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The Memorialization of Southern Poor White Men's Labor in Rick Bragg's Memoir Trilogy

SARAH ROBERTSON

This article explores the ways that Rick Bragg memorializes poor white men's labor across his memoir trilogy, examining the tensions that arise as he attempts to bring poor whites into the center of the southern community. I consider the neo-Agrarian strains within his work, as well as Bragg's responses to the globalization of the region. The work addresses the absences within the South's memorial landscape, and questions the extent to which Bragg's work addresses those gaps.

Having experienced poverty throughout his childhood, Rick Bragg explores the nuances of poor white lives throughout his memoir trilogy, *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997), *Ava's Man* (2002), and *The Prince of Frogtown* (2008). In particular, Bragg destabilizes the boundaries between grand and micro-narratives as he oscillates between neo-Agrarian and anti-Agrarian sentiments in a bid to reenvision poor whites and their place in the southern community. His accounts of people whom "history would otherwise have ignored" stand as counterstories to dominant southern narratives that tend to demonize, ridicule and exclude poor whites,¹ stories that depend on the unstable, unreliable nature of memory. Also central to Bragg's project is the commemoration of poor white labor that offers a direct rebuke to long-established ideas of poor whites. Since the eighteenth century and William Byrd's account of the "Indolent Wretches" he discovered living on the North Carolina–Virginia border,² poor whites have commonly been cast as unproductive degenerates. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, George M. Weston commented on the pervasive idleness amongst non-slave-owning, rural whites who exist, he insists, "on the outskirts of civilization, where they lead a semi-savage life, sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with each succeeding generation."³

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¹ Rick Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 12.

² William Byrd, *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 54.

³ George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington: Buell and Blanchard, 1856), 5.

Such assertions are reflected across southern writing, with Erskine Caldwell's Jeeter Lester epitomizing the unproductive and destructive qualities associated with poor whites.

Tobacco Road,⁴ with its litany of degenerate poor whites, was set into relief during the Depression by James Agee and Walker Evans's photo-essay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,⁵ depicting the lives of three white tenant families in Alabama. Alongside Evans's images of poor whites at work in the fields or his well-known shot of Floyd Burroughs's working boots, Agee stresses that the "The family exists for work," offering an account of the "arduous physical work" that is "taught forward from father to son and from mother to daughter." Agee agonizes about his outsider perspective, asking "how am I to speak of you . . .?" worried that he might "betray" his subjects.⁶ Certainly, Agee's assumption that the families he encountered lacked any "sense of beauty" since "'sense of beauty,' like nearly everything else, is a class privilege" goes some way to showing the difficulty he faced in moving beyond his own prejudices.

Agee and Evans's vivid portrayals of the laboriousness of poor whites are consistently undercut in southern literature and culture as poor whites are widely paraded as idle, trashy degenerates. In the most recent monograph entirely devoted to the literary poor white, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*, Sylvia Jenkins Cook notes that since the 1930s fictionalized southern poor whites typically appear "as comic villains and industrial victims, as unionizing sharecroppers and mob supporters of rabble-rousing politicians, and even still, as quaint and colorful mountain peasants" – in short, poor whites are typically types rather than fully realized characters.⁷

Since the late 1970s, however, significant shifts have taken place in southern letters, as neatly summarized by Fred Hobson: "What is different in the past decade or so is that any number of plain and poor white southerners . . . *have* spoken for themselves."⁸ These writers contribute to what Brundage terms "a social history of remembering in the South," a form of remembering that draws attention to the fissures, to the forgotten, and to the misrepresented in southern history and memory.⁹

⁴ Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995; first published 1932).

⁵ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978; first published 1941).

⁶ Agee and Evans, 289, 92.

⁷ Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 188.

⁸ Fred Hobson, ed., *South to the Future: An American Region in the Twenty-First Century* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 6, original emphasis.

⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.

In contradicting established ideas about poor white lives, Bragg's memoirs join an expanding list of micro-narratives that disrupt any singular perspective of what, and who, constitutes the South. As Scott Romine argues, "if one doesn't subscribe to the South of *Southern Living*, then alternative subscriptions are available." Romine points to a "proliferation of microSouths" that reflect a late South that "is mobilized in an increasingly diverse range of cultural projects."¹⁰

Of such projects, Harry Crews's *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* marks a crucial transition in southern writing and in conceptions of the southern community.¹¹ Watkins claims that *A Childhood* left "a more lasting influence on the literature of the South than all of his fiction combined," and certainly Crews's work stands as the forerunner of a tradition of poor white memoirists.¹² *A Childhood*, with its uncompromising exploration of Crews's home place, Bacon County, south Georgia, and "all of its people and its customs and all its loveliness and all its ugliness,"¹³ paved the way for future southern writers including Dorothy Allison, Janisse Ray, Tim McLaurin and Rick Bragg. In effect, such memoirs disrupt any dominant "rhetoric of community" by returning poor whites to the center of the southern community.¹⁴

