

# Demolition Derby, Working-Class Identity, and Capitalist Geographies

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## Abstract

In order to understand the formations of identities within a working-class population, this paper draws on ethnographic field research with participants and fans of demolition derby competitions in two regions of Arkansas. It attempts what Arjun Appadurai calls a ‘genealogical’ reading to discover within semiotic evidence foreclosures of identity that challenge the power of capitalist fixation and movement of value within and through these regions. The paper uses the term ‘material integrity’ to describe how participants and fans of demolition derby understand the economic dynamics in which they participate. In Northwest Arkansas, a region characterized by the fixation of capital, class is ‘read down’ by nominating perceived lower classes, but in White County, Arkansas, a region with little fixed capital, class is ‘read up.’ As a ground-up spectacle and performance, demolition derby reveals the value of material integrity as an integral aspect of a working-class identity and provides some evidence of what Don Mitchell calls ‘working-class geographies’ and Ben Rogaly’s ‘non-elite cosmopolitanism.’

## Keywords

Critical ethnography, working-class culture, working-class Identity, demolition derby, Northwest Arkansas, precarity, critical geography, Marxist geography

Mobility—or really control over the conditions of mobility—is thus an aspect of class power and struggle.

—Don Mitchell, *Working-class Geographies: Capital, Space, and Place*

Well, hey, hey, working man, working man like me  
I ain’t never been on welfare and that’s one place I won’t be,  
‘Cause I’ll be working, as long as my two hands are fit to use.

—Merle Haggard, ‘Working Man Blues’

In a *New York Times* review, Anand Giridharadas (2018) complains that each book on identity by Francis Fukuyama and Kwame Anthony Appiah is ‘a book about books about books.’ He admits, ‘theorists gotta theorize,’ but he goes on, ‘with an issue so fraught and a world so full of rage, each author could have made use of a rental car and the Voice-Memos app. For all their strengths, both books lack the earth and funk and complexity of dreaming, hurting human beings.’ Giridharadas wants to hear from people themselves about their identities. Michel de Certeau (1984) asks a

similar rhetorical question of philosophers like himself as he considers ‘the ordinary man.’ ‘What are we asking this oracle...to license us, to authorize us to say?’ As we try to analyze a living world, we rarely ask whether the living world wants to be analyzed. The ‘ordinary man...does not,’ de Certeau concludes, ‘expect representations’ (p. v).

With Giridharadas and de Certeau in mind, I rented a car, bought a digital recorder, and immersed myself in the culture of demolition derby performance in Springdale and Searcy, Arkansas, two communities in some ways similar and in other, meaningful ways, distinct. I attended these demolition derbies with long-time fans and spent time in the ‘pit’ area talking to drivers, their crews, and families and observing their repertoires of behavior. I arranged longer interviews at their homes and places of work where I asked them questions about their experiences in demolition derby and its place in the culture of their lives.<sup>1</sup> These interviews were expansive and ended up being much longer than I had intended, as everyone was eager to talk about demolition derby. I would ask to talk for a half hour and the conversation would continue for an hour or more. One conversation went on for four hours, as beer cans piled around our lawn chairs under summer shade trees. These conversations were about much more than smashing cars. They opened up vistas into the local construction of identity and the local appropriation and adaptation of more globally-produced representations of working-class subjectivity, such as the yeoman pioneer and the ‘hillbilly.’ From these interviews, I tried, as Giridharadas suggested, to get the ‘earth and funk and complexity of dreaming, hurting human beings.’

I intended my conversations with drivers and fans to introduce some ambiguity into monolithic top-down definitions of working-class identity as they show that ‘culture,’ as Raymond Williams (2001) points out, is ‘ordinary,’ not an Arnoldian content narrating an *a priori* transcendent essence. I agree with Williams’ point that the meanings that foreclose identities cannot ‘in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance’ (p. 15). His description serves as a perfect metaphor for demolition derby, as my conversations with drivers and fans sought to discover how meanings are made and remade ‘by living.’ Just as mobility is the crux of a demolition derby competition, mobility of meanings is the crux of culture, and mobility of capital is the crux of late capitalism. The discursive meanings of demolition derby reveal working-class negotiations of gender, ethnic alterity, and late-capitalist productive processes. Below, I shall focus on the ways that demolition derby is involved in expressing and creating what Don Mitchell (2005) calls ‘working-class geographies.’ In response to the power of top-down capitalist modes of moving and fixing capital, these drivers *make and remake* a geography of meaning and literally rebuild the material environment for their own uses. As one driver explained about his battered pink Lincoln Continental derby car, ‘It’s homemade, man.’

