcers of racism, O'Connor reveals "the cross-class nature of racism by representing white women across the social spectrum voicing differently worded versions of the same bigoted sentiments" (76).

Chapter four shifts its focus away from middle-class writers and instead studies the representations of southern poor white characters by two poor white authors whose works appeared during the economic boom of the 1990s. Through her analysis of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Barbara Robinette Moss's *Change Me into Zeus's Daughter*, Hubbs cannily shows how Allison and Moss establish a new hunger economy that challenges the classist association made by middle- and upper-class writers between the material and intellectual deficiencies of poor whites. Hubbs demonstrates that Allison and Moss present characters who are physically hungry but culturally sated, thus refuting the entrenched notion that literature is a luxury for the leisure class only. By doing so, Hubbs adds, Allison and Moss testify to "how narratives authored by middle- and upper-class writers can beget a form of false consciousness in poor white readers" (102). Hubbs also compares Allison and Moss's works with canonical male grit lit, including Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, Tim McLaurin's *The Acorn Plan*, Larry Brown's *Joe*, and Harry Crews's *Scar Lover*. She argues compellingly that Allison and Moss's portrayal of hungry poor white women characters significantly contradicts the representations of horny poor white women found in male grit lit, in which a fixation on fellatio is symptomatic of a general disinterest in women's minds. Hubbs notes that by creating "decidedly inedible female figures" such as Allison's heroine Bone, who defies expectations in male grit lit that poor white women's bodies are fungible and routinely associated with food, both authors upend grit lit's sexualization of the female body (96).

Class, Whiteness, and Southern Literature concludes with a coda that delves into the representations of poor white southerners in the early twenty-first century. Through her analysis of the recurrent motif of katabasis in Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, Hubbs highlights the endurance of

hegemonic white classism. Hubbs specifically cautions against Hochschild and Vance's renditions of poor whites as "unalive" (123), arguing that such depictions further contribute to enduring class divisions in the South, wherein the presence of poor whites is still likened to "a major bugbear haunting better-off people today" (124).

While the range of primary texts Hubbs covers is commendable, readers familiar with only a subset of the selected works might find it daunting, if not exhausting, to engage with such a diverse array of authors. This challenge is particularly evident in chapter four. Here, Hubbs's otherwise persuasive analysis is hampered by her labored comparative reading of Allison and Moss's works alongside novels by McCarthy, McLaurin, Brown, and Crews. There are also some rather strained comparisons within the genre of male grit lit itself. Chapter two, by contrast, offers a more focused and sustained close reading of a single novel, rendering it more accessible to general readers.

Finally, Hubbs's study does not engage with discussions of how twenty-first-century southern writers—Black as well as white—are similarly engaged in the process of recycling and recasting the pioneering works of their predecessors. For example, Jesmyn Ward, very briefly mentioned in the coda, radically repurposes Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to launch a pointed critique of the neoliberal discourse that consigns poor Black southerners, too, to the category of waste in *Salvage the Bones*. Perhaps other scholars will expand on Hubbs's compelling readings to consider further the inter-generational and cross-racial dynamics of twenty-first-century southern writing.

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