

## “Finding Your Way When Lost”: Class and the American Girl

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*Abstract: This paper looks at the disappearance of working-class women from the dominant imaginary of literary and popular fiction and argues that this figure has been displaced by a contemporary interest in girlhood. I analyze contemporary fictions of young white women that engage with and challenge ideas of normative American girlhood in late capitalism, showing how the texts take up issues of sexual oppression and pathology, maternal failure, and consumerism that sometimes destabilize but more often normalize economic oppression.*

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In February 2016, the *Huffington Post* published a blog entry by Leo Girard, the International President of United Steelworkers, entitled “TPP would further Emasculate America,” in which America’s working-class past is mourned as an emasculation — its once “big shoulders” now “stooped” as “America’s tool makers and freight car builders are furloughed.” This imagining of the American working-class in masculine terms is not new, but it is surprising to see such an uncritical association of working America with masculinity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the past forty years, this frame for understanding the intersection of class, labor and gender has been disrupted by new economic structures, civil rights movements, and feminism. As yet, as historian Elizabeth Faue has argued, until recently even labor historians “remained committed to an understanding of class consciousness as class politics that was public, production-centered, and predominantly white and male” (20). Similarly, in her essay, “Class Absences,” Vivyan Adair argues that the working class has most often been symbolized by “families with male heads of households” those “rough,” “diligent workers” that “embody and enjoy independence, legal heterosexuality, autonomy, logic, and order . . . ‘respectability. . . frugality, decency and self-discipline’” (25). These traditional depictions put distance between the working class and more diverse but also more stigmatized images associated with those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Moreover, these popular images often hold in place the associations of class and whiteness so that working class iconicity is not only resolutely masculine, but historicized through the white racial frame.<sup>[1]</sup> Adair asks us to consider the consequences of imagining class oppression in terms of “white male injury” for the poor women who are excluded from this image of class oppression and more likely to be portrayed as economic and sexual deviants.<sup>[2]</sup>

Comparably, the best-selling works of Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* and Hannah Rosin’s *The End of Men* gave recession-era prominence to stories of professional working women on the rise, but these texts are relatively free of the images and voices of working-class and poor women.<sup>[3]</sup> Focused on the rise of women in the corporate workplace and the “end of men,” these authors marginalize the stories of women who work at the bottom of the economic pyramid. No images that match those of the past such as Dorothea Lange’s Depression-era *Migrant Mother* or the based on a true story 1970s film *Norma Rae* have emerged as iconic representations of laboring women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>[4]</sup> Instead, cultural interest in working-class women seems to have been displaced by an attentiveness to the lives of girls.

As Anita Harris summarizes in her book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*: “Since the early 1990s young womanhood has become a topic central to debates within Western societies about cultural and economic change. Popular culture, public policy, academic inquiry, and the private sector are now interested in young women in ways that are quite unprecedented” (13). She uses the contrasting images of the “can-do” and the “at-risk” girl to explore dominant ways of thinking about girlhood in the contemporary West. According to Harris, the new “intense interest” in girl “suggests that what it means to prevail or lose out in these new times has become bound up with how we understand girlhood” (14). She defines the “can-do” girl as “‘girls with the world at their feet’ . . . identifiable by their commitment to exceptional careers and career planning, their belief in their capacity to invent themselves and succeed, and their display of a consumer lifestyle” (14). On the other hand, the “at-risk” girl is “alienated” and “se destructively,” engaged in “inappropriate consumer behaviors” and sexual risk taking.

Harris argues that this framing of girls tends to focus on narratives of individual empowerment in which young women’s economic and cultural dominance is the norm, and, thus, these cultural positions “are never articulated as classed and raced positions” (Harris 34). Harris points out that not only are the structural causes of young women’s poverty ignored, but that the girls’ economic and social contributions are systemically exploited for the purposes of cultural and economic profit. In the “at-risk” discourse, girls threaten the “desired futures” of capital (Peter Kelly qtd. in Harris 25) rather than being necessary to the functioning of capitalist hierarchy. This discourse assumes that a good future — defined by the dominant values of capitalist patriarchy — is available to all. Harris attributes the hegemony of this discourse to the developing structures of neoliberalism with policies and rhetoric that assimilate young women into competitive structures of the marketplace and the pleasures of consumerism; both policies and rhetoric compel them to avoid forms of collective organizing against injustice that might jeopardize their carefully cultivated ambitions and future economic security.