As Bragg destabilizes ideas of community by insisting on the central role his family played in the formation of southern society, he repeatedly turns to labor and the legacy of laborious lives. Like a number of poor white memoirists, including Janisse Ray, Bragg seeks to uncover his family's origins and their arrival in the region, on the Alabama–Georgia border. For Bragg, manual labor defines their presence as he traces their work back to his great-great-grandfather, James B. Bundrum, who served in the Civil War, and "came home half-starved . . . to plow a borrowed mule on another's man's acreage in Cleburne County in northeastern Alabama."¹⁵ During Reconstruction James "labored" along with other poor whites: "They hammered together towns and laid tracks and cut roads and the designs they carved in this landscape are still here." Bragg claims, "I have walked railroad trestles they built, crossties rough under my bare feet."¹⁶ That laborious legacy passes on through the generations, from James to his son, Jimmy Jim, "a logger and sawmill hand and a whiskey man, to tell the truth. Lay your hands on the oldest houses in this corner of the world, and you can feel his touch in the wood."¹⁷ Tracing

¹⁰ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 16, 15, 9.

¹¹ Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995; first published 1978).

¹² James H. Watkins, "The Use of *I*, Lovely and Terrifying Word: Autobiographical Authority and the Representation of 'Redneck' Masculinity in *A Childhood*," in Erik Bledsoe, ed., *Perspectives on Harry Crews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001), 15–28, 28.

¹³ Crews, 17. ¹⁴ Romine, 15. ¹⁵ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 33. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

ancestry via labor simultaneously challenges the assumption that poor white men “mainly passed their time on their backsides in front of a tree” and points to poor white labor as a seething, unacknowledged presence within the landscape.¹⁸ Patricia Yaeger notes that within “southern literature extraordinary numbers of women, men, and children fall into the landscape and disappear,” so for her the southern landscape is “built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture.”¹⁹ Yaeger’s conception of “white culture” is arguably too homogeneous, forgoing the class divides that have kept poor whites pinned on the bottom rung of the social ladder, alongside and often fighting against southern blacks as they vie for social advancement. Indeed, as Matt Wray argues, the labels attached to poor whites, including “trash” and “dirt eater,” have seen poor whites treated “more like a caste than a class,” racialized in ways that make their bodies seemingly as expendable as black bodies.²⁰ Aware that poor white labor has yet to be fully included in the region’s dominant narratives, Bragg dedicates his memoirs to redressing the balance.

Bragg concentrates on the labor of various family members, writing in *Frogtown*, “From the cradle, they had been taught that their very worth as a people was tied to their ability to labor.”²¹ Notably, Bragg claims in *Shoutin’* that his first memory is of his mother dragging “a canvas cotton sack along an undulating row of rust-colored ground.”²² Caution must necessarily be taken when approaching such reminiscences, with Bragg’s autobiographical texts open to the instability of memory. As Laura Marcus notes:

autobiography is itself a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object. In an intellectual context in which these are seen as irreconcilably distinct, autobiography will appear either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or a magical instrument of reconciliation.²³

To that end, autobiographies and memoirs must be read and analyzed as texts imbued with all the imaginative processes at play in any literary text. With issues of accuracy in mind, it is also pertinent to note that after the peak of Bragg’s journalist career, working for the *New York Times*, and winning the

¹⁸ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991; first published 1941), 24.

¹⁹ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15.

²⁰ Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

²¹ Rick Bragg, *The Prince of Frogtown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 128.

²² Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin’*, 23.

²³ Laura Marcus, “The Face of Autobiography,” in Julia Swindells, ed., *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 13–24, 14.

Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 1996, he resigned under a cloud in 2003 after some of his work was found to contain plagiarized material. Nevertheless, readers of his memoirs will do well to remember Michel de Certeau's salient point that memory is always in the process of alteration, that it is always "played by circumstances."²⁴ The question should not, then, depend on the authenticity of Bragg's memory, but instead on how he fills in, or plays that memory, on why he chooses it as his first memory, or as his ur-narrative. As he privileges this memory, Bragg presses the point about his mother's "dignity," a woman who picks cotton rather than accepting welfare or family charity.²⁵ This forms part of Bragg's desire to stress the interconnectedness of work and worth for poor whites, and while he repeatedly teeters on the border of the sentimental, his texts "flesh out the story of an 'Other America' in-filled with texture and the force of imagination and desire."²⁶ In what follows, I explore the ways that Bragg "fleshes" out labor, examining the tensions and contradictions that surface throughout his writing. It is necessary for me to explore the trilogy's account of labor before I then move on to consider the ways in which Bragg memorializes that labor.

