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The Contemporary “White Trash” Memoir in Literary, Social and Political Contexts

By Ursula Hansberry

Submitted to the Committee on Undergraduate Honors at Baruch College of the City University of New York December 2, 2022 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for receiving Provost Honors.

Professor Michael Staub
Faculty Sponsor

Professor Sean O’Toole
Department Committee

Prof. Rick Rodriguez
Department Committee

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Abstract

This senior thesis is about class in the United States, as expressed and represented in three critically and popularly successful memoirs published by white working-class writers between 2005 and 2018. My thesis explores how these memoirs and their critical and commercial reception demonstrate a profound shift in cultural and social representations of white working-class upbringings in the United States, although not in any simple or obvious way. While readers intuitively grasp that a memoir is not the truth in a directly literal sense, but rather a document that is constructed, edited, framed, shaped, and dramatized, readers and critics at the same time presume that these memoirs can and do provide a deepened understanding of what individuals from impoverished and troubled backgrounds really experience – and both authors and commentators also often suggest that more general policies and politics may be derived from these experiences. The evolving reception of these texts has shaped their meaning.

My argument is threefold. First, that a shift in white working-class memoir represents a new turn in class consciousness in American nonfiction/autobiographical writing. Second of all, and crucially, this shift represents a rupture from a past linkage between working-class literature and leftwing politics that the term “proletarian writing” so often exemplified. Rather, what we are seeing in the trajectory from Walls (*The Glass Castle*) to Vance (*Hillbilly Elegy*) to Westover (*Educated*) is far more confusing to locate politically. Thirdly, then, and regardless of their political standing, these memoirists implicitly and explicitly cite education as the catalyst for their escape from their “white trash” upbringing.

Introduction

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz.

Janis Joplin, 1971

I began this project in response to the growing divides in American politics and society. Signs of these worsening ruptures have grown impossible to ignore in the year since I began my thesis. One of the more concerning signs is the growing disconnect among American citizens – both from one another and from any conviction that US society can be functional. To call people “disconnected” in this day and age is, I admit, a strange thing; technologically, thanks to social media and smartphones and the instantaneous delivery of news and knowledge, we are actually more tied to each other than ever. The internet has allowed for access to seemingly infinite amounts of information: news sites, journals, social media, blogs, and online communities, all giving users the ability to interact and converse with people across the country and the globe. There are infinite opportunities for Americans to learn from one another and find common ground. And yet, the established lines drawn between my algorithm and your algorithm, between individuals with loyalties on the left and those with convictions on the right, have only grown darker and deeper as members on all sides become polarized – and closed down to any open-mindedness they may have at one time had towards one another.

Things had already reached a point of seeming no return when Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016. At that moment, many progressive commentators expressed bewilderment as

to how he was able to muster so much support, especially among the white working-class.

Articles in esteemed national journals and magazines expounded on how the “educated left” had failed – and continued to fail – to see the “forgotten” rural and white communities that Trump championed in his victory speech the night after the election. As one *New York Times* article so remarked, “this essential political idea – that a vast segment of the nation’s white citizens have been overlooked, or looked down upon – has driven every major realignment in American politics since the New Deal” (Gage, 2016). During this latest contemporary realignment, then, America’s “forgotten” white and rural working class had come to be passionately convinced that a reality television show host and New York real estate magnate with a history of bankruptcies – an individual who had existed his entire life among the one percent – was the man best positioned to give full-throated voice to their neglected plight.

The modern Republican Party’s identification with the demographic of the poor and white working-class American is nothing new, although it is often confounding. There is proof that the Republican Party’s identity as the party of the working man may have been more myth than reality; Democratic voters in 2016 earned less on average than Republican voters (Pew Research). Yet it cannot be denied that many of Trump’s supporters came from regions of the country with few opportunities, places that former diplomat Fiona Hill has called “opportunity deserts” (Hill, 90). These supporters resided in places where there has been astonishingly easy access to highly addictive, destructive, and inexpensive opioids – pharmaceuticals that were provided by enormously profitable corporate entities like Purdue Pharma, owned by the renowned Sackler family (Macy). And while many progressive policies would seem on their face to have strong appeal for those living in opportunity deserts (e.g. universal health care), logic did not appear to triumph over the seeming irrationality of this political situation. As Texas journalist

Molly Ivins wrote almost twenty years ago, in her summary of insights in Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, "white working-class Americans have been voting against their own economic interests for a very long time" (Molly Ivins quoted in Frank, back cover).

Which brings us to the subject of this senior thesis. There was, and has been at least since 2016, a genuine hunger among readers of more liberal leaning publications like *The New York Times* and the *New Yorker* to get a true first-hand understanding of what it might mean to live in "red" America, and more specifically in poor white America. There was, and remains, renewed fascination with places long forgotten by people living on the two coasts. What did it mean to come of age in Appalachia, for instance, or the Midwest more generally? What was it like to grow up watching the factories and industries which acted as the heartbeat to the interior of our country shut down and put thousands out of work? How did these experiences and conditions shape the political and societal perspectives of this demographic?

The appearance of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), a first-hand account of Yale law school graduate J. D. Vance's white working-class upbringing in southeast Ohio, appeared to provide the timeliest of answers. It was absolutely the right book at the right moment, offering up clear and intensely personal reflections on how someone like Trump could find his strongest supporters among America's white and disenfranchised. Left and right agreed on very little, if anything, but they somehow did manage to agree that Vance's dark and dysfunctional depiction of a "culture in crisis" in the Appalachian mountains was honest, important, and even essential reading. Vance had achieved more than the story of his own triumph over poverty and pain; he had captured the story of an entire swath of Americana – "the hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash" he considered to be his "neighbors" (Vance, 2).

This was the rare memoir that took on the power of sociological critique; it was seen as better than scholarly research in that it was telling a true story, and therefore was irrefutable. Vance's facts and data were his memories of abuse and hardship, betrayals and humiliations. In harnessing the personal for the political, *Hillbilly Elegy* was almost immediately to have the profoundest of effects on the conversations that pundits and politicians, not to mention academics and policymakers, were having on how to respond to the Trump Revolution.

Yet for Vance's memoir to change a conversation about the white working-class in the United States after Trump, and then really to seize control of that conversation, meant that there had already been a conversation before Vance. What had been the dominant discourse about the so-called "white trash" community, as expressed specifically in the memoir genre, before Vance? And what of that discourse after Vance? Had Vance's memoir fundamentally changed the conversation? And if so, how and in what ways had the "white-trash" memoir been transformed by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century?

To research these questions, I turned to a critical precursor text in the genre: Jeannette Walls' immensely popular *The Glass Castle* (2005). I also looked at a notable successor to Vance's memoir: Tara Westover's bestselling memoir, *Educated* (2018). These two memoirs serve as crucial bookends to this story of Vance's impact on the genre for several reasons. First, all three achieved enormous critical and literary success, topping the *New York Times* bestseller list for multiple years. Secondly, all three memoirists were white Americans (two with Appalachian roots) raised in or still reeling from poverty by families in crisis. The effects of their painful upbringings permeate their narratives. Thirdly, and intriguingly, all three memoirists are highly competent writers who successfully went on to receive educations at the most elite universities in the world.

My interpretation of these texts has been oriented around Nancy Isenberg's book *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2017). Like Vance's memoir, the book was released as a reaction to the political landscape of 2016. Unlike *Hillbilly Elogy*, its intention was not to broadly translate a modern mindset. *White Trash* instead sought to simultaneously address the historical formation and evolution of the "white trash" classification and to expose the country's appalling treatment of those to whom Isenberg's title referred. It must be stated that even in academic circles the term may be interpreted as derogatory. Its inclusion in this project is not an attempt to alter its meaning or to grant the term the ability to empower its bearers, nor will its use diminish the four centuries of derision which accompany it. Rather, the history of the term is what makes the term essential to the thesis.

I was compelled by Isenberg's analysis that "the poor, the waste, the rubbish, as they are variously labeled, have stood front and center during America's most formative political contests" as well as her argument that the creation of this marginalized group of human beings came together with the rationalizing of economic inequality throughout US history (xviii). So too there is Isenberg's historical evidence that this economic inequality had to be *naturalized* and therefore made to seem a matter of inheritance; as she puts it: "poor whites had to be classified as a distinct breed" (xvi). The term "white trash" accordingly takes on a more nuanced meaning than just poor and white. It refers to a specific group of Americans whose ancestors were held down by class partitions modeled after ones for cattle. Isenberg puts it like this: "To speak of breeds was to justify unequal status among white people; it was the best way to divide people into categories and deny that class privilege exists. If you are categorized as a breed, it means you can't control who you are and you can't avert your appointed destiny" (313-314). Descendants still cannot escape the archaic idea that their poverty has been the result of their

genetics, and so “white trash in the twenty-first century remains fraught with the older baggage of stereotypes of the hopelessly ill-bred” (xvi). Thus, the people portrayed in “white trash” memoirs will inevitably be seen subjectively – as makers of their own misery rather than heirs to misfortune. The term must be acknowledged and used to better contextualize the opinions the authors may have about themselves and others, alongside the reactions of the reception to each memoir.

Bearing this in mind, it is my contention that close analyses of the three exceedingly influential and commercially successful personal narratives demonstrate a meaningful shift in how much power contemporary white working-class memoirs possessed in the hands of both their authors and their respective commentators. This can be seen most clearly in the case of J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, a text that was initially not seen as especially political one way or the other, but that would increasingly be interpreted through the lens of Vance’s own political realignment – from a private citizen and venture capitalist strongly opposed to MAGA Republicanism to a Trump-endorsed and successful candidate for US Senate from Ohio in 2022. While Vance’s reversal may be interpreted as hypocritical opportunism, that is not the focus that I wish to put forth here. Rather, it is more that the reception to Vance and his dramatic shift rightward also pulled the entire genre of the so-called “white trash” memoir in an unprecedented direction. Whereas once upon a time – in the 1930s and 1940s, to be precise – the reflective narratives of white working-class authors might have generally been labeled “proletarian” writing, this label had now been rendered completely obsolete.

There has long been a scholarly consensus that “class” is not a well-understood category in American life (in contrast, for instance, to race or gender). Americans have been “taught to disbelieve in class” as a category for understanding their own positions in US society (Lauter and

Fitzgerald, 2001). Yet at the same time, starting from America's inception, class discourse has been tinged with the elitist mindset that, for the poor, social standing is inherited and immutable (Isenberg, 2016). When class consciousness was more openly acknowledged in the writings of journalists, novelists, and memoirists – as for example was the case during the Great Depression of the 1930s – these writings were typically labeled examples of “proletarian writing” and understood as belonging to a leftwing tradition (Foley, 1993). Proletarian writing was a window into a world of social and economic oppression; it sought to dramatize the struggles of the working class, and most typically the *white* working class, as beaten down by the forces of capitalistic exploitation and class inequities. At times, these depictions of poor whites were lurid and hyperbolic, such as in *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell, but at other times, these depictions were sensitive and deeply humanistic, such as in the autobiographical fiction of Jack Conroy (*The Disinherited*) and Tillie Olsen (*Yonnondio: From the Thirties*) or the journalistic documentary fiction of Albert Maltz (“The Happiest Man on Earth”). There was a generalized fascination with the white underclass of Appalachia, the American South and the Midwest, and there was an incessant conviction that these proletarian communities needed above all to band together in labor unions and in community organizations to defend themselves against the avarice of cutthroat capitalism.