Demolition derby is a working-class spectacle that involves drivers intentionally colliding cars to debilitate their mobility. The rules, which are not produced by any governing authority, are simply disable your competitors’ cars. Several preliminary heats provide the competitors for a final heat from which an overall winner is literally the last car moving. Before the spectacle, drivers ‘build’ their competitive cars out of salvaged commuter cars. The level of preparation depends on the

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<sup>1</sup> I interviewed thirteen consultants in Northwest Arkansas, including the organizer of the demolition derby and seven consultants in White County, Arkansas, including the organizer of the event. Though everyone assured me it wasn’t necessary, I have changed their names.

competitor and distinguishes the meanings of the performance as entertainment or prize-seeking. Demolition derby is performed and consumed by working-class subjects whose class-consciousness is neither over-determined nor monolithic. Instead, the understanding of one's position within economic and material relations is continuously produced at the local level according to representations that slide both horizontally, along an historical axis and, more importantly, vertically, along a symbolic axis. The symbolic is often overlooked by observers who see demolition derby only as a vestige of historical stylized violence. For example, in his famous essay 'Clean Fun at Riverhead,' Tom Wolfe (2009) relates demolition derby to the gladiatorial spectacles of ancient Rome. 'Since then [300 AD] no game...has successfully acted out the underlying motifs of most sports, that is, aggression and destruction,' he claims (p. 32). He calls on the image of the automobile as power and claims, 'Americans have turned to the automobile to satisfy their love of aggression' (p. 33). His analysis, however, merely traces the spectacle horizontally through time to an arbitrary historical correlative. Such an analysis threatens to fix the audience of demolition derby as an historical anachronism, as if to say they are as gullible as Roman plebeians, stuck in history with an appetite for bread and circuses.

None of my consultants referred to the spectacle as merely 'destruction;' instead, they spoke much more about the 'building' of cars, especially emphasizing the conversion of the consumer products into constituent materials. I interviewed a driver from Northwest Arkansas, Javier, whose cars were known more for their creative decoration than for their formidable performance. In the first Springdale derby I attended, he won the \$100 'best-dressed' prize for his Chrysler Newport featuring purple glitter paint and a row of police lights. He understood that it was not only his decorative cars that distinguished him. 'I'm the only Hispanic guy out there,' he told me. 'When I first started, there was another guy with a Hispanic last name, but he looked white. Does it bother me? No.' Javier had moved to Northwest Arkansas from California where he had first migrated from Mexico (illicitly he implied) following a migration trend that has transformed the ethnic landscape of the region. I interviewed him at his job at a high-end professional body shop, where he ironically restores commuter cars to industry specifications. He explained the continuous economy of derby car production: 'You take parts that you use on the other cars and save them up. You know, it's not like you're goin' to be throwin' everything away because more money that way, you know.' Another Northwest Arkansas driver, Kyle, described his process of building as 'well, mine's homemade...just poor boy here in the yard, at work all day, come home and tinker a little bit.' A professional diesel mechanic, he also emphasized the fluid value of his Lincoln Continental's materiality: 'I got that car in the back, scrap metal around here has gone down quite a bit. It's only at seventy-five [dollars] a ton. Right now, I'd probably only get two hundred bucks out of it, so I'm just sittin' on it.' Though they understood that an important part of the spectacle inside the arena is putting on a show of stylized aggression, all of the drivers I interviewed connected their participation with transformative flows contiguous with their working-class livelihoods. They were making something rather than destroying it.

To account more fully for its cultural meanings and their uses, repertoires must be investigated not only horizontally through time but also vertically through what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls 'genealogical' meaningfulness. 'History,' he writes, 'leads you outward, to link patterns of changes to increasingly larger universes of interaction.' This approach led Wolfe to ancient Roman violence. 'Genealogy,' Appadurai continues, 'leads you inward, toward cultural dispositions and styles that might be stubbornly embedded both in local institutions and in the

history of the local habitus' (p. 74). This last term is important to my understanding of how local cultural practices produce local meanings. Appadurai borrows it from Pierre Bourdieu (1980), who explains 'habitus' as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (p. 53). In other words, when Eugene, a White County driver, describes himself as 'I've always been sorta blue collar,' and when Dale, a Northwest Arkansas fan claims, 'I'm above white trash,' they are calling on 'structured structures' of class identity with 'durable' or historical associations. However, Eugene and Dale's use of the terms are 'transposable' and are not associated with any particular 'ends.' 'Blue collar' and 'white trash' relate them to others in their experience rather than to others in history. Important to Appadurai's use of 'habitus,' their transpositions work at the level of local semiotics, in living language.