Bragg's texts detail numerous forms of labor, with *Shoutin'* almost entirely devoted to his mother's work in the cotton fields and raising her children. However, across the trilogy Bragg heavily invests in the labor of his brother Sam and of their maternal grandfather, Charlie Bundrum. To understand why their labor takes center stage it is pertinent to consider race and the connections between poor white and poor black labor. In *Shoutin'* he considers the black families who lived close to his own: "We had seen our neighbors only from a distance . . . Their children existed beside us in a parallel universe, climbing the same trees, stealing the same apples, swimming in the same creek, but, somehow, always upstream or downstream."²⁷

As the adult Bragg reflects back on the generosity of one black family who offered leftovers to his destitute mother, his retrospective class-consciousness overcomes the divide that shaped his segregated childhood.²⁸ Richard Godden's analysis of Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (1938) and the sparks of class-consciousness that permeate the mind of Ab Snopes is useful when

²⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), 87.

²⁵ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 24.

²⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4.

²⁷ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 66.

²⁸ The hunger experienced by Bragg's family during this period is a common marker of poor southern lives, both white and black, long after the end of the depression. For an interesting article on the political nature of food in the South see Marcie Cohen Ferris, "The Edible South," *Southern Cultures*, 15, 4 (Winter 2009), 3–27.

considering the dynamics at play in Bragg's recollections of his black neighbors. Godden asserts that inside Colonel DeSpain's home, the poor white Snopes "knows that the house and its contents derive from him, or at least from his class, but he turns the class against itself by refusing an alliance in sweat with the black body of tenancy."²⁹ Snopes's inability to see, or refusal to acknowledge, the link between the tenant labor of poor whites and blacks in the story's 1890s setting is echoed in the racial division that separates black and white neighbors during Bragg's childhood. Bragg's retrospective stance does not gloss the racial and class tensions that shaped his childhood. He comments, "I would like to say that we came together, after the little boy brought us that food, that we learned about and from each other, but that would be a lie. It was rural Alabama in 1965, two separate, distinct states."³⁰

In a time and place when the governor told poor whites that they "were better than the nigras,"³¹ the need to maintain such distinctions and separations is apparent, particularly in light of Margaret Bragg's cotton-picking work until the full-scale mechanization of the cotton industry, which occurred in the late 1960s in Bragg's Alabama.³² So, to recognize their black neighbors would be to recognize that their labor was Margaret's labor, effecting an acknowledgment of a shared dependency that would, in Godden's terms, necessarily make the poor white's "class body more black than white." Such "recognition is blocked," Godden argues, "not least because of the resilience of dependency, and its key trauma, grounded in the institutional persistence of bound labor."³³

Bragg finds refuge from pondering the boundedness of his mother's labor in his grandfather Charlie's labor, a labor that he perceives as more independent. While Bragg writes in *The Prince of Frogtown* that "so much of what I have tried to write in my lifetime, attempts to peer into the pasts of blue-collar Americans, specifically the mill and mountain people of the foothills of the Appalachians,"³⁴ there is far greater emphasis on "mountain" or "backwoods" labor across his memoirs, a labor marked as more artisan than industrial, more underclass than blue-collar class. Bragg claims earlier in *Frogtown* that "as a boy I wondered why anyone would work inside a place that could keep a part of you at quittin' time,"³⁵ implying that in the labor of men like Charlie, a carpenter, Bragg reads a greater sense of independence and self-worth. Bragg regards such artisan skills and labor as overlooked and forgotten, as standing outside industrial labor records.

²⁹ Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124.

³⁰ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² For a thorough consideration of the changes to the cotton industry see Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984). ³³ Godden, 126. ³⁴ Bragg, *The Prince of Frogtown*, 254. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

In order to fill in the gaps surrounding Charlie's labor, Bragg has to fill in the gaps in his own knowledge. Since Charlie died before Bragg was born, Bragg depends on anecdotes to build a picture of Charlie. I return later to the problems involved in Bragg's textual reconstruction of Charlie; here it is important to detail the list of activities he attributes to his grandfather: he was, we are told, "a carpenter, roofer, whiskey maker, sawmill hand, well digger, hunter, poacher, and river man."³⁶ Pointing both to the nuances of Charlie's character and to his constant sense of activity, the list challenges stereotypes of poor white men and their inactivity.

Indeed, in *Shoutin'*, Bragg tells readers that Charlie "made his honest living in the most honorable way any man could, with a hammer."³⁷ Here the repetition of honor appeals to the idea of the southern "aristocracy," thereby destabilizing preconceived notions of the dishonesty and unworthiness of poor whites. Simultaneously it draws attention to Charlie's hammer, with tools playing a central role in Bragg's account of labor. Throughout the trilogy Bragg draws attention to the fact that his brother Sam inherited both Charlie's tools and his artisan skills.