The association of the literature of poor whites with more progressive strands of social thought and politics did not necessarily fare well through the Cold War era, especially as Americans were given extreme examples of what communism and socialist policies could do to a country's poor. However, there remained a general association, especially with respect to Appalachia, and thanks in no small part to progressive institutions like Berea College in Kentucky and the Highlander Center in Tennessee, that the white American underclass remained

defiantly independent in its thinking and its political values. Vance himself acknowledges the leftwing political opinions his grandparents possessed, unseated only by Ronald Reagan's presidential bid in 1980. This association held for a very long time, as did a broader belief that these poor white Americans represented the heart and soul of something enduring and valuable in US culture and society. It was an association that over time, and certainly by the early 2000s, had a good deal to do with the opportunities afforded by education.

Education is a common thread in the three memoirs analyzed in this thesis. In the case of Walls, Vance, and Westover, acquiring a college degree and choosing to face down their own ignorance are turning points in all three of their lives. The argument can be made that all three memoirs not only prove the importance of schooling in breaking free of the economic and emotional shackles of their upbringing, but that it has been a lack of education which kept poor white Americans from ever reaching above their socioeconomic strata. Yet in contrast to this common thread through the three memoirs, there are important differences as well. Whereas in the first memoir by Walls, there is the strong theme that something has also been *lost* as well as gained as Jeannette rises out of the extreme poverty from which she has come, that sense of loss is far less in evidence in Vance – and it is completely gone by the time Westover publishes *Educated*. The portrait of the “white trash” world, ravaged by addictive drugs and familial dysfunction, is no longer something to cherish and revive; it is now strictly something to survive, overcome and move on from.

Chapter I:

Jeannette Walls, Dry-Eyed Portraitist

In 2005, Jeannette Walls published *The Glass Castle*, a deeply personal account of her upbringing in decrepit dwellings and impoverished communities across America. It is apparent from the first chapter just how unstable and insane her early life was. Her earliest memory occurs at the age of three, her tutu dress catching on fire after she is left alone by her mother, Rose Mary, to boil hot dogs for her and her siblings. Jeannette suffers third-degree burns and is rushed to the hospital, where despite her injuries she actually enjoys herself. She writes, “That was the thing about the hospital. You never had to worry about running out of stuff like food or ice or even chewing gum. I would have been happy staying in that hospital forever” (12). Perhaps most interesting is that Walls could recall vividly enough that at such a young age, it was the quiet she liked the most. Walls closes out the chapter with her father sneaking in to check her out of the place “Rex Walls-style”, which we come to learn means going against all rule and law. These seven pages cover less than two months of Jeannette’s life, but they lay her experience bare: here is a girl that is being forced to be responsible for herself and for her siblings at far too young an age. Not only is she food insecure, she has no access to peace and quiet, and she has parents who are both irresponsible and repeatedly prone to making the wrong (and often utterly selfish) decisions.

The memoir follows Jeannette around the United States as her parents move the family from town to town, in search of a place to put down roots and construct the fantastical Glass Castle, “a great big house he [Rex] was going to build for us in the desert. It would have a glass ceiling and thick glass walls and even a glass staircase” (25). However, instead of building the Glass Castle, Rex squanders opportunity after opportunity due to his alcoholism, and Rose Mary

languishes, rarely lifting a finger to try and negate her husband's mess-ups. After a few months or a year in one place, Rex always ends up getting himself in such economic trouble that the whole family is forced to do the "skedaddle" and leave, preventing the kids from ever making lasting friendships or finding a community. Each town they enter begins their lives anew, but eventually whatever money they have is again lost due to Rex's alcohol addiction and the Walls family returns to abject poverty and a near-homeless existence.

After moving from Arizona, to California, to Nevada, and back to Arizona again, Rex and Rose Mary decide that it would be best to take the kids to his hometown of Welch, West Virginia. There, the family moves in with Erma (Rex's mother), who is objectively awful in both verbal and physical ways, Grandpa Ted (who dies shortly after they arrive), and Uncle Stanley, who proves repeatedly to be sexually predatory towards Jeannette. It is in this poor, dour town running through the holler that Jeannette comes of age, learns what racism is, fully understands both the power and weakness that is her gender, and finally schemes to escape from both West Virginia and her parents. Readers come face to face on more than one occasion with parental negligence; both Rex and Rose Mary are indifferent when their kids are almost assaulted, with Rex going so far as to use thirteen-year-old Jeannette as a sexual pawn when swindling a drunk man out of eighty dollars. Rex is notorious for stealing any money Rose Mary or the children save to get drunk and go on a bender for several days. Meanwhile Rose Mary puts the responsibility on her children to take care of their own mother, with Jeannette and her sister having to force their mother out of bed to go to work in the mornings so that there is any money at all with which to buy food. It is up to the children to care for themselves in conditions where there is no food, running water, or working electricity.

Eventually Jeannette does escape, heading to New York City at the age of seventeen to be with her older sister Lori, and coaxing along her younger siblings Brian and Maureen to do the same. While she is entirely out of her element in New York, Jeannette's parents do justice by her in one regard: they make sure she and her siblings are talented at reading and writing. Though the children often dig through school garbage bins for leftover lunches to feed themselves and suffer long episodes when they couldn't bathe themselves properly, the Walls kids nevertheless excel at their scholastics in every school they attend. These academic skills are what ultimately lands Jeannette a successful application to attend Barnard College, and eventually a well-paid job at a newspaper. And yet, even after she gets away, Jeannette can neither fully outrun the shadow of her past nor can she completely renounce the love she has towards her parents, even though she routinely denies her impoverished childhood to everyone in her New York circle. Rose Mary and Rex Walls may have been terrible parents, but they had their moments of clarity, their moments of kindness. Walls holds onto these moments so much so that it is impossible to view her parents in an entirely negative light. Jeannette does not tell her story only as that of a girl constantly threatened by chaos, homelessness and food insecurity. Those same unknowns get turned into adventures by the usually upbeat and weirdly charismatic Rex. Jeannette does make it uncomfortably explicit that her white working-class family was beset by alcoholism and abuse, but also that this same family is resilient and loyal to the bone. At the memoir's close following her father's death, the resentment and anger that might naturally follow are absent. Instead, what Walls depicts is the immense love between siblings, and their acceptance – even forgiveness – of their very imperfect parents.

The memoir outperformed anyone's wildest expectations, especially those of the author herself. In a 2005 interview with *Vanity Fair*, Walls makes mention of the book, *Because I*

Wanted You, written by Kelli Pryor under the pseudonym Annie Garrett. The book may seem innocuous until you hear what the story is about: “It tells the tale of Ruby Maxwell, a driven New York media giantess with ‘big red hair’ whose hillbilly past comes back to haunt her when a *Village Voice* reporter-cartoonist uncovers her secret” (“Interview”, *Vanity Fair*). Before the novel’s release, Walls had spilled her entire story to Pryor, who took it and passed it off as something out of her own imagination. Not only did it appall and hurt Walls to have her life’s story sold off without her consent, but the book was a complete failure, with reviews remarking that the plot and the class ascension were almost impossible to believe. One can imagine the surprise Walls felt when her own account of these same events, *The Glass Castle*, rose to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, going on to spend seven years there. Praised for its authenticity and candor, the book won two awards from the American Library Association, and in 2017 was adapted into a major Hollywood motion picture, starring Brie Larsen (as Jeannette) and Woody Harrelson (as Rex Walls). It has also been the subject of some controversy; during three different years, the memoir was the among the top twenty most-challenged books in the United States, and was banned in school districts and libraries across the nation for its sexual content and violence.

*

Key to the initial success of Walls’s memoir may have been that the author was already a celebrity of sorts, although in an area that was quite remote from the personal saga she would tell in her memoir. By the time her memoir appeared in print, Walls was a television gossip reporter on the cable network MSNBC. She covered celebrity scandals, a point that critics of Walls’ *The Glass Castle* never hesitated to mention. It was, critics repeatedly said, ironic that Walls had built a public profile exposing the steamy side of other people’s lives when she herself was in

possession of such an unimaginable backstory. In many instances, there was an acknowledgment of how much courage it must have taken for Walls to make herself so vulnerable to the world by writing in such intimate detail about her own family's struggles with hunger and a frequently unhoused existence. There was a good deal of commentary on the fact that Walls had cultivated a public persona that was all about glamour and success, a point that Walls herself acknowledged in interviews after the memoir appeared. As she openly admitted, she had been very worried "that writing this book would be the end of my career and I would lose all my friends" ("Interview," *Vanity Fair*).

Walls' writing style possessed a humility that greatly impressed commentators and critics of her memoir. Reviews emphasized how honest about herself and her past Walls had been in *The Glass Castle*. Rather than undercut enthusiasm for her book, Walls' public celebrity as a gossip reporter led commentators to observe that Walls had put "down her poison pen long enough to dredge up her dolorous, dirt-poor childhood" (Fonseca). There was a recognition that Walls had built up a career by "mining the private lives of others," as *Time* magazine wrote in its review, though the same review also singled Walls out for praise as being a "dry-eyed portraitist" (Grossman). She might have been unforgiving in her coverage of others, said this line of analysis, but Walls had turned out to be just as unforgiving in her exposé of her own flaws and the imperfections of her own family.

More significant, however, was how almost all the commentary on *The Glass Castle* celebrated the memoir for its nonjudgmental perspective towards the author's own experiences. Walls did not pander to her readership; she did not spare herself or her immediate family. Her roots in journalism, realized in her teenage years while editor of her Welch high school newspaper, allowed Walls to tell her story in a fashion that refused "to indulge in amateur

psychoanalysis, to descend to the jargon of dysfunction or theorize (beyond tantalizing clues that occurred to her during their stay with her West Virginia grandmother) about the sources of her parents' behavior" (Prose). The reception to *The Glass Castle* applauded its author for telling her story in as direct a manner as possible; there was no sense that Walls sought either to prettify, on the one hand, or melodramatize, on the other. This direct approach to storytelling, several reviewers did not hesitate to remark on, meant that Walls was able consistently to pull the reader into her story.

Walls did not editorialize, nor did she sentimentalize. Interestingly, this meant that reviewers never questioned or challenged whether the details in *The Glass Castle* were completely accurate – or not. This signaled trust between her readers and the author. By staying true to her forthcoming style as a well-known journalist, Walls told an unexpected story, but reviewers never doubted the voice of the memoir or its particular events. (This will, as we will see later, not always be the case with later examples.) Even more striking is that reviews of *The Glass Castle* would occasionally point out the fantastical and fictional elements of *other* memoirs, noting for instance “one-downmanship [*sic*] among memoirists as to who has the weirdest, most dysfunctional, most damaging parents” (Grossman). Walls' restrained portrayal of her own terrible childhood, told through the eyes of the child she had been at the time, was repeatedly cited in her favor.

Reviewers had a lot to say about Walls' ongoing and abiding love for her mother and father – despite all the hardships and bizarre experiences her parents had put her through. Walls would later say in interviews that she still very much loved her parents, and of her father Walls said specifically that she's “gotta love him” (Valby). Indeed, one reviewer said exactly that the Walls memoir represented a “tender, moving tale of unconditional love” (Rockhill) and that it

was “permeated by the intense love of a peculiar family” (*Politics and Prose*). Still, it was rather less clear whether this was the message Walls had intended to communicate; she never said either in her memoir or in her interviews that her love for her father and mother was unwavering.