Classed identities are insecure, tied as they are to global vagaries in capital movements. The vague term 'middle class' seems to mean the portion of the working class (the producers of surplus value) that retains sufficient surplus value to invest in consumption behavior unattainable by the precariat, economist Guy Standing's neologism to describe the late-capitalist position of a class of workers that 'must rely largely on money wages, without non-wage benefits, such as pensions, paid holidays, retrenchment benefits, and medical coverage' (2014, p. 10). Many of the drivers and fans I interviewed, especially in Searcy, fit Standing's description, as they are itinerant workers who must seek their own temporary contracts. The aesthetics of the White County derby were less refined than the derbies in Springdale because there is less fixed capital in White County. The Springdale derbies are presented in Parsons Stadium, a permanent arena of grandstands for up to 9000 spectators. Originally built for the annual Rodeo of the Ozarks, the arena now makes most of its money from two annual demolition derbies. My consultant, Dale, jokingly bragged that we had exclusive accommodation in the 'luxury seating,' a section of shaded stadium seats with backs instead of the backless planks of the grandstand bleachers. Dale also took me into the 'pit' area where drivers were busy with the final preparation of their cars. In Springdale, the pit was accessible with only a \$5 additional entrance fee. In White County, where the arena had only one meager stand of bleachers along the fence that surrounded the arena, access to the pit area required an additional \$25 fee (no discounts for academic researchers, alas). Most of the audience, whose attendance was part of the White County Fair attractions, sat on a small berm near the bleachers, or lingered standing near the two chain-link gates. Without the fixed capital of a permanent stadium, the White County derby seemed more temporary and ad hoc, consistent with the precarity of the capital flows negotiated by the drivers for their livelihoods. In fact, one White County driver handed me a battered and soiled business card that listed a variety of skills offered for sale, including, 'Fabrication; Welding; Automotive Repair; Gas & Diesel; ATV & Small Engine Repair.' I visited another driver, 'the sorta blue collar' Eugene, at his home and shop in rural White County where the yard was littered with the detritus of years of derby cars built and demolished. As we drank iced tea from a cooler in the shop where he both built his derby cars and sold his labor for piecemeal remuneration, he told me, 'You just do anything you can to make a livin'.' I never heard this kind of precarity articulated by anyone in Northwest Arkansas.

All workers seem to exist along an axis between precarity and security, and the local fixtures of capital, flowing along designated and rational lines, largely determine positions. Along with the

more obvious salariat, some portion of the working class has some ‘middle-class’ financial power to save for retirement, to send kids to college, to buy single-family homes, to buy expensive gun collections. One’s relationship with the precariat, though, is more a matter of ambiguous degree than strict formal category. Good factory jobs—or service industry jobs in Northwest Arkansas and gas extraction jobs in White County—can leave a region and emerge in another that draws populations across figurative and literal borderlands. This mobility of capital and labor is a prominent feature of studies of working-class geographies. Linkon and Russo’s study of the effects of capital and labor mobility on collective memory and the meaning of work in Youngstown, Ohio, begins with a look at the traces of historical struggle on the landscape of the Mahoning Valley. The movement of capital from Youngstown, or as they rightly call it, the ‘capital strike,’ changed the meaning of work in the community and ‘exacerbated a process of urban decline that had begun in the 1950s’ when white workers could afford to move from the working-class neighborhoods near the steel mills (2002, p.236). The landscapes of Northwest Arkansas and White County have likewise been marked by the comings and goings of capital and labor. Javier, the driver I introduced above, was born in Mexico, moved to California and later followed relatives to Northwest Arkansas, where the Tyson food processing jobs, though grueling and low-paying, are at least predictable. So long as consumers crave their frozen chicken tenders, Tyson’s slaughter conveyors run day and night. The sense of precarity seems less urgent when capital is flowing in the form of steady hourly wages. When I commented to Dale, my Northwest Arkansas fan consultant, that I missed fishing but lacked an Arkansas fishing license, he invited me to join him at a private rural pond stocked with catfish. As we reeled in captive whiskered blues, Dale described his Belgian factory employers with approbation but worried that the new American manager was ‘more about the bottom line.’ In his comments can be heard the fearful knowledge that ‘the bottom line’ might move the factory. The defining distinction between the two areas of Arkansas that I explore seems to be the relative pressure of precarity. Concepts of class belonging depend on local access to well-paying, stable, and seemingly long-term jobs. Demolition derby means something different depending on this ambiguity, as the different groups negotiate definitions of ‘micro-classes’ that they perceive above or below their own positions. The two regions of Arkansas where I engaged demolition derby drivers and fans illustrate this difference. The Northwest Arkansas landscape is marked by fluid capital flows and fixation while White County, where the Searcy derby is held, is marked by capital extraction and flight.