In this paper, I examine some of the ways that this discourse of the “at-risk” girl structures contemporary literary fiction and how these fictions represent the economic and social conditions of working-class life in terms of its coding of sexual pathology and family dysfunction as the dangers that must be managed by the “at-risk” girl. If, as Sarah Projansky argues, the can-do/at-risk dichotomy codes a mostly unarticulated whiteness and heteronormativity (9), then it is also a means of folding structures of economic domination into the imaginary construct of girlhood and ignoring the increasing inequality among women.<sup>[5]</sup>

This imaginary is perfectly illustrated in a recent American Girl Doll campaign that seems to promote the identity of “girl” over and above any other axis of identity. The campaign’s commercial, “The Pledge,” is based on the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States’ flag, so the voiceover narration of the girl speaker has the rhythm and cadence of that pledge:



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*"I pledge my strength to the team of girls and girlhood everywhere and to the brilliance and bravery for which we stand . . . I pledge my loyalty to the crew who have each others' backs especially when our backs are against the wall. I pledge my friendship to the tribe, to inside jokes told in outside voices and rallying cries told as whispers. I pledge my laughter to the party with late night plots to change the world made over giggles and popcorn. I pledge my voice to millions and millions of one in a million girls, one girlhood, indivisible, with infinite potential. For all." (my italics)*

It opens with a young white girl, plainly dressed in striped shirt, facing the camera. As she recites the pledge in voiceover, a multitude of complementary scenes of mostly girls flash across the screen: girls raising lacrosse sticks in the air, wearing rollerblading helmets, conducting science experiments, hugging a horse, dancing, roaming in the woods, enjoying a slumber party and doing flag team drills. As she says, "especially when our backs are against the wall" we get the only scene of distress: a young woman wearing a prom dress cries in a school bathroom and is comforted by other girls.

As a representation of the "can-do" girl, this advertising campaign engages in capitalist modes of feminist appropriation as commodity, which frame women's empowerment through specific channels of bourgeois individualism, divorcing personal empowerment from feminism as a social and political movement, including its attentiveness to economic oppression.<sup>[6]</sup> While there is some surface diversity in the commercial, it is predominantly white and body normative, obviously more concerned with blurring boundaries of conventional femininity and masculinity in terms of activities and in celebrating girlhood solidarity than on transformational images that challenge such commonalities.

The commercial offers a model of healthy consumption for girls, promoting the American Girl doll as a symbol of girl solidarity-but also as symbol of an already constituted collective that connotes merit and achievement: the team, the crew, the tribe. Like the pledge that it mimics it has the pedagogical purpose of creating the "imaginary community" it invokes. Using the structure of the Pledge of Allegiance also ensures its emotional appeal; the rhythm of the pledge is internalized by most public school girls in the United States, implicitly tying the brand to the kind of bourgeois nationalism represented by the scenes of the commercial. The few homes that appear suggest the timeless order of the outer American suburb or countryside; the girls are most often pictured in the "great outdoors," enjoying spring-like weather. There is something of Benedict Anderson's notion of nation-time being invoked here as girl-time, the invocation of the "imagined community" created through a sharing of discursive images, the construction of a collective myth. As Anderson argues about the imagined community of the nation, "Finally, it is imagined as a *community* because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may occur in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (7). The "one girlhood" imagery becomes a synecdoche for the nation, demonstrating the corporation's interest in linking its product to a specific set of national values through this imagery, that set of values it closely associates with the aspirational or educated-bourgeois family/consumer. It also forms the basis for a prior unity of classlessness in the identity of "girl," suggesting a tribe that moves through "homogenous, empty time" in choreographed formation.<sup>[7]</sup>

In many ways, the novels analyzed here put this imaginary into the background and act as class interrogations of the notion that girlhood itself is something to consume as a set of experiences that through oaths of allegiance might be accessible to all and might unify all. They raise to the surface questions about girlhood in the United States that consumerist models of feminism not only obscure but maintain through their glossy pictures of pastoral America as a magical site in which a happily diverse femininity already exists. However, these authors also draw on tropes of the "at-risk" girl that demonstrate its discursive power for occluding patriarchal class oppression in the service of managing particular kinds of girls as themselves representing a risk we, can-do American girls, must manage. Moreover, all of these novels focus on white working-class femininity, partly as a sign of their distance from the multicultural imaginary girl-nation that presents diversity as classless, raceless unity, as a sign of the health of the nation, sidestepping questions of hierarchy by presupposing a prior unity across difference.