Reviewers particularly had a lot to say about Rex Walls, the memoirist’s father, whom many commentators argued was the larger-than-life figure – and an enormously appealing one at that. While his problematic behavior was not overlooked, much of the reception offset Rex’s unsavory characteristics with his more positive attributes. Rex may have been “troubled”, but he was also “brilliant.” Rex may have been “deeply damaged,” but he was also “gifted” and “seductive,” as one review remarked (*Prose*). Rex may have had a life-long addiction to alcohol, but there was something powerfully attractive about his inability to conform to the conventions of the nuclear family (Barsanti). Rex may also have been delusional, perhaps as a result of his addiction, but there was frequent mention as well of the acuity of his moments of clarity – moments that allowed Rex to foster curiosity and intelligence in his children or, as one review put it, Rex “captured his children’s imagination, teaching them physics, geology, and above all, how to embrace life fearlessly” (*Politics & Prose*). What was even more fascinating was that reviewers asserted that Rex would have been a success, if not for his alcoholism. It was almost as if these commentaries sought to make a link between the troubled genius of the father and the eventual blockbuster success that Walls went on to achieve.

However, Walls’ mother, Rose Mary, did not receive the same flattering attention in early commentaries on *The Glass Castle*. Rose Mary was rarely singled out as a sympathetic character. This is not to say Rose Mary was never placed in a positive light. Several reviewers wrote that *both* parents were admirable, even if they did not always act in their children’s best interests. As one review put it, while *both* parents “were failures at everything,” they nonetheless “chose to

spin their inability to stick to anything as a glorious crusade against bourgeois conformity, and they dragged their kids along for the ride” (Prose). In this way, then, and when Rose Mary received attention at all, she generally got bundled together with Rex, even though Rex, by contrast, was not infrequently discussed without mention to Rose Mary.

In the case of *The Glass Castle*, and in the context of this thesis, it is important to note what is not mentioned by reviewers. Nowhere in the reception do critics talk about Jeannette’s experience with race and culture. Although she lives in Welch, West Virginia, a town deep in Appalachia, neither she nor her family are given the connotation of “hillbilly”, or even “white trash”, by any of the reception. She is poor, and obviously white, but no one feels that those are things which are necessary to talk about. Walls enjoys a literary acclaim almost devoid of racial recognition, and her own lack of discussion surrounding her Appalachian heritage is likely the cause of it. While it is there for any reader to see, it is not made to signify anything within the memoir.

It can also be argued that the extremity and context of Jeannette’s story, in comparison to the other white kids she grows up with, separates her from normal “hillbillies”. Jeannette suffers as a result of her father’s addiction and her family’s extreme poverty. It is clear that she has parents who many times over could have risen out of their terrible circumstances and lived a more comfortable life. As Walls reveals at the end of the memoir, her mother had been sitting on land in Texas that was potentially worth millions of dollars but which she refused to sell it out of some misguided principle, choosing instead to keep her children homeless.

The racism put on full display by her father’s West Virginia family is also missing in the reception. Reviewers completely neglect to mention the example of Welch’s remaining segregated despite the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and fail to comment on the

derogatory white racist slurs hurled around by both Erma and Stanley. There is no discussion of how Rex Walls might have escaped the retrograde mentality of his hometown and developed his own anti-racist convictions or of how Rex demonstrated a commitment that his children should not grow up to be bigoted. Instead, the reception of *The Glass Castle*, both in this specific regard, and also more generally, located little or nothing in the memoir that would indicate that the book possessed a broader political or social purpose. Instead, *The Glass Castle* was viewed as nothing more than an updated “rags to riches” narrative void of commentary on class or race.

*

One of the most interesting sections of *The Glass Castle*, and one which has been important to reviewers, is the memoir’s three-page preface. In this brief section, Walls sets up the starkest contrast of her entire life. During a taxi ride through the East Village of Manhattan on the way to a party, Jeannette spots her homeless mother, Rose Mary, dumpster diving for a meal. Instead of asking the cabbie to stop the taxi, Jeannette ducks down deep in the cab’s backseat, and has the cab turn around to bring her back to her affluent Park Avenue apartment. When Jeannette later meets up with her mother, her mother gently tells her daughter to “accept it” – meaning the fact that Rose Mary is homeless (5). Which is, one supposes, what Walls does, especially by alerting her readers on page one to her most shameful secret. The brief encounter between successful daughter and homeless mother, so strategically placed at the outset, makes it abundantly clear that this intense and painful memoir signals Walls’ acceptance.

Acceptance in this instance turns out to be twofold. There is the personal acceptance of her past; this might be labeled a coming-to-terms of sorts. And then there is additionally the *professional* acceptance of her past. As already mentioned, Walls’ vulnerability in an entertainment industry that feasts upon weakness might have been a death sentence for her

career. Yet even if it had not been a death sentence, the underlying point is that Walls believed it could have been. Regardless that the threat to her career may not have been real, the feeling that it was – her sense of deep vulnerability – certainly was real. Walls communicates with understatement that she cannot afford to make any mistakes if she hopes to hang onto her hard-won victories over poverty and homelessness. She has shrouded every part of her past from nearly everyone she knows since leaving Welch, West Virginia. While many people – also people who come from considerable class privilege – can feel imposter syndrome, Walls’ imposter syndrome runs to the very core of her being.

By the time Walls decided to write *The Glass Castle*, she was no longer willing to live her life on the defensive. However, to switch away from feeling vulnerable came certain other compromises. Central among them was a corollary decision to avoid making grand statements about class stratification or the woeful status of the white working class in the United States. The term “white trash” crops up several times during the memoir; at one point, her mother laments that “to live in a three-room shack and own a gold Cadillac meant you were bona fide poor white trash”, a protestation she makes after Rex brings home a fancy car he won while gambling (224). In this example, and in others, those around Jeannette are more than willing to acknowledge that she and her family deserve the label. Jeannette however never outrightly acknowledges or admits to being “white trash”. She leaves it up to the reader to determine whether they view her and her family as such, keeping her opinion out of the narrative. Thus, the Walls memoir remains studiously anti-sociological, relying on emotion rather than argument to propel its story. Walls refuses to pass judgment on the situations she faced, and she rarely places direct blame on her family, let alone American society more broadly. This is a formal decision, but it also reads like a psychological necessity. The opinions expressed in *The Glass Castle* are consistently presented

as opinions that Jeannette had in the moment when she initially experienced them. Jeannette documents her experiences, but she seldom evaluates or tells her readers how to feel about those experiences. Her memoir seeks to have readers witness Jeanette's psychic evolution and her dawning awareness of her plight as it happens. In a literal sense, *The Glass Castle* is not a story to which the majority of its readers can directly relate; and yet it is a remarkably easy narrative to connect with because "we" can "grow" alongside Jeannette as she comes of age. What little adult retrospection seeps into the narrative is difficult to discern. The stylistic choice to keep the narrative personal and present rather than ideological and reflective adds a timeless quality to the book.

This is equally true of the memoir's handling of the historical era in which it is set. Much of the first half of the narrative takes place during the 1960s. (Jeannette Walls was born in 1960.) Yet there is virtually no mention of the seismic events transpiring all around Jeannette as she comes of age. One would not know, for instance, that the United States was at war in Southeast Asia. There is no mention of a civil rights movement, despite the fact that young Jeannette recounts in detail her encounters with a Black girl whom she befriends in Welch, West Virginia. Social history is elided almost entirely from the memoir; there is no counterculture, no student protest movement, no women's movement. Arguably, told from the perspective of who she was as a child, Walls did not see the need to provide any context for her personal experiences growing up. Still, and nevertheless, this decision does add immensely to a sense that this story could have happened almost at any time in the recent American past.

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Though Jeannette is too young to fully grasp the implications of certain incidents, she understands from a young age that to preserve what little peace and normalcy exists among her

family, discussions surrounding matters of sex are better left unsaid. The first instance of sexual assault occurs when the family is living in Battle Mountain, Nevada, where a preadolescent Jeannette develops a tenuous “friendship” with a boy named Billy. Billy pursues Jeannette with the intensity and physicality of a grown man. During a game of hide and seek, he forces himself upon her and she bites him on the ear to get away. When she tells him she doesn’t want to be his friend anymore, he proudly tells her that he raped her and because she is too young to know what that word means, she only responds with “Big deal!” What is even more jarring than the incident is her response to it. She writes:

At home I looked up the word in the dictionary. Then I looked up the words that explained it, and though I still couldn’t figure it out completely, I knew it wasn’t good. Usually, when I didn’t understand a word, I’d ask Dad about it, and we’d read over the definition together and discuss it. I didn’t want to do that now. I had a hunch it would cause problems (87).

Before even grasping the concept of the sexual act, Jeannette has already been made to feel that matters and problems concerning her body are too much for her parents to handle. If she were to discuss it with her father, it is insinuated that he would get drunk to ease his anger or he would get so upset that he’d do something which would make the family have to move again. Rose Mary is not even presented as someone who could be told. So Jeannette’s feelings become diminished by the fact that her parents are not responsible enough to handle the incident in a way that would protect her; she must bear the burden alone.

Several years later in Welch, Jeannette is left alone with her Uncle Stanley, who begins pleasuring himself in her presence. During this time, Jeannette and her family were living with Rex’s kin, and would be homeless otherwise. This need to stay on the good side of Erma and

Stanley is what prompts a most bizarre response from Rose Mary. Walls recounts, “She said that sexual assault was a crime of perception. ‘If you don’t think you’re hurt, then you aren’t,’ she said. ‘So many women make such a big deal out of these things. But you’re stronger than that’” (184). It is possible that Rose Mary is trying to keep the peace by not taking an argumentative stance; any accusation made against Stanley would result in the whole family getting booted out of the house. But it is also possible that she just doesn’t care. In fact, rather than express concern over her daughter, Rose Mary conveys pity for Stanley because he must be lonely. But beyond this, Rose Mary is teaching her daughter that being injured, assaulted, or victimized is all subjective. It is up to Jeannette to determine whether or not she has suffered at the hands of another, making sexual and physical assault into a choice. Rose Mary’s further comments on women seek to destroy her daughter’s view of her own body. To make a big deal out of something invasive is to show vulnerability, something that Jeannette’s mother is teaching her she cannot do. Sex and the use of her body for it are hinderances to survival, and from this point on Jeannette expresses an aversion towards physical intimacy and pays little regard to men until she is established in New York City. As she remarks in 7th grade, “I knew that boys were dangerous. They’d say they loved you, but they were always after something” (200).

Sex and matters of the body are not the only instances where her parents show an utter disregard towards what is morally right. During the same period where the Walls family is living under Erma’s roof, Jeannette speaks up after Erma uses the n-word to disparage the Black people living on the other side of town. After getting punished for talking back, and seeing her parents do nothing about it, Jeannette says,

They [Erma and Stanley] didn’t seem like Mom. She and Dad happily railed against anyone they disliked or disrespected: Standard Oil executives, J. Edgar

Hoover and especially snobs and racists. They'd always encouraged us to be outspoken about our opinions. Now we were supposed to bite our tongues. Situations like these, I realized were what turned people into hypocrites (143-144).

Here is another instance of what Jeannette recognizes so astutely as hypocrisy. Her parents are unwilling to defend Jeannette when she voices the ethical opinions they taught her and her siblings to have. In turn, Jeannette is learning that morality is not absolute and that sometimes the things we firmly believe in must be set aside to survive, especially when one's survival hinges on the decisions of others. The sense of self is sacrificed for a stable place among the collective. Going forward, Jeannette understands that the freedom to say what you feel is one that is only afforded to those who are not struggling to get by. This can be extrapolated to make the point that according to the logic of Rex and Rose Mary, these sorts of opinions on racial equality should only be publicly expressed by people belonging to wealthier classes who do not have to appease others.