### **Northwest Arkansas versus White County, Arkansas**

The Census Bureau refers to Northwest Arkansas as the ‘Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR-MO Metropolitan Statistical Area.’ The three nominated towns are strung from south to north along a new stretch of Interstate 49, which the website of the Interstate 49 National Coalition (2002) claims will connect Canada with the Ports of Louisiana and further ‘to Central/South America and points beyond through the expanding Panama Canal.’ Organized by business and policy advocates in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri, this Coalition plans to take this ‘comprehensive transportation grid that will enhance the movement of food, goods, energy, and people to and from anywhere in mid-America and the rest of the world’ right through Northwest Arkansas. The geography of mobility, in other words, is planned and intentional. Included in the Statistical Area is also Bentonville, just north of Rogers, and the home of the largest corporation on earth, Walmart. In many ways, the modest intersection of Sam Walton Boulevard and Southwest 8<sup>th</sup> street in Bentonville is the epicenter of global capitalism, as the headquarters of the largest private employer

draws the managers of global vendors and record capital into the region, a boom evidenced by the improved regional airport, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and the Range Rovers and Ferraris parked around the Bentonville square.

Walmart is the most famous of the indigenous Fortune 500 corporations with sprawling campuses in Northwest Arkansas. Down the highway in Lowell, south of Rogers, J. B. Hunt, which started out as a company trading in old rice hulls, is the nation's largest trucking company. Hardly a company of mere eighteen-wheeled haulers, after deregulation in the 1980s, J.B. Hunt innovated the vertical integration of logistics and distribution across global intermodal transportation systems. By the 1990s, its dominance drew other trucking companies, both local and national, to the area until 'northwest Arkansas had evolved into a major carrier hub' with 'six of the one hundred largest trucking companies maintain[ing] headquarters in the region, a greater number than found in any other state' (Johnson, 2000, p. 196). This convergence attracted not only drivers but also mechanics to Northwest Arkansas, a working-class population with the necessary skills and access to tools for demolition derby participation. Kyle, who was saving his Lincoln Continental derby car in his backyard until scrap metal prices rose, explained, 'I work on trucks all day—heavy duty trucks. I'm a diesel mechanic, I work on Mack trucks.' I interviewed Kyle on two separate occasions in his yard in a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Springdale, the older part of town where light manufacturing and service industries sprawl across former pastures. Hispanic/Latino and Marshallese communities are concentrated in East Springdale. Parsons Stadium is there as well. Under a shade tree, Kyle described the modifications he made to his '71 Lincoln that he'd bought for \$400 from a local woman's backyard: 'I took the rear-end out and welded my spider gears together for posi-traction.<sup>2</sup> I bought the actual—this is a Ford nine inch rear-end, three-quarter like you'd have in a three-quarter ton truck, I don't know why it's in this car but it is. I bought the spool on-line; it's called a spool.' Knowledge of the gear structure of a drive-train differential is professional knowledge for Kyle generally. He is paid a wage for applying such knowledge every day. Though he was using professional skills, he still described his derby car as 'home-made.'

A few miles south of J.B. Hunt's verdant campus on Interstate 49 (which includes a jogging path for managerial employees), a newly developed exit leads to the international headquarters of Tyson Foods in Springdale, arguably the most 'working-class' of the four Northwest Arkansas cities.<sup>3</sup> Tyson's innovations in chicken processing involve contracting growers to raise Tyson chicks with Tyson chicken feed to be returned on Tyson trucks to Tyson processing plants and delivered to commercial markets wrapped in Tyson packaging. The independent farmers growing the chickens are paid a set contract price independent of the market price of their produce. In other words, sharecropping. With scientific farming techniques pioneered by the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville—a combination of feed additives, hormonal treatments, and accelerated brooding in artificial environments—Tyson can produce more and more chickens with fewer and fewer growers. Its processing automation has changed the ethnic make-up of the local labor environment and the developed geography of the area in important cultural ways. It brought both Javier (from

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<sup>2</sup> As any fan of the film 'My Cousin Vinny' knows, posi-traction describes a drivetrain that distributes the power of the engine to both rear axles.

<sup>3</sup> And my hometown.

Mexico via California) and Kyle (from Ohio) to Northwest Arkansas. ‘Tyson,’ Kyle said, ‘that’s my bread and butter right there.’