I've chosen these novels because despite the diversity of genre, they all demonstrate the power of the frame that Harris identifies as hegemonic. These particular literary fictions, however, are textual performances of the displacement of working-class women from popular discourses of gender work, and class in the twenty-first century. Their representation of "at-risk" girls is also a representation of working-class adult female characters who fade into a narrative irrelevance that reflects their marginalization in the national imaginary of the future — and the historical imaginary of gendered

class oppression as it is represented in blogs such as Leo Girard's. These fictions deviate from the American Girl campaign and similar popular constructions of girlhood in their representation of girls' affective encounters with capitalist patriarchy as debt shifted onto the girls' shoulders as the social and economic infrastructure crumbles around them.

These fictions also deviate from late twentieth- and early twenty-first century films and novels that take up current economic conditions of precarity and engage with the "homogenous, empty time" of capital from its cosmopolitan or corporate center.<sup>[8]</sup> To be at-risk is to be vulnerable, in need of care and regulation, but because these characters threaten the utopian imaginary of girl-time, the novels are more accurately defined as working-class fiction, using the definition of writer D.D. Johnston, "as fiction that examines and antagonises the tensions inherent in capitalist society." The first novel I examine performs this antagonism most directly by interrogating the institutions of girlhood and their invocations of normative middle-class femininity.

Tupelo Hassman's *Girlchild* (2012) situates itself firmly at the intersection of class and gender in its representation of the "can-do" girl as a gendered construction that conceals patriarchal class oppression. Its protagonist Rory Dawn grows up in a Reno trailer park (the Calle) with her waitress mother Jo. Rory's devotion to the *Girl Scout Handbook* is established early in the novel and her juxtaposition of selections from the *Handbook* with her own experiences, her mother's stolen social services file, and with her grandmother and mother's stories demonstrates the limits of the American Girl version of the girl. The Girl Scouts is the historical antecedent to the commercialized can-do girl, drawing on similar images of health, wellbeing, activeness and solidarity as the principles of the girl pledge.<sup>[9]</sup> The *Handbook's* model of constant, linear achievement and preparedness acts as a text of middle-class normalcy that Rory looks to for help as she attempts to protect herself from the social world that threatens to negate her.

Rory checks the *Handbook* out of the library and faithfully reads its advice on such subjects as "the Disposal of Outgrown Uniforms," "The Right Us of Your Body," and "Finding Your Way When Lost" although nothing seems to apply to her own world and the only other member of her troop is her imaginary friend Vivian. Rory's "at-risk" status is signified by the distance between the imaginary girlhood of the *Handbook* and the realities of being girl on the Calle. The *Handbook* is a solace because it does promise her access to the imagined community of girlhood solidarity and control so different from her own isolated and silent powerlessness: "I hold onto my *Handbook* because nothing else makes promises like that around here, promises with these words burning inside them: *honor, duty and try*. . . . these words never ever show their faces together and much less inside a promise" (44).

The book's advice doesn't provide the guidance Rory needs so its promise is ultimately hollow, a set of fictions written about and for other girls. This dissonance is made clear in the *Girlchild* chapter entitled "Girl Scout Laws" that nevertheless fails to mention the *Handbook* in its content. Instead the chapter is a sorrowful reflection on the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution and its importance on the Calle. It is in this chapter, midway through the book, that young Rory begins to assert her perspective in resistance to the institutional structures that categorize her as a girl "at-risk." On the Calle Rory tells us,

The Fourth Amendment hangs from the doors of the scariest houses . . . Homes whose wiring and plumbing are gutted for quick cash from the junkman . . . whose inhabitants are known by their burnt fingertips, their bruises, and long sleeves in summer. . . . These are the folks who tape the Fourth Amendment to the front door believing in its promise. (127)