However, the one thing her parents never shied away from was the academic prowess of each of their children. Rex would work through mathematics and science problems with the kids, and was (almost) always willing to explain words they did not know, teaching them how to learn from the dictionary and eventually learn on their own. Rose Mary, who was an accredited teacher, worked with her husband to make sure their children were all literate, and when the kids entered a new school district, their parents never told them to dumb themselves down to fit in. On the contrary, as Rose Mary says upon the family's relocation to Welch, "'You'll have to impress them with your intelligence,' Mom said as Brian and I headed off to school the next day. 'Don't be afraid to be smarter than they are'" (137). Because her intellect was never diminished

or questioned by anyone in her family, only nurtured, Walls is never afraid to try for educational opportunities. When she moves to New York, she applies to Barnard College because it “was the best [school] in New York City” and is accepted (250). In one of the more touching moments of the memoir, Jeannette’s homeless father somehow comes up with the money she needs to pay for her last year of college. When she tries to refuse the money from her parents, her mom speaks for both of them, “I’ve always believed in the value of a good education,’ she said. So when I enrolled for my final year at Barnard, I paid what I owed on my tuition with Dad’s wadded, crumpled bills” (265). Her father and mother’s willingness to give the only money they had to pay for their daughter’s college indicates just how much value they placed in the education of their children. This alone proves to be Jeannette’s way out of poverty for good.

Walls’ complicated relationship with her past is never skirted. In the memoir’s aforementioned preface, Walls writes: “It had been months since I had laid eyes on Mom, and when she looked up, I was overcome with panic that she’d see me and call out my name, and that someone on the way to the same party would spot us together and Mom would introduce herself and my secret would be out” (1). There is brilliance in how Walls crafts this sentence, for she turns it into a stream of consciousness that mimics the mind-racing worry she is feeling in the moment. Only later do we learn that her own will to survive, no matter the consequences to her own mother, is a stark mirror image of her parents’ callous perspective towards their own children. The difference for Jeannette is that her survival is about maintaining the persona she worked so hard to invent for herself.

Jeannette’s reckoning with her past begins when she attends Barnard College. After giving money to a homeless person while walking home after school with a classmate, the Barnard classmate berates Jeannette with the excuse that to give change to the homeless “only

encourages them.” Jeannette is conflicted. She writes: “I felt like telling Carol that my parents were out there, too, that she had no idea what it was like to be down on your luck, with nowhere to go and nothing to eat. But that would have meant explaining who I really was, and I wasn’t about to do that” (256). It is interesting here that she uses the phrase “who I really was”. Again: Jeannette is confessing to an imposter syndrome. Yet she is also admitting an anxiety that she will be targeted as an outcast if she reveals who she really is. This is, I suspect, a sentiment that it does not take the personal experience of homelessness to understand.

At Barnard, Jeannette is in class and is again confronted by the topic of homelessness when her professor raises the topic in a discussion. When called upon, Jeannette tells the class that homeless people may be choosing the life they have. Jeannette says to her class:

“But if some of them were willing to work hard and make compromises, they might not have ideal lives, but they could make ends meet.” Professor Fuchs walked around from behind her lectern. “What do you know about the lives of the underprivileged?” she asked. She was practically trembling with agitation. “What do you know about the hardships and obstacles that the underclass faces?” The other students were staring at me. “You have a point” (257).

Jeannette backs down. Is it shame? Is it respect for a teacher she admires? Either way, Jeannette does not want the teacher – or her classmates – to view her differently. To admit her first-hand knowledge of homelessness, Jeannette feels would have transformed her in their minds into a specimen; she’d become a case-study, an object of fascination. In the context of Isenberg’s text, Jeannette also remains, if covertly, a member of a specific “breed” of American. Peers and colleagues could find the inherited traits ascribed to “white trash” in her if they were told of her origins. She stays silent because she believes that to speak would make her an object of pity for

the person she used to be and the people she descends from – rather than be respected for the person she has struggled so hard to become.

Walls travels full circle as her memoir comes to a close, expressing concern that her coworkers might learn her history. Walls writes: “I was convinced... it would be impossible for me to keep my job. So I avoided discussing my parents. When that was impossible, I lied” (270). This is the first time she fully admits to deceiving others about her origins. For all her hard-won independence, Jeannette remains acutely aware of how much the opinions of others might undermine her achievements. In the beginning, Jeannette hides her past so that her talent and tenacity wouldn’t be overshadowed by the strife she endured, or influence how her peers saw her. Walls likely wants to be given as fair and unbiased a shot as anyone else. She doesn’t want to be coddled or handed opportunities she does not truly deserve, and then be looked at disdainfully as a result. By the end of the book, Jeannette hides her past because she has built her reputation by hiding it. And yet here is the book we are reading that discloses everything, and blows her cover to smithereens. Jeannette Walls, having buried herself and her family away for so long, and with such exhausting effort, has opened it up for all to see, which is itself a kind of testament of love for the troubled family from which she came.

Chapter II:

J. D. Vance, *Raised by Wolves*

Almost immediately after its publication in 2016, the memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance reached the top of the *New York Times* Nonfiction Best-Seller List. Vance did not begin *Hillbilly Elegy* with himself but rather with the lives of both his great-grandparents and his grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw. What Vance describes is a violently loyal bunch – people who take great pride in patriotism, vengeance, and bloodshed. While his great-grandparents lived out their lives in Appalachia, his Papaw and Mamaw moved to the industrial Midwest alongside thousands of other poor whites seeking work in the factories. For the Vance family, the destination was Middletown, Ohio, where his Papaw got a job working for Armco Steel. His grandparent’s marriage was a tumultuous one, riddled with alcoholism, abuse, and dissatisfaction. His grandmother was especially frustrated, feeling as though she was destined to remain confined by and dependent upon the whims of her husband rather than seek out an education for herself. Vance writes, “Mamaw was expected to cook dinner, do laundry, and take care of the children. But sewing circles, picnics, and door-to-door vacuum salesmen were not suited to a woman who had almost killed a man at the tender age of twelve” (34). These conflicts do nothing to make the lives of their children Lori, Jimmy and Bev any easier, and while Lori and Jimmy made it out alright, Bev, the mother of J.D. and his sister Lindsay, have a rough existence. Bev’s instability and Vance’s later reliance on his Mamaw becomes an important driver of Vance’s narrative, so before J.D. even begins to discuss his own life, he writes that his grandparents “filled the gap when my mom was unwilling or unable to be the type of parent that they wished they’d been to her. Mamaw and Papaw may have failed Bev in her youth. But they spent the rest of their lives making up for it” (46).

The remainder of the memoir follows J.D.'s path out of Middletown first to the Marines and then the Ivy League. As a young boy, he is forced to live in the unstable household surroundings of his mother, a woman hopped up on pills and entirely caught up in the pursuit of a succession of men. She is a woman prone to extremes, and often explodes or has violent meltdowns around her children. Like Walls, Vance rarely ever finds a quiet moment living with his mother, and cannot focus on anything but the chaos that surrounds him. After several years, and numerous horrendous episodes, including his mother asking J.D. to pee into a cup for a drug test she would not be able to pass otherwise, Vance moves in with his Mamaw permanently. The harsh, direct woman may be a force to be reckoned with, but for J.D. his grandmother is exactly the person that could give him the support and love he needs to live a functional life, and ultimately to help him find "a couple of teachers who inspired me to love learning" (151).

Following his graduation from high school, Vance enrolls in the Marines, and credits the military with changing his outlook of himself. "It was the Marine Corps that first gave me an opportunity to fail," he says, "made me take the opportunity, and then, when I did fail, gave me another chance anyway" (175). From the military, J.D. learns to approach life with the "give it your all" attitude, or what one could call the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" attitude, starkly in contrast with the message that "I and the people like me weren't good enough; that the reason Middletown produced zero Ivy League graduates was some genetic or character defect" (176). Vance would later attribute this newly found hard-working attitude as the reason he gets through an undergraduate degree from Ohio State and eventually a law school degree from Yale University. His Mamaw dies right before his first military tour, and his own mother descends back in a heavier and harder addiction, but for the first time in J.D.'s life he does not let his family's baggage, personal or "cultural," weigh him down.

Transitioning from a poor midwestern city to the wealthy microcosm of the Yale campus is not easy for Vance, and he has a hard time fitting in. Like Walls, J.D. hides aspects of his past that could mark him as an outsider. Vance graduates from Yale with a law degree that permanently removes him from the “hillbilly” world from which he originated. And yet even though he inhabits an elevated class status, in the final sequence of the memoir we can see that Vance is still encumbered by the violent “hillbilly” temper he considers to be inherent in himself. But regardless of the inner turmoil he endures, Vance makes it; he rises above the expectations of his upbringing. By the end of the memoir, Vance has married and is working in finance (for billionaire Peter Thiel) in California. Vance’s narrative is the embodiment of the American dream – in his case, this dream is achieved not only through hard work but through military service and a first-rate education, which to him seems to be the only forces that could possibly make it possible “to escape the worst of my culture’s inheritance” (253).

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A recurrent aspect of the reception to Vance’s memoir is an emphasis on the degree to which “hillbilly” culture lies outside of the world of coherent or rational discourse. Several commentators make note of how consistently “chaotic” and “unstable” Vance’s east Ohio upbringing was in comparison to their readership’s status quo. As the memoir provides ample discussion of how truly out of control Vance’s childhood and adolescence really were, reviewers largely take him at his own word. They accept wholesale Vance’s assertion that chaos is an inherited trait, indicated by statements like “the greatest disadvantages [“hillbilly” culture] imparts to its youth are the life of violence and chaos in which they are raised” (Dreher). In the hands of these commentators – and this would be true regardless of where on the political spectrum these commentators are – the core disorganization of Vance’s life leading up to his

decision to enlist in the Marines at eighteen is absolutely central to their analyses. It is his survival and escape from the bedlam of “hillbilly” culture that grant Vance’s book a verity for his reviewers.

A significant focus of the reception to Vance’s memoir has to do with the powerful ways in which the book, given the context of the 2016 Republican presidential primary race, persuasively provides an explanation for the powerful appeal of right-wing populism to rural working-class white communities. Over and over again, commentators cite *Hillbilly Elegy* as the single most important book published that year to help their readers understand how a white populist agenda came to dominance. Reviewers are unable to read the memoir outside of the context of larger political developments, even remarking on its opportune timing mere months before the highly contested 2016 election.

As the review in the *New York Times* put it: “Now, along comes Mr. Vance, offering a compassionate, discerning sociological analysis of the white underclass that has helped drive the politics of rebellion, particularly the ascent of Donald J. Trump” (Senior). Vance’s memoir was enlightening especially for a more politically progressive audience who were presented as previously unable to make sense of why working-class white voters aligned with Trumpian politics. As Joshua Rothman noted in the *New Yorker*: “... anti-Trump conservatives have responded to its largely empathetic portrait of poor, white Americans, which they see as an alternative to the less sympathetic theories about Trump’s least affluent supporters – ‘They’re all racist,’ essentially – that have become popular on the left” (Rothman). Reviewers consistently praised the memoir’s deft capacity to translate a “hillbilly” experience to the wider world, Without saying so outright, critical reception to Vance’s book assumed its readership existed on

a different political wavelength, one that couldn't appreciate the appeal to poor white Americans of the more visceral right-wing politics espoused by modern MAGA Republicans.

Along with this, the critical reception to *Hillbilly Elegy* noted Vance's willingness to engage with the media, gesturing to how many television shows, radio programs, news radio programs and public speaking events Vance conducted. Vance's media presence was of such importance that the *New York Times* review began with reference to a Vance interview that was so popular "it briefly crippled the central nervous system of the magazine's website" (Senior). Such widespread exposure made it almost impossible for analysts to separate Vance's public persona from Vance's persona in his memoir. Rather, Vance's celebrity only strengthened the voice of his memoir's protagonist.

It becomes clear in retrospect that Vance the media star contributed quite a lot to the discussion of how his memoir was read, understood and received. The fame the author achieved through such interactions prove crucial in allowing him to take control over his own narrative. We will return later in this thesis to the question of how successful or unsuccessful Vance was in constructing such a narrative, but there can be no doubt that commentators admit to their reactions being informed by Vance's carefully cultivated public image.