Bragg mourns the fact that he, unlike his two brothers, does not have recourse to the traditions and to the local knowledge of his family. In *Frogtown* Bragg details a walk he took with his younger brother:

Everything was . . . in bloom . . . and as I walked beside my little brother through the rows I realized I was a poser, a fake country boy, and that driving a truck and shooting a gun is a lame statement next to what he knew about the ground. Unlike me, he had paid attention walking beside the old people in our family, and when I asked how he knew what to do, he just looked at me funny, again. "I've always known," he said.³⁸

Bragg's feelings of being "inauthentic" or "fake" point readers to a key motivating force behind these narratives. Romine suggests, "Time and again in the stories in and about the late South, an opposition between the real and the fake emerges to perform crucial narrative work."³⁹ Part of Bragg's narrative work, then, is an attempt to authenticate himself as belonging to the people and place he depicts.

Towards the conclusion of *Shoutin'* he ruminates on having left the region and his connection to the people left behind:

You do the best you can for the people left, a yard-fighting, teeth-gnashing, biscuit-eating, ugly-dog-raising, towel-stealing, television-praying, never-forgiving, hard-headed people that you love with all the strength in your body, once you finally figure out that they are who you are, and, in many ways, all there is.⁴⁰

³⁶ Rick Bragg, *Ava's Man* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 8.

³⁷ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 27.

³⁸ Bragg, *The Prince of Frogtown*, 247.

³⁹ Romine, *The Real South*, 17.

⁴⁰ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 327.

Much of Bragg's trilogy sees him trying to "figure out" his connection to place. In *Shoutin'* Bragg comments on his "own foolish romanticism" as he partakes in a nostalgic recollection of the gardens that his mother used to keep. Even while he is aware that this is a story that "sounds romantic to people who have never held a hoe," he also indulges in such admiration, wondering if he has retained "any of the skills of my people."⁴¹

Bragg's emphasis on skills has twofold significance. In the first instance it highlights his anxiety about the degree to which he is divorced from a family legacy of manual labor, and in the second it reiterates the nostalgia in his prose for an earlier time. David Harvey, commenting on the "turnover time of capital," notes, "Workers, instead of acquiring a skill for life, can now look forward to at least one if not multiple bouts of de-skilling and re-skilling in a lifetime."⁴² This general 'death of skills' partially accounts for the heavy emphasis placed on the quality of Charlie's labor, but it also points to Bragg's own feelings of being a "fake country boy."

In Bragg's case the journey to authentication is fraught since the pen has replaced the hammer, causing a troubling transition as the material solidity of the tools that defined Charlie's working life are replaced with an image of a man pieced together from reminiscences and anecdotes, a man created by Bragg to fulfill the idea of a grandfather that he never knew.

In Bragg's most recent publication, *The Most They Ever Had*, he refers to his early journalistic work as "frivolous . . . something you could do all day and not even get any grease under your nails."⁴³ Indeed, Bragg feels distanced both from Charlie and from Sam, two men defined by manual labor. He attempts to bridge this distance through the narrative and through the memories of those who remember or indeed share, in the case of Sam, Charlie's legacy. To this end, Sam has direct access to what Nora terms "true memory" while Bragg has access to a "memory transformed by its passage through time."⁴⁴ True memory, according to Nora, "has taken refuge in gestures and habits, skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories."⁴⁵ While Sam is not the central focus of any of the memoirs, he and his labor appear repeatedly throughout them. As suggested earlier, Bragg marks Sam as the inheritor of his grandfather's tools and skills, as an inheritor of "true memory."

When Bragg describes Charlie as the kind of man "mostly lost to this world forever," he acknowledges that "you see ghosts of them from time to time.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997; first published 1990), 229–30.

⁴³ Rick Bragg, *The Most They Ever Had* (San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage, 2009), 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

They live in good men like my uncles and my brother Sam.”⁴⁶ Bragg depends upon Sam to keep him in touch with the southern world that he has left, claiming that Sam “brings me home, all the way home, telling about layoffs at the mill, about who died and where the funeral was.”⁴⁷ Sam, then, is a route back to community, a way for Bragg to reconnect his separated self with the home place. Significantly, this reconnection is made via labor, and more particularly via the tools of that labor, with Bragg’s repeated turns to tools involving him in what Judy Attfield refers to as “the interpretation of the past through the media of material objects.”⁴⁸