Rory breaks with the world of false promises that the Fourth Amendment and the Girl Scout Laws represent and realizes that their lack of applicability to her life signifies a judgment against her family. She tells readers that her mother, already suffering depression from an early marriage to an abusive husband, is further derailed when firemen find marijuana in her home while putting out a fire:

The Officer made short shrift of the Constitution, and ignoring the devastation on [my brothers'] faces. . . he took [our] mama away. And she never quite made it back. . . . Despite the promises of equal opportunity and protection under the law. . . that night her arrest record got all shuffled up with her social services record, and soon the childcare she got so she could go to college was canceled, and with it her courses, and Mama went back to the school of hard knocks. (129)

Instead of Girl Scout advice about what to do when the police come and take your mother away to jail, we get an excerpt from the social service file reporting that Jo's problems are caused by intergenerational poverty and low intelligence: the report is an archival piece detailing the history that categorizes Rory as at-risk from Jo's irresponsibility.

Rory has stolen the file and is constantly reframing its stories of her mother, placing Jo back within her own sympathetic view. She knows that school officials see Jo through a prism of normative femininity that Jo has no access to. She revises a record that would define her mother as irresponsible, bad mother, a weak woman of bad habits. In the end, Rory learns that getting off the Calle means giving up a belief in constitutions, handbooks, social service files and recognizing the construct of imagined girlhood as another form of violence because it blames the women in her family for the violence they suffer.

In *Girlchild*, Rory's sexual abuse occurs despite Jo's attempts to protect Rory; damaged by her own abusive father, Jo resents her own mother, preventing Rory's grandmother from taking care of her. The Hardware Man's sexual assault of Rory means that she must struggle all the harder against being labeled as deviant as her single mother:

In the fairy tales there's only one Big Bad Wolf and the little girl takes only one trip through the Dark Forest and fights only one fight for her life before the story ends in happily and ever after. But life on the Calle is real and every Calle girl knows that once the My-What-Big-Paws-You-Have fall on her skin, Little Red will carry that scent no matter how hard she scrubs. (54)

However much Rory presents her mother from a sympathetic perspective, she is aware that social workers, cops, and school authorities see her mother as carrying “that scent” of pathology that marks Rory at-risk.

*Girchild's* narrator directly questions characterizations of the “at-risk” girl, but other novels about young working-class girls incorporate the can-do/risk dichotomy as a means of typifying individual characters. One trait that these “at-risk” girls share is a femininity characterized by disordered sexuality related to maternal failure. This is a key theme in *Girchild* as well as Daniel Woodrell's young adult novel *Winter's Bone* (2007) and Lindsay Hunter's *Ugly Girls* (2015).<sup>10</sup> However, these narratives portray more ambivalence about traditional representations that code daughters “at-risk” for their mother's disordered femininity in which the mother is unable to secure a stable heteronormative family for the daughter and, thus, the patriarchal protection this is imagined to afford white girls.

In *Winter's Bone*, the mother barely exists as a character. Like Rory's mother, she cannot overcome her past and assimilate to the shifting fortunes of her family. A faded beauty with an unnamed mental illness, she is “lost to the present” (6); she cannot cope with daily life and instead lives as a ghost in the home the family has inherited from her parents and that is as faded as she is. *Winter's Bone* closes the distance between the “can-do” and the “at-risk” girl in its representation of poor white Ree. Her ability to endure and her loyalty to her family harkens back to images of Appalachian women who are capable in both masculine and feminine roles: Ree kills and cleans squirrels as well as she cooks, wears dresses and chops wood, and changes diapers in a moving truck. She tells her starving preadolescent brothers, “Never. Never ask for what ought to be offered” (5). Her survival is not in question, only whether or not she can keep family and farm given the physical disappearance of her father and the mental and emotional absence of her mother. One of Ree's strengths is her ability to negotiate the everyday harassment she experiences as an adolescent girl alone in the world. When she goes out to search for her father, she enters precincts that are male-dominated. Women who might want to help her, do not or cannot because of this hierarchy. But Ree's ability to defend herself against constant sexual threat becomes a measure of her can-do character instead of an indictment of the oppression she suffers.