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An arguably more contentious perspective articulated by commentators on *Hillbilly Elegy* was how repeatedly Vance's "hillbilly" narrative ought to be interpreted as analogous to the poor Black American experience. On the one hand, this aspect of the reception may be excused due to the fact that Vance himself harps on the extent to which he came to understand his poor white upbringing as parallel to a poor Black upbringing after discovering as a teenager the work of conservative sociologist William Julius Wilson. On the other hand, it does remain confusing –

especially given the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement subsequent to the publication of the memoir – to get back inside a mindset where readers can really be expected to equate white poverty with Blackness in any direct sense. Still, leaving aside everything that has happened since 2016, it is striking how readily the Vance reception invoked the African American experience as a guide for understanding the “hillbilly” experience.

Partially, this appears to happen because frequent commentary remarks on how much has been written about how and why Black communities have historically been deprived of opportunities, whereas by contrast there has been precious little study of poor white communities. This is not to say that each reviewer concurs with Vance’s perspective, as liberal venues do occasionally disagree or challenge Vance’s assertions. What is interesting is that reviewers who may disagree with Vance note the contrarian viewpoint he takes when reflecting on poverty. The *New Yorker* dives into a racialized theory of poverty’s segmentation into two types: “Working-class whites are said to be poor because of outsourcing; inner-city blacks are imagined to be holding themselves back with hip-hop. The implicit theory is that culture comes from within, and so can be controlled by individuals and communities, whereas economic structures exert pressures from without, and so are beyond the control of those they affect” (Rothman). While not disassociating Vance from such a racialized position, the *New Yorker* instead paints Vance as committing a sort of inward-facing racism, saying that he and others caught in this mindset are “just arguing – incoherently – about whether or not people who suffer from [problems] deserve to be blamed for them” (Rothman). Vance in his narrative equates Black and white experience in a way that flattens and obscures the persistence of anti-Black racism in the process.

Along related lines, President Barack Obama receives repeated reference in the midst of commentary on Vance’s memoir. These reviews cite Obama’s controversial statements on both Black and white culture to highlight the importance of listening to cultural “insiders” over “outsiders,” a point especially pertinent to politicians. As the *New York Times* notes, “Certainly, an outsider cannot say what Mr. Vance is saying to his kin and kind. But he can – just as President Obama can say to fellow African Americans, ‘brothers should pull up their pants,’ as he did on MTV” (Senior). In this context, race gets referenced to demonstrate Obama’s – and also Vance’s – authenticity as a spokesperson for his community. Criticizing one’s own cultural background becomes a sign of respect in this version of reality. It is true that Vance himself makes this same point in *Hillbilly Elegy*, but reviewers amplify this observation. On the flip side, Obama comes under fire for an infamous 2008 remark he made about the poor white Americans “clinging to guns or religion.” Some reviews go so far as to distinguish between (what they call) Obama’s condescension to “hillbilly” culture in contrast to the tough love for these same people that Vance articulates. Since Obama is neither poor nor white, he cannot – *and really should not* – be making assumptions about these people because he is simply not one of them. But then there is Vance – who really says much the same, and is just as condescending to poor white Americans, but is perceived as being able to do this because he is, in effect, “one of them.” One review said, “Vance has earned the right to make those judgments. This was his life. He speaks with authority that has been extremely hard won” (Dreher). It is a controversial but salient feature of much criticism on *Hillbilly Elegy*, one to which we will return.

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The issue of Vance’s authenticity as an “insider” to the dysfunctional white, rural and poor culture that he comes from plays a strong role in how reception interprets the social policy

solutions that his memoir proposes. This is important because a key takeaway message is that top-down federally funded social policy practices can only do so much – and really in many cases cannot do very much at all. Several reviewers remark on what an outsider can only label the inherent laziness of Appalachian cultures who would rather do nothing than hold down steady employment and provide stability to their families. A single quote from the memoir is cited on multiple occasions. Vance writes: “As a teacher at my old high school told me recently, ‘They want us to be shepherds to these kids. But no one wants to talk about the fact that many of them are raised by wolves’” (127). This “raised by wolves” is used for instance in *The National Review* to point a finger at a coastal elite for trying to make cultural change through institutional changes without taking into account the people who inhabit these communities. Throwing federal dollars at the problem of chronic unemployment and underemployment can never fix the deep-rooted social pathologies that haunt Appalachia, or so Vance repeatedly says and a number of commentators echo. Meanwhile, the value of military service is also repeatedly referenced. It is simply stated as vital that Vance decided to enlist in the Marines; no decision is more crucial to his emotional development into manhood. In this way, and again, commentary on the memoir really just reflects the perspective that Vance himself states in the memoir. Vance portrays his years in the Marines as a definitive turning point, especially in terms of providing him the structure, the discipline and the guidance he required to cope with adulthood. It is important to observe that reviewers who do comment on the role that Vance’s military experience play for him do not do so with any critical distance.

This is not to say that reviewers are unable to find flaws in Vance’s gospel. Kevin D. Williamson in *Commentary* writes that, “short of universal or near-universal military conscription – something that would be resisted both by the public and by the military... what

policy options do we have to intervene in the lives of young men and women who come from backgrounds like Vance's, but who are even worse off in both economic and social-capital terms...?" (Williamson). Just as *The New Yorker* review says that "the buck never stops," the critical reception to *Hillbilly Elegy* not infrequently notes the trickiness of trying to find a solution to a problem that is deep-rooted and deceptively complex.

Finally, there is the truly fascinating reflection – again lifted from Vance, more or less directly – of the concept of "learned helplessness," and how much that social psychological concept explains for Vance the emotional conditioning of Appalachians (163). Again, going back to the tough love that Vance expresses when it comes to the social pathologies of his culture, reviewers pick up directly on the incapacity of poor white communities to imagine any other possible way to behave or to live. The overall way reviewers cite Vance's invocation of "learned helplessness" is almost always to concur with his argument that almost nothing can be done to change Appalachian behavior via outside interventions.

And yet, amidst reviews that for the most part agree with Vance's doctrine, Bob Hutton's article "Hillbilly Elitism" for *Jacobin* stands out as the exception to this general rule. A professor of Appalachian Studies at Glenville State University, Hutton published his article several months after the release of the memoir and its initial reception. As hinted by the title, Hutton establishes early on Vance's fakery in writing a memoir about people living in poverty when those people are hardly the target audience. Hutton makes the claim that the Vance memoir is intended to be read by the "middle- and upper-class readership [who are] more than happy to learn that white American poverty has nothing to do with them or with any structural problems in American economy and society and everything to do with poor folks' inherent vices" (Hutton). For Hutton, Vance is not so much a medium or a translator between cultures but rather an enabler; Hutton

argues that Vance promotes a mindset among the elite that removes responsibility off their shoulders. Even more so, Hutton's review implies that opinions such as Vance's diminish the problems faced by a culture suffering from neoliberal capitalism.

In fact, the decades-old characterization of the "hillbilly" that Vance markets proves to be crucial in furthering narratives created by such an elite – an elite that Vance now belongs to. Touching on both the racial and social aspects of the term, Hutton's review makes reference to the Hollywood industry's portrayal of Vance's people. Essentially, the entire group arguably are mere pawns that elite film producers use to "portray images of poverty, ignorance, and backwardness without raising cries of bigotry and racism from civil rights advocates and the black and minority communities" (Hutton). Hutton touches on the point of Vance's equation between the white "hillbilly" and the Black American, but not in the way that the memoir sets out to do. The "hillbilly" in Hutton's context is merely a vessel in which racism and bigotry can be funneled and turned profitable. The "intra-racial hierarchy" implicit in the term "hillbilly" due to the way it is portrayed furthers Hutton's accusation of white readership elitism.

The biggest hypocrite in all this is Vance himself. Hutton touches on the previous idea that Vance is the real deal due to his background; he calls Vance out for "claiming the term hillbilly, then scolding his fellow hillbillies for their cultural and moral failings." Hutton does not accept Vance's argument that his culture suffers from inherited social issues without calling into question how he was able to escape his own logic. A mindset that is supposedly so ingrained within his psyche, and the psyche of every other "hillbilly" should make it impossible for Vance to find a way to exist without having to completely abandon the label of a "hillbilly". And yet he asserts that he is able to live within both worlds, which Hutton remarks are "two worlds that couldn't be farther apart" (Hutton). In short, Hutton's review is the rare commentary that does

not take Vance at his own word, but rather questions Vance's conclusions and assumptions. Hutton's review is also unusual in the ways it seeks to recontextualize the meaning of *Hillbilly Elegy*, a recontextualization that reads in 2022 as almost prophetic as Vance has reinvented himself (again) as the strongest supporter of MAGA Republicanism, a political position he not so long ago dismissed as utterly ignorant and completely wrongheaded.

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Hillbilly Elegy ends up being something far more than just a memoir of one Appalachian man's early life. The subtitle alone, *A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, is enough to situate the book as something of a sociological text. He places his family's crisis adjacent to the crisis of an entire demographic so that his story can be presented as something of an academic argument. Readers are being prepared to read into Vance's experiences as more than just memories before they even open the book. In strong contrast with *The Glass Castle*, which had wanted nothing to do with political or social contexts, Vance steeps his narrative in these contexts. He directs himself right at what he incessantly argues are the slew of false preconceptions and mistaken assumptions that his readers no doubt harbor about so-called "hillbillies," or for our purposes, working-class white Americans. Vance makes clear that only an insider like himself gets to traffic in generalizations about the white working-class precisely because he knows these people – while his (presumed) readers do not. Vance brings in data, quite unlike Walls, which he then corroborates with personal anecdotes. He asserts himself as a member of the group he then savagely critiques. He thus sets himself up as a kind of mediator between "cultures" – functional middle-class on the one side, and dysfunctional "hillbilly" on the other.

Vance situates much of his selective empirical data at the beginning of the memoir. Vance's decision to lead with sociological evidence establishes early on that the personal experiences in his memoir represent more than just himself. He also acts to inoculate himself against charges of bias. Take the first chapter which begins as an introduction to Vance's family history but quickly pivots to commentary on what Vance considers to be clichés about mountain life. Strikingly, Vance does this *not* to defend the Appalachian community against these clichés, but rather to reinforce them. Mountain people, for instance, are quick to bouts of irrational anger, a position Vance writes that "supports the academic literature" on hillbillies that finds "that avoidance and wishful-thinking forms of coping 'significantly predicted resiliency' among Appalachian teens. Their paper suggests that hillbillies learn from an early age to deal with uncomfortable truths by avoiding them, or by pretending better truths exist" (20). Most crucially, Vance immediately follows this with the statement: "We tend to overstate and to understate, to glorify the good and ignore the bad in ourselves. That is why the folks of Appalachia reacted strongly to an honest look at some of its most impoverished people" (20). Beyond the fact that Vance is not representing the sociological literature all that accurately, preferring himself to reduce it to soundbites, his use of "we" is crucial to his narrative's power. By naming himself as one of the people he is basically insulting, Vance gets to act as if he himself is owning the purported shortcomings of the white working-class American. This capacity to critique himself and to acknowledge that he too would rather ignore the truth than face discomfort serves strategically not only to strengthen his own authenticity as narrator; it also makes his memoir a documentation of the *collective* poor white American psyche.

