



Review of Sarah Robertson, Poverty Politics: Poor Whites in Contemporary Southern Writing.

Bone, Martyn

Published in:
MFS - Modern Fiction Studies

Publication date:
2021

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Bone, M. (2021). Review of Sarah Robertson, Poverty Politics: Poor Whites in Contemporary Southern Writing. *MFS - Modern Fiction Studies*, 47(3), 590-92.



PROJECT MUSE®

Poverty Politics: Poor Whites in Contemporary Southern

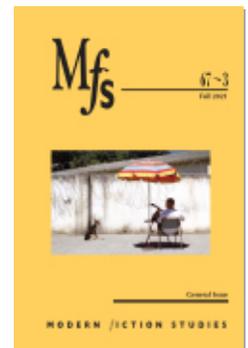
Writing by Sarah Robertson (review)

Martyn Bone

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 67, Number 3, Fall 2021, pp. 590-592
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2021.0029>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/806248>

Sarah Robertson. *Poverty Politics: Poor Whites in Contemporary Southern Writing*. UP of Mississippi, 2019. vii + 188 pp.

Despite two decades of the New Southern Studies, with its transnational turns and critiques of southern exceptionalism, southern literary studies still retains some regionalist assumptions about its object of study and who is doing the studying. Even the ostensibly polemical “Blast South” manifestos published in 2015 by the Emerging Scholars Organization (an affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature) include nativist pronouns (we southerners, our South); indeed, nine of the ten emerging scholars featured are from the region, and eight teach at southern institutions. It is striking, then, that this second book by Sarah Robertson—an American literature specialist trained and based in England—is “less concerned with . . . the US South than . . . the region’s place within global financial markets” (xii-xiii). *Poverty Politics* not only “embraces the aim of new southern studies” (xiii) but also pitches the struggles and representation of poor southern whites as a “case study” (xxii) for “the exploitation of workers under neoliberalism . . . across the globe” (xii).

While “the writers in this study might not always be those the reader expects” (xiii)—Harry Crews, Chris Offutt, and Tom Franklin appear only fleetingly—Robertson’s five chapters encompass an eclectic range of authors and genres. This ensures that even experts on so-called Grit Lit or Rough South writing (terms Robertson repudiates as reductive) will likely encounter new texts and fresh analyses. The opening chapter attends to poor whites in contemporary travel narratives, beginning with British authors but concentrating mostly on Douglas Kennedy’s *In God’s Country* (1989), which Robertson scores for scapegoating poor whites as the wellspring of southern racism. If travel narratives by V. S. Naipaul and others reproduce similarly hoary ideas of poor white southerners as “authentic” (11), Robertson is more interested in how, when seeking to excavate a “real” South “untouched by neoliberalism,” these authors “displace class and economic issues.”

Chapter 2 turns to photo-narratives and considers whether or not they “offer counternarratives, or countervisualities” (28) to well-worn images of white southern poverty (often established by Farm Security Administration photographers during the Depression). Robertson is sympathetic to the Appalshop projects of the 1970s and 1980s but charges Sally Mann, Tim Barnwell, and Susan Lipper with romanticizing the rural South while eliding “the actualities of poverty” (48). Perhaps inevitably, Shelby Adams, a controversial figure

for three decades, receives the most sustained attention; Robertson notes that Adams's recent projects seem to respond to criticism leveled at earlier works such as *Appalachian Portraits* (1993).

Chapter 3 considers "poor white life-writing" (Robertson prefers this more expansive nomenclature to David A. Davis's designation, "white trash autobiographies" [63]). The chapter includes a compelling critique of J. D. Vance's notorious *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), a memoir that adheres to neoliberalism's rhetoric of "choice and economic freedom" without "any consideration of socioeconomic policies" (84–85) that compound working-class suffering, such as access to healthcare. *Poverty Politics* also draws lightly here (as it does elsewhere) on postcolonial theory, arguing that Rick Bragg and Janisse Ray write back against dominant stereotypes about hicks, hillbillies, and trash; Robertson qualifies, however, that Bragg and Ray register their ancestors' role in Native removal. Furthermore, for all that Ray occasionally appears like a "wistful neo-agrarian" and Bragg sometimes indulges in what Robertson deliciously skewers as "foodways frivolity," neither author "sugarcoat[s] the ecological destruction wrought by settlers and their descendants" (72–73). Rather less convincing is Robertson's attempt to locate Bragg and Ray within her larger project of linking the poor southern white experience to a "national and sometimes global community" (70) defined by class solidarity rather than racial division. Too much here hangs on Bragg's brief gesture to the "global economy" (86), while Robertson herself observes that Ray "focuses at the micro level, on an uber-local notion of community . . . political action at the granular level" (88). Ray's "localism" may evade ossified "categories of southern, regional writing," but I wanted more evidence of how exactly she and Bragg engage with "global economics."

Chapter 4 locates poor whites in imaginative literature (mainly novels), including texts by two major African American authors: Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead. There is an intriguing take on the encounter between pregnant Sethe and Amy Denver in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987): their "cross-racial, class-based cooperation" is read "against the backdrop of the neoliberal turn" (92) at the time of the novel's production. Though this chapter's attention to Morrison and Whitehead helps assuage some of the skepticism that a book focused exclusively on white southerners is (as Robertson preemptively acknowledges) "bound to generate" (xiv), *Poverty Politics* could have connected more texts by white and Black southern writers set in the neoliberal era ("the years since 1970" [xv]). To take one salient example, since 2008 Jesmyn Ward has repeatedly addressed pre-

cisely the intersection of regional poverty, global neoliberalism, and environmentalism that informs Robertson's fifth and final chapter. Like Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Ward's three novels and memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), explore how working-class southerners—mostly, but not exclusively Black—have been stigmatized as waste, even as they are “used and thrown away as a cheap form of labor” (114). As Henry Giroux and others have demonstrated, Hurricane Katrina—central to Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and which Robertson discusses briefly, with reference to John Biguenet's play *Shotgun* (2009)—exposed neoliberalism's deeply racialized (and classed) politics of disposability. Nevertheless, *Poverty Politics's* focus on the environmentalism of poor white southern writing—including how, in novels by Larry Brown and Ann Pancake, economic necessity supersedes any sense of care for the damaged landscape—contributes valuably to what Zackary Vernon has called ecocriticism's crucial role in the future of southern studies.

Poverty Politics concludes by stressing that the value of these texts lies not in changing government policy but in reimagining the poor: they help us fathom what Robertson calls (adapting Raymond Williams) the “structures of feeling” of life under neoliberalism (90–91). Robertson reiterates “the need to see the poor as complex and to locate poverty within socio-economic policies and models rather than regional contexts and behaviors” (151). Together with the emphasis on global economics, this final sentence raises the question of why the book retains the category of southern writing. Certainly, *Poverty Politics* deserves an audience beyond southern literary studies. Perhaps other scholars will build on Robertson's analysis to explore comparatively how “the exploitation of workers under neoliberalism aligns poor whites in the US South” with other “poor people”—both within the region and “across the globe” (xii).

MARTYN BONE
University of Copenhagen