The focus on sexuality in these novels is an important component of representing the girl as “at risk.” As Rita Felski notes, traditional representation of the white working-class family have been “set against (and thus dependent upon) ‘sexualized images of lower-class women's bodies’” (27). In *Ugly Girls*, bored and pretty Perry adopts her mother's sexual behavior with disastrous results. On the surface, Perry has the most stable home life of any the working-class girl characters discussed here. Her prison guard stepfather Jim and convenience store clerk mother Myra provide economic security and stability; someone is always home for Perry. But Myra is as faded and ghostlike as Ree's mother. Myra's fading beauty, her alcoholism, and fear of being alone rule her life, making her indifferent to Perry. Myra believes that with her beauty she should have been able to extract more from life than nights of loneliness; but she doesn't want to spend those evenings with her daughter, it's the young man who comes around at night that interests her, even though it is Perry he wants. Myra is a victimized predator, forcing herself on young men to prove that she is still sexy. Seeing no other value in herself, she sees no other value and encourages no other values in her own daughter. Perry and her mother are both at risk — sexual promiscuous, stealing, drinking beer, eating fast food and microwave dinners; they exist in a wasteland of dependency, boredom, and narcissism.

*Winter's Bone*, in contrast, marks Ree's worthiness partly by her aloofness from men and, her lack of interest in heterosexuality and boys. Ree experiences intimacy and solace only with her friend Gail, a teen mother wedded to a young dictator who refuses to give up his girlfriend. The love Ree has for Gail is muted by the patriarchal structure of their world, in which fathers represent economic, familial, and physical resources. In both novels, sexuality is depicted as a risk that must be managed. It is a test that Ree passes and that Perry and her friend Dayna fail. While the relationship of Gail and Ree is limited by the constraints of heteronormativity and male power, the friendship between Perry and Dayna implodes because of the girls' overwhelming desire for intimacy and inability to achieve it.

In *Ugly Girls*, Dayna (aka Baby Girl) becomes obsessed with a boy she meets online who flirts with her and seems to care for her; unknown to the girl Jamey is a felon who has already been convicted of raping a teenage girl and lives with his mother in the same trailer park as Perry. He visits Myra a night and develops a social media connection with Dayna, because he is stalking Perry. In *Ugly Girls*, “youth” and “sexuality” are directly connected ideal white femininity as the only mode of empowerment. In her worst moments, the “pretty” Perry consoles herself that she is not Dayna, “bald, fat, ugly”:

But when she looked in the mirror now she saw that she was different. Smudge of Myra. Faded and fading. And then she allowed the thought she allowed whenever she felt like she might be disappearing: *Least I ain't Baby Girl*. Bloom of relief. She could get through this past it. No more than a tick on her timeline. Just had to stay strong till the next tick. (176-77)

Perry may be “fading” but she is in step with girl-time; she is not a “can-do” girl, but her ability to meet the demands of white normative femininity, including innocence and beauty, means that she possesses as a form of respectability offered by Jim's protection; she mostly avoids the kind of scrutiny that Baby Girl suffers.

However, Perry's mirroring of Myra and her association with Baby Girl threaten to cut her off completely from the world of the respectable white working-class represented by the male work ethics of Jim and her crush Travis. Perry is highly conscious of appearances and the ways in which people construct images. The opening of the novel lingers on Perry's awareness of the falsity of those around her: she figures the red Mazda “belonged to someone who wanted to look fancy but couldn't squeeze enough out of her sad rag of a paycheck. Like how for years Myra, her moth kept a dinged-up Corvette because it was red and two-door” (3). Similarly, readers first see Baby Girl/Dayna through Perry's gaze as a “Fake-ass thug.” Nevertheless, “Sometimes it seemed mean thoughts were all Perry had for Baby Girl, but when she caught sight of herself in the side mirror she saw she was doing all the same shit” (3). It is these internal resemblances to Baby Girl and Myra that make Perry feel ugly, although the book suggests that it is *her* inner ugliness (her mean thoughts) that help bring about Dayna's death.

Pretty girl Perry is “like some kind of garden fairy,” so attractive that people question why she hangs with Dayna, but as Dayna notes, Perry is not perfect; she has “fixable problems but only if you had the money for it. And Perry didn’t. But neither did Baby Girl. Which was an important level to share” (11). Dayna is aware of Perry’s ability to be assimilated — at least in appearances — into the “one girlhood” imaginary of the American Girl di campaign, but *Ugly Girls* also dramatizes a more heterogeneous and hierarchical girl-time of the “at-risk” girl who is too ugly for such assimilation. That this ugliness may be a fabrication of the girl imaginary is the more difficult insight of the book.