Vance uses data recurrently to make his memoir read as an evidential work, transforming him into the premier, and rarely contested, representative of the poor whites. When discussing

prospects for the education of the working-class whites, Vance refers to his hometown of Middletown, Ohio, as the place where thousands of Appalachian “hillbillies” migrated north from the south to work at Armco Steel and other factories. Vance states that 20% of Middletown students do not graduate from high school, adding: “Students don’t expect much from themselves, because the people around them don’t do very much. Many parents go along with this phenomenon. I don’t remember ever being scolded for getting a bad grade until Mamaw began to take an interest in my grades in high school” (56). At first, this leap from an empirical statistic to a blanket statement about how all Middletown students feel about themselves looks like a stretch. Vance assures us that this is more than an assumption; it is also more than a stereotype of poor white students. It is simply true. Shifting back to a personal example, Vance writes that he cannot possibly fathom the mindset of every student in question, but that he is more than acquainted with the ways that professional academics have treated people like his own family members. Those academics are right, Vance argues, citing his own story; he also did not expect much from himself before his grandmother intervened in his life. It is a narrative through-line in *Hillbilly Elegy*, this drawing of a connection from the personal to the collective.

Vance’s “we” repeatedly encompasses the entire working-class white experience. It is an experience of chaotic familial dynamics and interpersonal dysfunction. Life is represented as seldom within his own control. Vance writes: “This was my world: a world of truly irrational behavior... Our kids go to foster care but never stay for long. We apologize to our kids. The kids believe we’re really sorry, and we are. But then we act just as mean a few days later” (147). Then follow three more paragraphs where Vance aligns himself with further “hillbilly” misdeeds. That Vance had no children at the time of his memoir’s publication is not the point, apparently. Rather, the focus is on an abusive and addicted mother who drags young J. D. through the highs

and lows of her erratic behavior, lashing out and then apologizing profusely. But in this instance, he is taking culpability for the mistreatment of poor white children alongside every other parent. Shouldering the blame he attributes to other people becomes Vance's way of authenticating his own perspectives on politics and society; Vance is willing to say things about himself that are not true, and he gets away with saying the same about others because he invites the same ridicule. It is a curiously effective rhetorical strategy.

What he suffered from, Vance concludes, was not only a family's consistent love and guidance, but also an educational deficit. Of his own people, Vance never hesitates to generalize: "We don't study as children, and we don't make our kids study when we're parents. Our kids perform poorly in school. We might get angry with them, but we never give them the tools – like peace and quiet at home – to succeed" (147). In moments like this, it is clear how his education – first in the Marines and later in college and law school – were instrumental in how Vance's life turned out. And it all begins at home with family values. Therefore, it logically follows that the upbringing within the household that a child experiences can make or break his or her future success, whether that be a turn to violence or addiction. It is not an especially original notion, but the execution of it in the narrative is striking in its intensity. As old as any adage in American culture, Vance argues that it is up to each individual to rise out of their situation. Beginning from this perspective, it is simple for Vance to turn the tables on working-class white America and essentially blast that world for worsening educational conditions.

Not that Vance is terribly consistent about his arguments. Vance at different points in his memoir argues both for and against the significance of personal responsibility. Circling back to previous points, Vance recurrently makes statements that do not line up; starting in high school after he moves in with his Mamaw, J.D. was given the "peace and quiet at home" that allowed

him eventually to excel at school. However, he still acts as if he was just another unlucky child condemned like so many others to wallow in mediocrity. It is a strange doubleness in *Hillbilly Elegy*; blaming the victim of the white working-class on the one hand, and acting like he alone among his cohort was able to escape to tell the tale.

Vance is also not always successful at making his opinions stick. At times, his broad-brush assertions about “hillbilly” culture seem hard to corroborate. An example occurs during a discussion of childhood stress. Vance writes: “By almost any measure, American working-class families experience a level of instability unseen elsewhere in the world. Consider, for instance, Mom’s revolving door of father figures. No other country experiences anything like this” (228). Here Vance sidesteps actual data to back up the claim. Vance argues that no other country has mothers who lead unstable love lives. To say that this is preposterous would be an understatement, and it exposes Vance’s unreliability in a narrative that relies so centrally on the reliability of its narrator. In examples such as these, Vance’s thinly veiled use of the memoir to pursue political and social agendas cuts down and contradicts his constant claims to genuineness.

Chapter III:

Tara Westover, Ambivalent Feminist

A recollection of her journey from the isolated world of rural Idaho to the estimable halls of academia, Westover's account is harrowing. The youngest of seven children, Tara was born and raised next to a mountain known as Buck's Peak. Both her father Gene and her mother Faye were brought up in the Mormon faith. Their families were devout but not so entrenched that they rejected technological advancements, education, or media. After getting married and having children however, Gene became a religious zealot and Faye went along with the extreme interpretations her husband made of *The Book of Mormon*. By the time Tara's memory begins, Gene's fanaticism has made him into a man who believes in bizarre conspiracy theories as much as he believes in God.

For the Westover children, their father's adherence to conspiracy means that they grow up with little sense of, or connection to, the outside world. He even goes so far as to revise historical events in ways that align with his own ideologies. Take for example the 1992 Ruby Ridge shootout: Randy Weaver and his family engaged in an eleven-day shootout/siege with the US Marshal Service and the FBI after failing to comply with an arrest warrant against him for the illegal sale of guns. Weaver, who had ties to Neo-Nazi groups in the Rocky Mountains, was first put into question after allegations were made that he was stockpiling weapons and making death threats against major US politicians (interview, NPR). By the time Gene tells this story to his children, the more nefarious details surrounding Weaver's arrest warrant had vanished. Instead, the father calls the Weavers "freedom fighters." As he explains his version of events: "They wouldn't let the Government brainwash their kids in them public schools, so the Feds came after them.' Dad exhaled, long and slow. 'The Feds surrounded the family cabin, kept them

locked in there for weeks, and when a hungry child, a little boy, snuck out to go hunting, the Feds shot him dead” (8-9). Gene’s incorrect portrayal of political events contributes to the Westover children’s deep skepticism of the government and government-funded organizations like health and education. Formal state-sponsored schools are something to be feared and avoided. The children are left without the tools to enlighten themselves and challenge his wrong theories in a home where there is no access to television, radio, or the newspaper. To worsen matters, Faye complies with Gene’s denouncement of education in favor of forcing them to work by either sorting scrap metal or making herbal remedies. Westover writes, “When Dad saw me with one of those books, he’d try to get me away from them. Perhaps he thought if he could just distract me for a few years, the danger would pass. So he made up jobs for me to do, whether they needed doing or not” (61). While he treats Tara according to the strict gender roles established in the Mormon faith, expecting her to be modest, unopinionated and subservient towards the men in her life, Gene makes Tara work alongside him doing a “man’s work” sorting scrap metal.

The flying metal and dangerous compacting machines lead to several near-death experiences for both her older brothers and herself. Accidents like these are seldom if ever treated by medical professionals because of Gene’s distrust of hospitals; instead, Faye tends to third-degree burns and serious wounds using herbalist remedies. It is rare that these treatments ever really work, and Tara grows up watching several members of her family suffer from head injuries and lasting scars that could have been avoided with proper care. Although too young to do anything, Tara is old enough to take notice when her older brothers, Tyler and Richard, find a means of escape in moldy textbooks found in the basement that they use to teach themselves the skills needed to get out of Buck’s Peak and into college.

Tara retreats to the same textbooks used by her other more properly educated brothers when her brother Shawn displays serious imbalance during his interactions with women, and especially with his youngest sister. Shawn is like Jekyll and Hyde, one minute playing with her lovingly and the next abusing her physically and verbally. He belittles Tara, calling her a “whore” before she’s even aware what that word means; he physically dominates her when she disagrees with him or tries to stand up for herself (116). As Tara gets older and begins to call him out for threatening her, Shawn finds ways to turn their parents against her every time before apologizing profusely – and then starting the cycle over again.

Desperate for a way to escape the abuse, she starts to devote all of her free time to study for the ACT so that she can go to college at Brigham Young University (BYU). While her father does everything in his power to keep her from going, her mother, in a rare moment, pushes her to keep on her path, saying, “Don’t you stay. Go. Don’t let anything stop you from going” (134). And Tara does. Without a high school diploma, without ever having written an essay or taken an exam, Tara is accepted to Brigham Young University and, for the first time in her life, she is free from Buck’s Peak.

This sudden severance from her family is not easy. Though Brigham Young is a private Christian university affiliated with the the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tara has a hard time fitting in amongst her more reform-minded Christian peers. She expresses in the following quote that she is still saddled with the fear that their lesser faith will taint her. “I’d seen women dressed this way before – Dad called them gentiles – and I’d always avoided getting too near them, as if their immorality might be catching” (154). Tara is also wholly ignorant in general curricula, and shocks her professors when she admits to having no background in American and world history. She knows nothing about major events like the Civil Rights

Movement and the Holocaust. What Westover conveys— and powerfully so — in *Educated* is a view of herself as a young woman who has been entirely kept from any real understanding or knowledge of the outside world. The narrative, then, is the story of Tara finding her own place in that world — a place where she had long felt she could not ever possibly belong.

Tara is only able to begin to do this when she is convinced by the warm encouragement of a Mormon church leader at her college to apply for a Pell Grant. Her staunch refusal to accept either state or school assistance — a holdover from her parents' values — does nothing to help her when she finds herself straining to make ends meet just to eat and maintain shelter at BYU. Working both a night shift as a janitor and a day shift in the university cafeteria, Tara still finds herself worrying about how she will afford next month's rent and next semester's tuition. She is left with little time or energy to devote towards her schoolwork.

With the grant, Tara's entire world unfolds. School is finally something she can begin to enjoy. Accepting assistance is, in some sense, a form of assimilation to general society; something that further alienates her from her family. As Tara grows more worldly and more independent, the relationships between herself and her family worsen. The resentment her family feels towards her only grows over time, as does her own resentment towards their self-inflicted ignorance and hatred towards outsiders. The memoir culminates in a final falling out when Shawn threatens to kill Tara. Though her parents and siblings have been witness to, and sometimes victims of, his abuse, they gaslight Tara in adherence to the deep gender divisions within their extreme variant of Mormonism, choosing the man's side over the woman's. Tara leaves home having lost all but two members of her family — her brothers Tyler and Richard — acutely aware of how being “educated” has divided her family.

Educated was the third best-selling book of 2019 and has since sold more than 8 million copies. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography and the American Library Association’s Alex Award; it was a finalist for over a dozen other awards and prizes, and was featured on both Barack Obama’s and Bill Gates’ year-end reading recommendations. *Educated* has had such a wide-reaching and profound impact following its release that Westover was listed as one of the 100 most influential people of 2019.

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When it first appeared in 2018, *Educated* was never specifically labeled “timely” in critical reception. Westover’s memoir however was repeatedly read against the backdrop of the political and social fractures in US society that had come so dramatically to the surface in the wake of the 2016 election. Now it appeared to be nearly impossible for reviewers *not* to interpret her memoir about poor white Americans *without* positioning that text in the context of what one reviewer referred to as an ideological “urban-rural divide” in the United States. He continued: “The divide has never consumed us as much as it does today. The political parties are aligned more than ever around blue metropolises and red spaces in between” (MacGillis).

Westover’s memoir never explicitly said anything about “blue” and “red” political alignments, and her book was about as apolitical as had been Walls’ *The Glass Castle* from a dozen years earlier. Yet this was now perceived by reviewers to be a problem for *Educated* – which it had not in the slightest been for reviewers of *The Glass Castle*. Suddenly, or so commentators insisted, a book like *Educated* was critiqued because it should have addressed contemporary ideological differences. The author’s journey could not only be about Tara’s escape from familial abuse and dysfunction – though these elements of the book certainly merited frequent discussion. It also had to address Tara’s escape from the landlocked interior of

red America to the safer haven of coastal blue America. That Westover failed on this count got presented as a problem.