In *Shoutin’*, Bragg recalls that Sam still has Charlie’s tools, tools that Sam has “hung . . . like a shrine, on the inside of his shed.”⁴⁹ In *Ava’s Man*, Bragg turns once again to Charlie’s tools, this time placing specific emphasis on his grandfather’s hammer. Attfield refers to the “way certain types of material culture are used for keeping in touch with life,” and for Bragg the hammer keeps him in touch both with a re-created sense of Charlie and with Sam.⁵⁰ Bragg presents Charlie’s hammer as talismanic, with tools and labor defining the man. The hammer, then, allows Bragg to “retain a fixed, reassuring sense of place, heritage, and tradition in the discontinuous postmodern society of the late twentieth century.”⁵¹

So, in a postsouthern world where Bragg mourns the homogenization and commodification of daily life, objects such as the hammer have the potential to become, as Harvey suggests, “the focus of a contemplative memory, and hence a generator of a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion.”⁵² In Charlie’s hammer Bragg reads his grandfather’s labor and life, investing the inanimate with the animate as he tells the story behind the object.

Conversely, however, Bragg’s own understanding of and relationship with the hammer is markedly different from that of either Charlie or Sam. Sam, for instance, has direct access to both the objects and their use-value. For Bragg the writer, however, the one who left the region, there is a risk of fetishizing the hammer.⁵³ Bragg sees stability and protectiveness in Charlie’s labor, as he does in Sam’s. In *Shoutin’* he recalls Christmas presents that he received on a return visit home. Sam, he writes, “got me tools, to make up for the fact I had moved

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁷ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin’*, 171.

⁴⁸ Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 234.

⁴⁹ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin’*, 27.

⁵⁰ Attfield, 215.

⁵¹ Amy E. Weldon, “When Fantasy Meant Survival’: Writing, Class, and the Oral Tradition in the Autobiographies of Rick Bragg and Harry Crews,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 53, 1 (Winter 1999–2000), 89–110, 92.

⁵² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 292.

⁵³ Bragg is currently a returned native, now living and working back in the South as a Writing Professor at the University of Alabama.

so far away he couldn't come and rescue me . . . With presents like that, you can ratchet yourself firmly into place, and remember who you are."⁵⁴ The idea of returning to the South through objects is fraught with the notion of a consumable regional identity. Harvey would term this a need for "secure moorings in a shifting world," in what he refers to as a search for "Place-identity." He argues that "Place-identity, in this collage of superimposed spatial images that implode in upon us, becomes an important issue, because everyone occupies a space of individuation (a body, a room, a house, a shaping community, a nation), and how we individuate ourselves shapes identity."⁵⁵ Yet achieving place-identity through material possessions may only ever be a search for a "real" or "authentic" past through the process of consumption.

However, this is not to imply that there is no complexity within Bragg's rendering of labor both in *Ava's Man* and across the body of his memoirs. While for Bragg the tools may represent forced connections with the past, in his accounts of Charlie and Sam, men who possess the actual skills required to utilize the tools, the objects retain their use-value. As Bragg details the men's skills he draws attention to the workers' hands.

Bragg defines Charlie as a "man who worked with nails in his teeth and a roofing hatchet in a fist as hard as Georgia brick,"⁵⁶ offering one of many descriptions of Charlie's hands that point to the solidity and autochthony of Charlie's labor. If, as Janet Zandy argues, "Hands are microcosms of the whole human,"⁵⁷ then the repeated descriptions of Charlie's hands are central not only to Bragg's characterization of his grandfather but also to his wider concern with labor.

Charlie's labor is embedded into the very fiber of his skin, and such embedded traces of labor are also reflected in Sam, who has "the permanent stain of grease on his hand, under his skin."⁵⁸ When Bragg describes Charlie's funeral he writes that his mother, Margaret, could not look at Charlie's face, and as she paused beside her daddy, she looked instead at his hands. The undertaker had dressed him in a blue suit, but the hands did not belong to a man who wore suits. His hands were rough and scarred and calloused, his nails thick and cracked, his knuckles and the joints in his fingers red and swollen, from the work.⁵⁹

While the damage to Charlie's hands may be considered a sign of the disfiguration of the laboring body, Bragg employs the signs of Charlie's labor to dispel the idea of poor hands as idle hands. Charlie's hands do not, for

⁵⁴ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 214.

⁵⁵ Harvey, 302.

⁵⁶ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 7.

⁵⁷ Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), xi.

⁵⁸ Bragg, *The Most They Ever Had*, 7.

⁵⁹ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 233.

Bragg, simply represent the degradation caused by manual labor, but instead, "His hands are about power and survival."⁶⁰ Bragg is involved in what Zandy calls the reconnection "of the metaphorically dismembered working hand to the whole body."⁶¹ Bragg compounds the significance of Charlie's hands as he goes beyond the move from hand to body, to consider the generational inheritance of labor practices.