*Ugly Girls* suggests some of the ways that race is articulated in stories of white working-class femininity; whiteness is co-articulated with class to he characterize the girls as “at-risk.” In these novels, it is the lack of diversity in their world that signals their isolation from “one girlhood.” The xenophobia of the village hangs over the landscape and signifies the cultural distance between the trailer parks and run-down Appalachian farmhouses and the well-ordered homes and natural scenes of “The Pledge.”

While Perry attempts to escape the confines of the trailer park by conforming to the dictates of an aspirational white femininity and getting a “boyfriend” who will be nice to her, Dayna assumes the nickname “Baby Girl,” shaves her head, and starts listening to gangsta rap; she and Perry c; their late-night joyriding and shoplifting “thuggin.” Dayna appropriates this commodified image of blackness without demonstrating any awareness its racial significance, but the Baby Girl moniker suggests an ambivalence about her own “thug” persona, an awareness that her mode of managing desire for intimacy and attention from boys, is just that, a tough persona adopted because she can never manage to achieve the conventional prettiness of Perry. Instead, she mimics the “thuggery” of her older brother Charles, a former car thief who has been in a helmet-less motorcycle accident, leaving him with permanent brain injuries. Charles’s sudden child-like dependence causes Baby Girl to adopt this masculine persona, listening to gangsta rap, telling random adults to “suck her dick,” and setting fires in the Walmart parking lot. At the same time, she responds to Jamey’s texts with a “smiley face, because it seemed more girly, less desperate for a response” (63).

The novel uses Dayna’s appropriation of “thug”-ness to demonstrate her distance from the girlhood represented by the subdivisions she and Perry crawl through at night; Baby Girl recognizes normative white femininity as a form of cultural capital: a malleable signifier of possibility that Perry has access to and she does not. This appropriation of commercialized blackness demonstrates her awareness of her distance from the girl-tribe imagin and thus shows antiblackness as a means of racializing class, a structuring power of racist capitalism that lacks thematization but is nevertheless recognizable.<sup>[11]</sup> Her version of oppositional expression is the inarticulate appropriation of a racialized and gendered struggle that is distinct from he own and that she misunderstands — even as it applies to her brother Charles. Only after Dayna has pushed Jamey to his death does she come to realize that Charles never killed anyone before his accident and that his car stealing was a means of easing their uncle’s financial burden. It is this realization that motivates her to tell the truth about Jamey’s death, feeling remorse that they left him to die alone in the woods — just as Charles wa left to die on the side of the freeway by indifferent motorists: “Charles hadn’t been who she thought he was. Neither had Jamey. Or Perry. She wouldn’t be like that. She would be who she was. She would say what she did” (217).

It is the landscape the girls of these novels share, however, that marks their common distance from the pastoralism of the girl imaginary: the dead ei nature of their stories. In these stories, the absence of a viable future is dramatized by the social geographies of the girls’ lives: trailers, bars, Walma and Denny’s, prisons, gated communities and crumbling farmhouses are the signifiers of late capitalism structuring the characters’ lives. As Don Mitchell argues, a central theme of working-class literature is not merely the lack of mobility, but the “lack of control over the conditions of mobility” (85). These landscapes disrupt the schema of pastoral nationalism to demonstrate the girls’ exposure to the unnamed effects of global capitalism. In contrast to the frenzied activity of the girl imaginary — running, skating, jumping, swimming — is the stultifying boredom of Perry and Dayna doing doughnuts in the Walmart parking lot and the long, cold marches in winter made by Ree. In *Winter’s Bone*, Ree’s home is located at the dead end of dirt driveway that is almost impassable. Rory’s trailer park is a forgotten “bust” in a country of booms and busts; her mother is run over by a car as she tries to walk home from work along a road never designed for pedestrians.