Why else read a memoir about poor white America if not to gain a broader social and political understanding of the subject? A review in the *Guardian* (UK) put it like this: “We hear a lot about the edges of the US these days. Geographically, these places might be in the middle of the continent, but they are on the periphery of the country’s economic life, and often the social one too. The people who live there are desperate and pitiable, we are told” (Dean). That Westover had not written about any of these issues was hardly the point; the point was that Westover’s memoir was now to be framed as offering unparalleled access and insight into America’s most “desperate and pitiable,” those outsiders stuck in “the middle of the continent” on “the periphery of the country’s economic life.” Commentators echoed sentiments seen in the reception to *Hillbilly Elegy*, where rural Americans were seen as a demographic completely outside their readership’s understanding. Two years after *Hillbilly Elegy*, commentators still felt entirely separated from, and, as “pitiable” would suggest, above Trump’s poor white constituency. Readers, it was suggested, should turn to *Educated* in hopes that Westover’s memoir would further illuminate the so-called “white trash” on the periphery. In other words, *Educated* was read as a sort of psychic sequel to *Hillbilly Elegy*.

It is unsurprising, then, to find that *Educated*’s critical reception overtly compared the Westover memoir to Vance – and often as a means of praising Westover for having further probed the ugly underbelly of the white underclass’ existence. The *New York Times* may have put it best: “If Vance’s memoir offers street-heroin-grade drama, Westover’s is carfentanil, the stuff that tranquilizes elephants” (MacGillis). It was as if to say – and reviews did more or less say this directly – that if you liked *Hillbilly Elegy*, you were going to love *Educated*. Vance’s

memoir had become the lens through which Westover's book should be read. Yet reviewers were not quite satisfied by this jolt of literary carfentanil; often they expressed their disappointment that intense opinions did not accompany Westover's intense memories.

Westover's lack of political perspective was seen as a failing on her part. That she was far less ideological than Vance meant to reviewers that she was far less clear than he had been. Indeed this is exactly what one reviewer wrote: "There are insights here that could compete with J.D. Vance's problematic and more ideological *Hillbilly Elegy* – if only they were more directly articulated" (Dean).

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It was not uncommon for Westover to get criticized for her lack of clarity and her inability to put the pieces of her life story into a complete package. As one reviewer says, "Westover's memoir never comes full circle. She never explains the purpose of sharing these deeply personal details, perhaps because she's still wrestling with the implications of her own conclusions and decisions" (Schutte). The book was a set of raw anecdotes, and these anecdotes were often quite brutal and horrifying, but reviewers also wanted to know: What had Westover *learned* from her experiences? Vance had never hesitated to underscore the life lessons of his life story they would note. However, and by contrast, Westover did a great job of digging through an awful lot of painful and deeply personal muck, even as she seldom provided an articulate retrospective position on what it all meant to her looking back – or what the big takeaways of her life story were supposed to be.

Such haziness surrounding Westover's true ideological agenda meant that reviewers felt it was their right to form their own judgments, oftentimes trying to find a reason for her apoliticism. Reading politics into Westover became a popular pastime, and while some centered

their discussions on *Educated* as a criticism of the sorry state of mental health and psychological counseling in the United States, others saw the memoir as a cry for help. Popular psychological interpretations of Westover's own mental well-being were made. Some included suggestions that the author probably was suffering from post-traumatic syndrome (PTSD), as if to say that no one could have survived what Tara went through and not have been emotionally damaged. A reviewer wrote that even the act of reading *Educated* might induce "secondary trauma" in some sensitive readers, and questioned whether the author might be suffering from false memories. Was it possible that "she might be imagining things? Was her memory to be trusted?" (Bocci).

The graphic nature of Westover's book also got scrutinized. Was such gory detail really necessary? Had the book simply crossed a line into indecency? The *National Review* was quite certain that it had gone too far – not least because the recovery of these memories could not have been therapeutic for Westover herself. This reviewer felt the need to advise Westover that "dredging up those deep feelings and traumatic experiences for a best-selling book likely isn't the best way to heal" (Schutte). Reviewers seemed genuinely concerned that Westover's raw emotion, rarely accompanied by retrospection or objectivity, signified an author who was "caught in a personal struggle for survival as she tries to come to grips with her past" (Schutte).

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By 2018, there was this expectation that a memoir about poor white Americans had to mean something – in a specific political sense. A stand had to be taken. It was not enough to tell the story of one's life experiences. Or as one reviewer put it, the portrait of Tara in *Educated* was akin to "scaffolding with sheets of plastic floating off, as if still in the process of building itself" (Dean). The point was that Tara's experiences needed to have a point. There had to be lessons –

both personal *and* political. It could not just be a story. It had to take on the big questions – and offer some clear and definitive big answers.

That critics expected a deeper purpose was directly in contrast with the reception to *The Glass Castle*, a mere dozen years earlier. There too we had a narrative with no agenda. It really was just a story – divorced from the backdrop of the political and social transformations that had rocked the United States in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s or, to put it in national terms, in the shift from the Kennedy era to the Reagan years. Walls had impressively recreated the perspective of the innocent child with no sense of larger realities outside her immediate viewpoint, and no one had found fault with this strategy. Westover had achieved something comparable in *Educated*, but the world around her had shifted – and radically so. No longer could a traumatic tale like Westover’s be read solely on its own terms – instead, it was read as a national allegory. In 2018, a story like *Educated* had to offer reflections on the world outside of itself.

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Alone among the reception to *Educated*, history professor Micky McElya’s “The Education of an Ambivalent Feminist” deserves more extended discussion. Appearing in the *Boston Review* about four months after *Educated* was published, McElya went much further in her efforts to provide an intellectual and historical context for *Educated*, placing it in a lineage of “foundation US stories of exceptionalism, rugged individualism, organic intellect and pure hustle from Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Boone, and Horatio Alger to more recent iterations such as *Hamilton* and J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*.” McElya commented on the reception to *Educated*, focused on the connections made between Vance and Westover. She noted how reviewers saw the two memoirists as sharing a “tough but loving eye on poor white people, their values, and

their problems outside the Northeast and coastal urban centers” (McElya). McElya continued: “While Westover’s book shares none of Vance’s candidate-in-the-making policy vision or overt politicking, it has been embraced by the right, left, and center on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean as an opportunity for casting new light on even deeper white reaches of Trump Country” (McElya). McElya didn’t believe that *Educated* possessed content which could justify such a reading. However, McElya saw Westover’s numerous appearances on right-wing media outlets during her publicity tour as an indicator of her alignment and comfort level with a more conservative audience. To McElya, Westover’s public persona was as meaningful as what she wrote about in her memoir, indicating values that might not have been clear otherwise. Vance set the pace, and now Westover was following in his footsteps.

What interested McElya was the emphasis on *individualism* expressed by both Westover and Vance. The authors possessed the mentality that people do not learn because they are told to do so, but only when they want to do so themselves. Westover made clear in interviews, McElya pointed out, that we do a disservice to people when we tell them that they can’t learn on their own. And it was this mentality that lined up so nicely with “the conservative social and political milieu of Vance – the milieu that celebrates individual choice and responsibility above all else” (McElya).

The other thing that distinguished McElya’s review was its attention to Westover’s whiteness. McElya – unlike virtually any other reviewer – acknowledged “the abiding privileges of Westover’s whiteness and Americanness” (McElya). This aspect of Westover’s education, especially as it related to the classical liberal enlightenment theory that Westover championed, was problematic because that theory had only truly pertained to *white men*. McElya reminded us

that the Enlightenment represented a flawed project that enforced a hierarchy based on pseudoscience while, at the same time, becoming the bedrock of modern democratic thought.

McElya's overall focus, however, was on the feminism that Westover *both* rejected and embraced. On the one hand, it was obvious in Westover's memoir that she found little value in the second wave feminism of writers like Friedan and de Beauvoir. On the other hand, Westover made clear that first wave feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mills were much more to her liking. McElya pointed out the contradictions and inconsistencies in Westover's position. This was because – in fact – “*Educated* offers an indictment of patriarchy and the damage men do – and how both distort women's and girls' senses of themselves and the world” (McElya). The brutal abuses and domestic violence that Tara experienced at the hands of her father and brother can be placed in systemic historical context. McElya wrote, “Westover's education rejects analyzing the collective conditions of women, their diversity and interaction oppressions across time and global geographies” (McElya). This may not have been how Westover interpreted her own experiences, yet for McElya this proved to be a limitation in Westover's ability to understand her own experience.

However, McElya went out of her way to clarify that she was not judging Westover. Part of this was because Westover was only thirty-one when her book appeared. Given the intensity of what she endured as a young woman, McElya was careful to acknowledge that someone who had gone through the things that Westover experienced may not be able to come to such an immediate understanding. As McElya concluded: “Westover is clearly still on a journey – both personal and educational” (McElya). In a sense, her review seemed as though it was written directly to Westover herself, respectfully encouraging the memoirist to reconsider her hesitations towards a feminist analysis of her own life.

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Featured on the back cover of the paperback edition of *Educated* (2022) is a quote of praise by none other than J.D. Vance. It reads: “Beautifully written... Westover’s powerful tale – of trying to find a place for herself in the world, without losing her connection to her family or her beloved home – deserves to be widely read.” Nothing in the short blurb implies an agreement of ideologies between the two authors regarding their memoirs’ subject matter. However, the inclusion of Vance’s recognition signifies how important his opinion has become, and the shadow that *Hillbilly Elegy* cast over *Educated*, as well as the long shadow the earlier book now cast over the entire genre of the so-called “white-trash” memoir.

And yet, *Educated* is not filled with the statistics and contextual analyses that Vance litters throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*. Westover’s memoir is, at its core, the story of a young woman using education to escape from bad circumstances. One specific similarity to *The Glass Castle* is *Educated*’s timelessness, achieved by Westover’s emphasis on her family’s disconnectedness from the outside world. Although not impossible to situate – we know Westover comes of age in the 1990s and early 2000s because of references made to the aforementioned siege at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and the “YTK problem” in 2000 – but these events only enter the house through Gene as long-winded conspiracies. Pivotal historical events like the fall of the Soviet Union and the September 11 attacks are left out of the conversation completely. The changes in Tara’s life are truly only defined by what occurs in the microcosm of Buck’s Peak, which makes certain sections of her memoir feel as though they could take place at any point in recent history.

Another similarity to *Walls* is Westover’s choice not to position herself within a specific demographic. Though we understand that at certain points in her life both she and her family are poor, Tara never identifies with titles like “white trash” or “hillbilly”. When compared to Vance,

Westover does not suffer from the inherited Appalachian anger-management issues, nor does her family suffer from the effects of America's industrial decay. But beyond this, Westover is aware that her youth is marked by religious fundamentalism. In fact, her family so rarely mingled with neighbors that even at a young age, Tara expresses that she felt different from the other Mormon girls in town, at one point referring to herself as "a goose among swans" (79). Perhaps a little more like Walls' family, the Westover clan is stricken by a poverty that is almost entirely self-inflicted.

Because Tara is insulated for such a long period of her life, racial issues only come up sparingly in *Educated*, and just in moments when Tara calls out the casual racism of her father and brother. A striking moment occurs after Tara has learned about the Civil Rights movement at college. While home on break, her brother Shawn addresses her using the n-word. Tara's taken this from Shawn "a thousand times before with indifference," but the knowledge she now possesses as to the origin and meaning behind the word causes her to freeze up (180). She writes: "The way Shawn said it hadn't changed; only my ears were different. They no longer heard the jingle of a joke in it. What they heard was a signal, a call through time, which was answered with a mounting conviction: that never again would I allow myself to be made a foot soldier in a conflict I did not understand" (180-181). This is the first time Tara acknowledges her whiteness. Now she knows that being complicit with the use of a word meant to degrade and subjugate people of color aligns her – however inadvertently – with the values of white supremacy. Beyond this realization, Westover does not spend time discussing white supremacy, nor does she discuss the ways in which that sickness has infiltrated her family. If anything, Tara's acknowledgement of racial inequality serves more as an example of her own personal growth than as a reminder of America's far-reaching problems with racial prejudice.