The words that Bragg uses to describe Charlie's actions, "slapping," and "pounding," echo his description in *Shoutin'* of Sam's outlook on life and work: "Sam believes in taking life in his two hands and squeezing and pounding it until it gives you something, even if it's just a little bit. But the important thing is to keep squeezing, keep pounding, keep working."⁶² Throughout his work Bragg seeks not simply to highlight this generational inheritance of labor practices, but more significantly to memorialize that labor.

In doing so, Bragg becomes part of what, for Derek H. Alderman, is "a growing number of marginalized populations" that are "seeking public recognition."⁶³ Since Bragg believes that the Depression was "our time of heroes and martyrs, and our monuments are piled neatly on the ground," throughout his memoir trilogy he sets himself the task of pulling up those monuments and parading them in full view, creating new, textual memorials in the process.⁶⁴ As Brundage suggests, "By insinuating their memory into public space, groups exert the cultural authority, express the collective solidarity, and achieve a measure of the permanence that they often crave."⁶⁵

However, the southern memorial landscape has long been determined by a privileged white memory and, as Cobb notes, "At many historical sites across the South, the very existence of slavery had been obscured and even obliterated."⁶⁶ Recently, however, the South has witnessed a steady increase in the number and range of commemorations to black history and leading black figures. In Richmond, for example, a city defined by Tony Horwitz as "a vast cenotaph of secession,"⁶⁷ Monument Avenue is now home to the 1996 monument to local tennis hero Arthur Ashe. Yet Brundage stresses,

⁶⁰ Daisy Hernández, "My Father's Hands," in Michelle Tea, ed., *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class* (Emeryville: Seal, 2003), 49–57, 50.

⁶¹ Zandy, 2. ⁶² Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 27.

⁶³ Derek H. Alderman, "New Memorial Landscapes in the American South: An Introduction," *Professional Geographer*, 52, 4 (2000), 658–60, 658.

⁶⁴ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 95.

⁶⁵ W. Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

⁶⁶ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 303.

⁶⁷ Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 242.

“Controversies in the South will continue not only over what parts of the past should be memorialized but also how do to so.”⁶⁸

Certainly, for Bragg, poor white labor stands as a gaping absence within this memorial South. As Toby Moore details, this absence is being addressed across “the Southern Piedmont, from Virginia to Birmingham,” where “communities are for the first time inscribing into their landscapes a memorialization of the region’s cotton textile past, and thus of its industrialization.”⁶⁹ While Bragg’s *The Most They Ever Had* explores the lives of mill workers in Jacksonville, Alabama, including his brother Sam, this blue-collar labor does not fully cover the experiences of the poor whites that constitute Bragg memoirs. As outlined earlier, Bragg focusses on artisan labor, in particular on Charlie’s carpentry. Although Charlie briefly worked in the steel plant in Gadsden, Alabama before the Depression, Bragg concentrates on the labor that cannot be found in industrial records.

His memoirs, then, act as memorials to everyday, laborious ways of life. Notably in *Ava’s Man*, Bragg twice refers to conversations with local men, and family members, recounting their claims that Charlie

was a damn rascal, all right, but he was their damn rascal, and they ought to stick a statue of him smack-dab in the middle of the square in Jacksonville, Alabama, next to the Confederate soldier.

... “He ought to have a monument,” Travis says, “because there ain’t no more like him. All his kind are gone.”⁷⁰

Bragg knows that statues are rarely built to commemorate everyday working men, yet he ponders, “Imagine if . . . all the beloved men were cast in stone and propped up there, an army of men in overalls . . . and hobnailed boots, holding hammers and big wrenches and bolls of cotton in their hands.”⁷¹ In the absence of such memorials, Bragg’s writing must prop up Charlie and other family members, allowing him to insinuate “his memory” into the “public space.” Since Bragg knows that there will never be a concrete monument to Charlie alongside Civil War monuments that stand as the white South’s central sites for collective remembering, then his texts must stand as memorial.

Civil War monuments are among the forms of historical remembrance that Pierre Nora terms *lieux de mémoire*. For Nora, “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”⁷² Bragg’s memoirs oscillate uneasily between these

⁶⁸ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 18.

⁶⁹ Toby Moore, “Emerging Memorial Landscapes of Labor Conflict in the Cotton Textile South,” *Professional Geographer*, 52 (2000), 684–96, 684.