In all these books, the theme is not how to mature into adulthood or “plan” for the future, it is simply to find an on-ramp to a feeling of freedom from the debt represented by these landscapes. As Liam Connell notes in another context, debt is a familiar theme in the contemporary novel of precarity “debt shapes our notion of time because the present is inscribed by obligations that precede us in the form of accrued public debt and inscribes ou future behaviour by demanding compliance while the debt is serviced” (Connell 32). In Ree’s case, this debt is her father’s use of their house and timber-rich land for his bond, forcing Ree into the labor of care work for her mother and brothers’ and barring her from the mobility represented by tl army. In *Girlchild*, the Calle is crowded with gambling debts, legal fees, and trailers worth less than what the owners paid for them.

*Ugly Girls*’ social geography suggests connections between the trailer and the prison as similar spaces of surveillance, danger, and punishment for poor risk management. Perry lives off an exit ramp from the freeway and she and Baby Girl circle endlessly from one exit to another, from Circle K to Denny’s joyriding in cars on “busted-up highways” (3). She climbs out the trailer window at night to join Baby Girl in the aimlessness of joyriding. It i in these moments of risk that Perry feels the most allegiance with Baby Girl: “The lock went with a soft pop. For Perry, that pop was an exploding cosmos of possibility. White tails of glitter shooting out. It felt like she and Baby Girl were mirrors reflecting the light from the streetlamps. . . . They could do anything, go anywhere. They were light” (7). The car theft violates principles of property, class, and gender in one single moment; the properties of identity disappear as the girls become most reflective of that which is most threatening to them: the streetlights transformed for a moment from a mode of surveillance into a mode of mobility that lights their way. But the girls go nowhere; the novel ends in Perry’s cramped living room in a scene that is foreshadowed early in the text: “Every time she got to thinking like this it was like time stopped and froze her right where she sat. She’d never leave this shabby, unloved room. The Perry she was right then, that girl was trapped forever” (36). Similar to the teen mother Gail w is “glued to her spot” (31), Perry feels that, like Myra and Ree’s mother, she “might be disappearing” (176), “lost to the present” (6).

In an opposing image of resistance at the end of *Girlchild*, Rory sets her trailer ablaze and walks off the Calle to find her future:

Old trailers like mine are tinderboxes, firetraps, accidents waiting to happen, but even so, the Nobility is all I have. I can't sell it, can't bear to think of the examination, the assessment . . . . A trailer will burn in sixty seconds and I'm going to let it. . . . I don't own a watch so I keep my own time, count one alligator as I slip between streetlights and let all the beliefs of the Calle turn into ash, seven alligator and let the shadows of the Hardware Man turn into smoke, eight alligator as the smoke gathers and follows my beauty down the Calle to the pond and over those hills to whatever world is waiting for me out there. At twenty-five alligator a window bursts behind me, and I turn around just in time to see an ember escape the Nobility's core and rise up into the night air, shivering, bright and free. (270-71)

In this renunciation of the Calle, Rory recognizes the structuring dominance of the trailer as a capitalist effect that is then used to trap her as Other; 1 imagery here is similar to the imagery of the car theft scene in *Ugly Girls*. The rejection of bourgeois girl-time ("I don't own a watch") as she slips between the lights of surveillance and burns to the ground the stereotypical cage that traps her, demonstrates Rory's rejection of the dominant narratives, the social service and educational files that would require her to assimilate her story to girl-time narratives yet never free her.

But *Ugly Girls* and *Winter's Bone* end in the close confinements of the home. Baby Girl is shot by Jamey's mother like the fake thug that she is, while Pery assaults the nice boy who offered her friendship instead of sex. *Winter's Bone* ends optimistically when the bail bondsman hands over the cash from her dead father's bond. When her brothers ask what they will buy first, the novel ends on Ree's simple response: "wheels." But, of course, Pery and Rory both live in homes on wheels that go nowhere — and the final damning lines of *Ugly Girls* suggest the cruelty of being "at-risk" for going nowhere in a society that demands mobility. Dying on the floor of Pery's living room, Dayna imagines that she's actually going somewhere: "She pushed down on the gas. She was on her way to Charles. . . . She'd save him. She'd become him. . . . only she'd go further than he ever had, 'cause this was her car. It was her car this time" (229).