Even though it is clear that Westover's work is apolitical, commentators are not happy that she doesn't have more to say about the sociology of poor white America. Essentially, they want her family's craziness to have some sort of explanation – Westover is expected to get to the root of the problem. It is *Educated*'s exclusion of political and social commentary that causes commentators to turn back to Vance to find some deeper meaning in Westover's story.

What arises from this is an opinion that Westover is, like Vance, an embodiment of the American dream. Reviewers cite her adherence to individualism and her belief that “we take people's ability to self-teach away by creating this idea that someone else has to do this for you, that you have to take a course, you have to do it in some formal way. Any curriculum that you design for yourself is going to be better, even if it's not the absolute perfect one” (Interview, Vanderhoof). The memoir is read – as had been *Hillbilly Elegy* – as an “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” tale that leaves little room for excuses as to why the poor or the uneducated can't take matters into their own hands and, like Westover, attend a top university.

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Only in 2022 did Westover decide to push back – if gently – against the reception of *Educated* in a *New York Times* op-ed, “I Am Not Proof of the American Dream”. The title takes a direct jab at the commentators who chalk up her story as one “that reduces any tale of success to one of grit and diligence,” as it seeks effectively to disassociate her memoir from its misreadings (Westover, “American Dream”). What Westover saw now was that, in spite of all of the obstacles she had to overcome to get an education – the lies, the abuse, the sexism – she believes in 2022 that when she went to Brigham Young, she had it much easier than poor kids trying to go to college now. As she wrote in *Educated*, the Pell grant gave her “the ability to think of things besides money” (207). But that same grant today would not have had the same

impact on her life. To classify her memoir as a rags-to-riches story is to fail to acknowledge the federal assistance she received. It is also to fail to address the worsening economic challenges of our time. She writes: “I will admit that, to be frank, it was an easier time, and things were better. Our institutions were better” (Westover, “American Dream”). The dramatic rise in tuition and rent has far outpaced a Pell Grant’s benefits. Westover cites a 2019 report from the Institute of Higher Education Policy: “At some state flagship schools (not fancy private schools, just regular four-year public universities), low-income students are asked to cover some \$80,000 beyond what they can afford” (Westover, “American Dream”). This is a huge jump from the \$3,000 in annual tuition Westover paid back in 2008.

In her *New York Times* editorial, Westover does not explain or justify why she wrote *Educated*. But her critique of the US government’s mishandling of public education makes her memoir as one that should be read not as “the persistence of the American dream but of its precarity, even its absence” (Westover, “American Dream”). The focus of the memoir had been not on trauma, she wanted her audience to recognize, but instead on the failure of our national systems to protect and support disenfranchised youth. Westover offers several modest solutions our government could deploy, like “restore funding to public universities” and “increase Pell grants and reform student debt” (Westover, “American Dream”). This would be to acknowledge that public universities are underfunded, and Pell grants are no longer sufficient; our government has done a disservice to our nation’s poor in its neglect of educational systems. And only in taking responsibility for these shortcomings will Americans be able to reach some sense of equality among students nationwide. In 2022, in other words, and better late than never, Tara Westover wants to be clear that her political views are on an entirely different spectrum from those of J.D. Vance. Asserting that the government has played a hand in our country’s academic

downfall stands in direct contrast with Vance's firm belief in individual culpability. Westover now insists her memoir really should not be read as the conservative manifesto so many commentaries initially took it to be.

Conclusion:

On the Evidence of “White Trash” Experience

In the final sections of *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls chronicles her and her siblings’ move to New York City and away from the emotionally toxic environment of Welch, West Virginia. Jeannette successfully applies to Barnard College, selected she tells us because it “was the best in New York City” that (at that time) admitted women (250). (Columbia would go co-ed only in 1987.) She also receives grants and loans to cover most of the college’s hefty tuition costs. It is a remarkable turnaround for a young woman who, only a short time earlier, had been destined to a fate far worse – stuck in Appalachia with no future except the dim expectation that she might attend Bluefield State College in nearby Bluefield, West Virginia on a full scholarship (235). Interestingly Walls does *not* mention at all in her memoir the small, but hardly incidental, detail that Bluefield State was at that time (and still is today) an historically Black college.

There are other details Walls does not mention. She does not tell us what grants and loans she received to attend Barnard. She spends no time whatsoever discussing the application process, or the odds against her – or how she pitched her personal story to the agencies that funded her education. Once her parents also migrate – and suddenly – to New York City, following their children there, Walls does recount in some detail the state of homelessness or near-homelessness that her parents, Rex and Rose Mary Walls, descend into. A typical passage from this section of the memoir reads:

That January it got so cold you could see chunks of ice the size of cars floating down the Hudson River. On those midwinter nights, the homeless shelters filled up quickly. Mom and Dad hated the shelters. Human cesspools, Dad called them, goddamn vermin pits. Mom and Dad preferred to sleep on the pews of the

churches that opened their doors to the homeless, but on some nights every pew in every church was taken (258).

What is interesting, again as with the other details that Walls neglects to include, is that we would never truly know that these events likely occurred in the early 1980s – or soon after the Reagan Administration took control of the federal government, and made it a priority to gut social services especially for the homeless in the United States. In justifying these cuts, Reagan’s Attorney General Edwin Meese made the administration’s position clear: “I think some people are going to soup kitchens voluntarily. I know we’ve had considerable information that people go to soup kitchens because the food is free and that that’s easier than paying for it” (McFadden). Yet we would not know anything of this context from Walls herself.

What changes, however, and as this thesis has analyzed, are the *social and political meanings* of the poor white American memoir from Walls to Vance to Westover. Walls for all intents and purposes keeps political and social contexts almost entirely out of *The Glass Castle*. Her quiet refusal to generalize and stereotype allowed the critical reception of her work to take every individual in her story and see them as such, as people who had their own backstories and problems that couldn’t be ascribed solely to the poor white culture they inherited.

While some of the memoir’s avoidance of political and social frames can be attributed to Walls’ stylistic choices, it would be remiss of me not to address the era in which the memoir appeared. *The Glass Castle* was published in 2005 – a few years at least before social media altered the social and political landscape. Facebook had only just transitioned from being a college-only platform to one that was open to the public. Twitter was still a year away from its first tweet. YouTube had been launched only weeks before *The Glass Castle* appeared. Social media was still very much in its infancy. What’s more, Twitter and Facebook were not yet reliant

on algorithms to sort their content, and the highly-controversial proliferation of political disinformation was a decade away in the future. The spin on *The Glass Castle* in its reception was still overwhelmingly a print-based phenomenon.

The politics of the United States had transformed by the time *Hillbilly Elegy* appeared. In 2016, Twitter switched over to an interaction-based algorithm in line with Facebook's, which would catapult any post with heavy engagement to the top of a user's feed. Bots, internet trolls, and disseminators of fake news were now able to post articles or videos with no factual standing that would get supported by the platform because social media companies were not just making money off advertisements, but off user interactions and data. There were more members on these platforms than ever, but there were inadequate measures in place to monitor the content that was posted or shared for quality or truth. Trump's incessant lies, as well as the lies of his cronies, ran rampant while people turned increasingly to social media to get their news rather than from more traditional (and reliable) forums like print journalism or a cable network like CNN.

Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* embraced the social and political contexts that Walls had left out of *The Glass Castle*. He made these contexts both the core of his memoir and the book's major selling point. He offered his own hot take on why "hillbillies" voted for Donald Trump – a position that he (at that time, though no longer) considered catastrophic. Here was an Ivy League-educated and seemingly responsible right-wing memoirist who was taken to be palatable to the wider (often liberal) reading public. He stuffed his memoir with credible statistics and clear if often tendentious analyses that could be read objectively. His life served as a case study. Vance – quite unlike Walls – pushed an ideological agenda that said that only poor whites could change themselves. No federal or state aid or institutional programs were going to help the "hillbillies" of southeast Ohio – or anywhere else, for that matter – make those cultural changes.

Wiped clean away from *Hillbilly Elogy* was the apoliticism and essential humanism of *The Glass Castle*.

It was this legacy of a new and ideologically-charged reality that Westover's *Educated* inherited. Perhaps inevitably, given the further polarization of the US political and cultural landscape, *Educated* came to be read alongside *Hillbilly Elogy*. Westover, like Walls, said almost nothing explicitly about "white trash." Westover focused her attention on personal choice – like Vance – but did not engage larger political contexts, nor did she cite statistical data to undergird her analyses of everything that had gone tragically wrong with the white rural underclass. Westover and Vance may have both climbed out of poverty through perseverance and hard work. However, and quite unlike Vance, Westover had not set out at all in her memoir to make grand statements about the current moral crises in American society. Yet and because the genre in which she worked had changed so drastically, Westover could not control the narrative of how her book was to be received – at a moment when our country was slipping further and deeper still into a state of political polarization. Although Westover had no ideological axe to grind – something for which some more liberal commentators were to criticize her – this turned out not to be enough of a firewall to prevent the reception of Westover's memoir (as I have discussed) from being interpreted through the cracked ideological lens of America's badly damaged social and cultural realities.

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It has been a core argument of this senior thesis that, as a genre, the memoir is a constructed story, in this way much like the novel, but at the same time, the memoir gains authority from the very fact that as a text it claims to be narrating autobiographical and historical truths. While readers intuitively grasp that a memoir is not the truth in a directly literal sense, but

rather a document that is constructed, edited, framed, shaped, and dramatized, readers and critics at the same time presume that these memoirs can and do provide a deepened understanding of what individuals from impoverished and troubled backgrounds really experienced – and both authors and critics also often suggest that more general policies and politics may be derived from these experiences. The evolving reception of these texts has shaped their meaning.

In her 1991 article, “On the Evidence of Experience,” cultural critic Joan W. Scott examined queer and Black writer Samuel R. Delany’s memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water*, as a means of asking questions about how such a transgressive memoir may produce “a wealth of new evidence previously ignored” and may also draw attention “to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional history” (776). Scott added, and importantly, that Delany’s “challenge to normative history” rests both on “its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience” and on an “appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based” (776). As Scott also astutely explained, such an appeal to “experience as uncontestable evidence” has its own built-in contradictions; such an appeal may seek to reveal realities previously unseen and undocumented, but at the same time, it also “reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems,” and thus can undermine the very contesting of categories and knowledges it may have set out to challenge (778).

Although worlds away from the memoir of Samuel R. Delany, the white working-class memoirs examined and analyzed in this thesis have also relied centrally on the authority of their authors’ experiences to make their stories “real” to their readership. Although in dramatically different ways, the works of Walls, Vance and Westover began from the same place when it

came to their own lives; these were stories only they could have told about lives only they had experienced.

In these ways, we can identify a cultural shift in our understanding of what the true “experience” of the white working-class was and is, and what it has more recently come to mean. Although this is hardly what Scott likely intended when she wrote more than thirty years ago that to write about one’s self is always “a discursive event,” my reading of the three memoirs in this thesis has sought to underscore that the meaning of these lives should also be understood as a discursive event (792). Only by interrogating their literary, political and social contexts can we begin to understand that these “white trash” memoirs – J.D. Vance’s exploitation of his own experiences, notwithstanding – only really exist in the realm of language and should not be taken too directly or seriously as empirical data on which future social policies or political discussions ought to be based.

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