⁷⁰ Bragg, *Ava’s Man*, 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁷² Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 7–25, 7.

two camps: his outrage at the lack of monuments (*lieux de mémoire*) for poor white laborers spurs his retreat into family memories and anecdotes (*milieux de mémoire*) that ultimately result in those familial “reserves of memory” becoming textual artifacts to be consumed in a period marked by a “vogue for personalized documents.”⁷³ In recent years the increased demand for memoirs and autobiographies reveals a consumer appetite for “real” memory. As William Zinsser explains, the memoir is “the perfect product of our confessional times . . . Today no remembered episode is too sordid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the wonderment of the masses in books and magazines and on talk shows.”⁷⁴ For instance, in the Prologue to *Ava's Man* Bragg addresses this consumer desire when he claims that he wrote that memoir, in part, to appease readers of *Shoutin'* who demanded to know more about his maternal grandparents.

The past is, of course, “a valuable commodity,”⁷⁵ and historical memory is subject “to the whims of the market.”⁷⁶ So when Bragg envisages photographs of one of his childhood homes collected in a “coffee-table book,” because that is “where a big part of the Old South is, on coffee tables in Greenwich Village,” it is important to recognize that his memoirs may be the perfect accompaniment to such a “coffee-table book.”⁷⁷ Bragg straddles a fine line, then, between writing his family's past in order to undermine preexisting narratives about poor whites, and offering up peculiar slices of southern life for a mass readership; when personal memories become big business the concern is always as Martyn Bone neatly outlines: “‘Cents of place’ may well have been substituted for ‘sense of place’.”⁷⁸

These issues raise the question of what is at stake when writing a memoir, so that *Ava's Man*, with its dependence on memories and Bragg's imaginative reconstruction of his grandfather, is a complex memorial to Charlie and the labor of poor white men. Certainly, in that text Bragg reenacts Charlie's life, using words to experience a “period rush” commonly associated with Civil War reenactments. In *Confederates in the Attic* Tony Horwitz details the reenactments of a “hardcore,” many of whom lose weight in order to “achieve the gaunt, hollow-eyed look of underfed Confederates.” The extreme lengths

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7, 24. A timely consideration of the recent market interest in memoirs and autobiographies can be found in James Atlas, “Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir Is Now,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 May 1996.

⁷⁴ William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 3. ⁷⁵ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 18.

⁷⁶ David W. Blight, “Epilogue: Southerners Don't Lie; They Just Remember Big,” in Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 347–53, 350. ⁷⁷ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 67.

⁷⁸ Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 51.

individuals go to in order to capture an “authentic” experience are embodied in Rob Hodge, who “favored total immersion in soldiery misery.”⁷⁹

Despite the “misery,” the romance of Civil War reenactment depends upon the notion of a return to “a simpler time.”⁸⁰ Bragg reveals similar sentiments throughout his texts as he romanticizes Depression-era lives in his rail against the onslaught of modernization and globalization. Bragg certainly risks romanticizing the Depression and the masculine bodies of men like Charlie, claiming, “The realities of this new, true South are not as romantic as in Charlie’s time, as bleak and painful as that time was for people of his class.”⁸¹ Despite his recognition of the difficulties of that time, Bragg seems to offer a nostalgic account of a time and place when, as his memoir suggests, men were men.

As he creates textual memorials Bragg indulges in forms of literary reenactment as he resurrects dead family members, most notably Charlie. As stated earlier, Bragg, unlike his brother Sam, never met his grandfather and as a result has created his own inheritance, something he attempts by putting *Ava’s Man* together, stating, “since I never really had a grandfather, I decided to make me one.”⁸² Bragg’s description of textually fabricating Charlie echoes the language of construction, cementing the idea of the narrative as monument.

There is a risk, as Bragg invests Charlie with particular values, that his reenactment becomes a reproduction as he reproduces the figure of a grandfather that he needs as much as a grandfather that ever existed. To this end, *Ava’s Man*, in its search for roots and the “authentic,” may only ever provide a facsimile of the southern poor, honest, white, workingman. What Bragg continually struggles against in his writing is what Moore defines as “a landscape of production” in which “old signs of class struggle and conflict are subsumed by nostalgic reinterpretations of a problematic past into a more easily consumed commodity.”⁸³ Bragg’s desire to believe in a better, simpler time risks dehistoricizing the actualities of poor white hardships.

In particular, nostalgia, and a reactionary tone against a changing South, appear to underpin much of *Ava’s Man*. C. Vann Woodward notes that “nostalgia has been democratized, so that millions now seek roots and ancestors . . . in quest of ‘heritage,’” but he warns that “yearning for a past creates all sorts of mischief.”⁸⁴ If mischief arises in Bragg’s trilogy then it firmly belongs in the complexity of his nostalgic turns as he utilizes a neo-Agrarian rhetoric when building textual monuments to his family.

⁷⁹ Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic*, 12, 16.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸¹ Bragg, *Ava’s Man*, 249.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸³ Moore, “Emerging Memorial Landscapes,” 685.

⁸⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *The Future of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), viii.