This combination of girl-time futurity and can-do-ness with the futility of Dayna's death seems unjustly punishing. But that's the point. It's not any of her "at-risk" behaviors that lead to Dayna's death, but her awareness of her need to grow up and take responsibility for her part in Jamey's death, her need to stop following Pery and follow her own "can-do" ways into adulthood. Her maturation into adulthood is also the moment of her death, just as Rory's burning down of the trailer signals the end to her story as it signals the end of the pathologizing at-risk/can-do paradigm that structures the representational framework of late capitalist femininity. Maybe in some other girls' story they will appear as the faded alcoholic Myra or Ree's fragile silent Ma, or Rory Dawn's luckless mother, Jo — displaced images of a patriarchal capitalist landscape, discarded minor characters in the future of girl-time. Each of these novels documents the fading of working-class women from the cultural imaginary; they are trapped, run over, shattered in bits and pieces by their encounters with capitalist patriarchy, the originary failure behind their daughter's "at-risk" status. There is no representational provision for these girls that mature into adulthood by departing from the future of the one-girlhood imaginary and into working-class womanhood.

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## Notes

1. The concept of the white racial frame is theorized by Joe Feagin.
2. See also the work of historians Kessler-Harris, Boris and Kleinberg, and Milkman. Many scholars in black feminist studies have analyzed the racist representation of black female poverty as sexual deviance; two examples are the works of Cohen and Hong. For a recent theorization of white male injury, see Hamilton Carroll. Milkman documents the increasing inequality among women in the United States. See Bettie's *Women without Class* for women's invisibility as classed subjects in social theory.
3. Tasker and Negra discuss these dominant representations in *Gendering the Recession*. I'm not sure I agree that the attentiveness to girls is unprecedented, but girls are being framed in ways that are different from previous eras. For instance, in the Progressive Era there was an obsession about the role of industrial capitalism in shaping the lives of *working girls*.
4. Florence Thompson, the woman who posed for Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," was Cherokee. Sally Stein discusses this "misrecognition" in "Passing Likeness: Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' and the Paradox of Iconicity."
5. There are some important ethnographic exceptions to this general dismissal of class and race in working girls lives. See, for example, Bettie's *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* which begins by deconstructing the white middle-class feminine norm at the heart of Mary Pipher's best-selling *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). Bettie argues that "it is not surprising that such a book would find much appeal in our culture, where popular understandings of social phenomena are dominated by individualistic, psychological explanations and routinely lack any consideration of the effect of social structural forces on individual lives" (5). For a recent discussion of class as a concept in literary studies, see Lawson.
6. Feminist theorists have used various terms to describe this appropriation of feminism; Rosalind Gill calls it "commodity feminism" and Andi Zeisler has recently termed it "marketplace feminism." It is, more generally, an aspect of the marketplace that de-politicizes collective movements, that neutralizes and appropriates social movements as "styles" "trends" or "brands."
7. I take this phrase from Anderson.
8. For a recent discussion of these novels and films, see Connell. These literary fictions are also very different from contemporary Chick Lit and its subgenre Mommy Lit, popular fictional genres similar to Sandberg's *Lean In* and Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* in their focus on the adult professional "can-do" girl and the pressures and anxiety of that cultural position. See Arosteguy for a relevant discussion of this literature.
9. Several scholars have written critiques of the American Girl doll as a socializing media. See scholar-artist Osei-Kofi for an overview of these critiques and her photographic "intervention" into the consumerist historical imaginary of the corporation (1). Perspectives on the Girl Scouts and girls' socialization vary widely. The organization has generally been seen as offering unconventional roles for girls and as an inclusive

organization, but it is also a form of Americanization and socialization into white middle-class *mores* (Auster, Hahner, Swetnam).

10. *Winter's Bone* was made into a film starring Jennifer Lawrence. Lawrence's career represents one odd dimension of how an interest in girls has displaced an interest in adult working-class women. In *Winter's Bone*, the *Hunger Games Trilogy*, and *Joy* she plays "working class" "can-do" characters, but her casting in the part of the much older character of Joy demonstrates the association of aspiration with youth, even when the story behind the movie is about an adult, divorced mother.
11. Discussions of the cultural appropriation of blackness, particularly in relation to rap music are numerous. See the work of Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal for a history of this commodification. More recent discussion has focused on the appropriation of hip hop by young white pop stars such as Miley Cyrus. The default in all of these novels is white, with *Ugly Girls* gesturing toward a more diverse if stereotypical world in the identification of Indian convenience store workers, black cops, and Hispanic visitors at the jail.

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