In a complex move, Bragg's attempt to recast his family in a new light depends upon a narrative that excluded his poor white forebears from an ideal version of the South. While Agrarians such as Andrew Nelson Lytle celebrated the yeoman farmer whose hard work toiling the land appealed to their sensibilities, the Bragg family were the type or class of poor whites who in their transience during the Depression, and in their status as nonlandowners, are typically regarded as an anomaly in any vision of the South.

Yet across his memoir writing Bragg expresses an obvious concern, one that carries echoes of the Agrarians' reactionary sentiments, for the ways in which the South has changed under the pressures of capitalization and globalization, a concern that may account for the elegiac tone that pervades large sections of his trilogy. For Bragg, the sense of a lost way of life becomes most clear when he thinks of Charlie. The new South to which Bragg refers is one where "the character of little towns" has been "murdered by generic sub-divisions and generic fast foods restaurants," a world in which "Southernness became a fashion" and where "men wear their camouflage deer-hunting clothes to the mall because they thought it looked cool."⁸⁵

Bragg's fears for this homogenized South appear, at least on the surface, to ground his writing in what Martyn Bone refers to as "a neo-Agrarian aesthetic of anti-development."⁸⁶ Bragg echoes Lytle's hypothetical account of a farming family whose life is hindered rather than helped by industry in certain sections of *Ava's Man*. At one point he writes,

For Charlie, the Tennessee Valley Authority was no blessing. It changed his river to create huge backwaters that swallowed houses and pasture fences and old barns, and pretty soon city people were building second houses on the banks, and "fish camps" that had electricity and refrigerators and radios that blared out into the darkness.⁸⁷

As this quote suggests, Bragg's memoir is not simply a tale about a dead grandfather, but of a dead, or dying, culture, a point captured in a number of poor white memoirs, most notably in Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. Unlike Ray, Bragg is not an overt environmentalist, yet there can be little doubt of his mourning for an imagined landscape.⁸⁸

While the nostalgic turns in Bragg's texts may veer towards neo-Agrarian sentiments, he simultaneously destabilizes the exclusionary Agrarian concept of regional culture. In effect, Bragg opens up the Agrarians to the micro-narratives that are now shaping the contemporary South, and as he situates poor whites in the center of the southern community he turns heavily to Charlie's values. In the Prologue to *Ava's Man* Bragg claims that the main

⁸⁵ Bragg, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, 5, 6.

⁸⁷ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 195.

⁸⁸ Janisse Ray, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999).

⁸⁶ Bone 245.

reason behind his decision to write his grandfather's story was "to give one more glimpse into a vanishing culture."⁸⁹ When Bragg writes about Charlie, then, he is not merely trying to save and memorialize "the stories of a man that history would otherwise have ignored," but also eulogizing the southern traditions that his grandfather embodied, traditions and skills that are denied to poor whites in many of the demeaning and derogatory depictions of that class.⁹⁰

Bragg makes clear that "men like Charlie are gone," employing Charlie to comment on the vacuous nature of his own contemporary South, rendering his grandfather a symbol of an "authentic" past.⁹¹ Towards the close of the narrative Bragg describes how he has recast Charlie: "now I have a picture of my grandfather, one so much finer than torn black-and-white, I imagine him always in summer, always in his boat made from two car hoods welded together, feeling for the mud and sand of the bottom with the end of his pole. The boat glides and glides."⁹² Here Charlie is both outside and distinctly inside time, a never-ageing, un-dead Charlie, "always" stranded on a boat in a quasi-1930s South. Cast in this mold, Charlie acts as a stable force for Bragg as he seeks to counter the changes in his own contemporary South.

In writing the memoir, Bragg has arguably attempted to appease his own guilt for being the one who escaped, the one who does not have to engage in manual labor, the one whose hands do not carry the traces of that labor. Yet central to all three of Bragg's autobiographical texts is also the assertion that poor white labor has been consistently undervalued in a region steeped in grand narratives of the Confederate dead. Brundage suggests that

if southerners speak freely, respect difference, deliberate collectively, and reject categorical claims that employ stark oppositions, they may avoid the divisions that have contaminated southern public life for most of the past century and a half. With time and commitment, they may enlist the region's public spaces to foster a heterogeneous public life rather than division and alienation.⁹³

Bragg's memoirs contain all of the complexity and tensions necessary to create a more "heterogeneous" conception of the southern community. His poor whites are multifaceted characters who trouble the "stark oppositions" that have kept poor whites locked in an underclass, rendered trashy and unworthy. Nostalgia may plague his writing, but his continued focus on poor white labor helps to rewrite the narratives of a class too often caricatured or excluded from central conceptions of the southern community.

⁸⁹ Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 13.

⁹² Bragg, *Ava's Man*, 245.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹³ Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 342–43.