By the 1970s, Tyson had replaced the apple orchards, bean fields, and grape vineyards of the early twentieth century with two-football-field-long chicken houses with twenty-four hour grow lights. As Tyson learned to get more chickens from fewer growers and the first generation of Walmart and J.B. Hunt millionaires needed tax-safe investments, the fields have been converted to housing developments and vertical retail complexes along the interstate. Pinnacle Hills golf course hosts an annual LPGA tournament. When I was visiting for a demolition derby and decided to get a haircut, the stylist talked about how friendly Harrison Ford was when he attended the new Bentonville Film Festival, an event co-founded by actress Gena Davis to focus on women in film. Alice Walton, daughter of Mr. Sam (as Sam Walton is still called by locals, though sometimes ironically), hired Moshe Safdie to build Crystal Bridges Museum, the digs for her collection of American art, which now attracts international tourists. Also cited for its collection of modern American art is the 21c Hotel near the Bentonville Square. The hotel made *Conde Nast*’s Top Ten Hotels in the South in 2015. In 2012, *Travel and Leisure* magazine called Bentonville, Arkansas, a ‘Top *International* Destination’ (my incredulous emphasis). In other words, the influx of capital has utterly transformed Northwest Arkansas in the past twenty years.

In Springdale, where I attended three of the demolition derbies in my research, the changes have been just as dramatic but geared less toward the *Conde Nast*-set. What was once Gene’s Donut Shop on Thompson Avenue is now a panaderia with Telemundo broadcasting Liga MX matches. Next to the old ‘Y-Liquor’ (named for its location within a three-way intersection of U.S. Highways 71 and 412), where generations of workers from the George’s poultry feed mill across the street stopped for an after-shift six-pack, the Mi Tienda Supermarket sells freshly-made tortillas, queso cotija, and produce such as tomatillos and nopales. Emma Street, the original commercial main street that leads to Parsons Stadium where the demolition derby is held, is lined with store-front windows in Spanish. According to Johnson (2000), ‘the arrival of Hispanic migrants changed the northwest corner [of Arkansas] and brought it even closer to the American experience. Between 1990 and 1997, the 127 percent Latino increase in Arkansas was the highest in the nation’ (p. 200). This population change has continued into the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century. According to the Pew Research Center’s study of Hispanic Trends, in 1990, the Latino population in Washington County was 1,526. By 2000, it was 12,932, and by 2011, 32,827. In twenty years, the Latino population in Washington County went from 1% of the total population to 16% (Pew, 2016). Nowhere is that population change more visible than in Springdale.

In a 2001 article, *U.S. News and World Report* called ‘the state’s bustling northwest shoulder... a 21<sup>st</sup>-century boomtown, a monument to the postindustrial service economy, and surprisingly, the nation’s sixth-fastest growing metropolitan area’ (Glasser, p. 16). This boom has continued, protected from recessions by flush capital, and importantly, the overwhelming confidence that Walmart, J.B. Hunt, and Tyson Foods are invincible. The stable employment that these service corporations provide is important to the ideas of demolition derby in the minds of the local participants. In short, the labor environment provides sufficient leisure time and access to materials for demolition derby to be merely affective performance, a ‘good time’ for performers and audience members. In Northwest Arkansas, I interviewed a family of demolition derby drivers

who had been featured in a national airline's in-flight magazine and subsequently solicited by eight different reality television production companies. They are famous locally. Ralph, the patriarch of the family, claimed 'They [their fans] come out there and mob our cars, want pieces off the car and autographs. I think we have fans that would follow us anywhere we went.' Contrasting his family with the White County competitors whom everyone calls 'professional,' Ralph claimed, 'If the money's all we did it for, we'd had to quit a long time ago.' The entire family laughed when Ralph remarked that he told the local derby organizer that 'we'd do this for nothing, and we would...we have...we do.' Because of the relative security of the capital flows in Northwest Arkansas, Ralph and his sons, who both have professional salariat jobs, can enjoy the affective and aesthetic aspects of demolition derby without the pressure of winning prize money.

In White County, on the other hand, the labor environment is more precarious. What drivers refer to as 'the show,' the performance aspects of the spectacle, suffers as the competition for the prize money becomes more strategic and, according to Northwest Arkansas drivers, more 'professional.' White County, where I attended the annual demolition derby and interviewed several drivers and the local organizer, is far more rural, with a population per square mile of 74.5 versus 261.2 and 215.6 for Benton and Washington Counties respectively (Census Bureau Quickfacts). East of the Ozarks, it is on the northern edge of the alluvial confluence of the Mississippi and the Gulf Coastal plains. It looks flatter and has large stands of ancient hardwood timber. U.S. Highway 67 is the only major transportation corridor that connects Searcy, the county seat and largest town, with Little Rock sixty miles to the south. The town sprawls westward from the four-lane controlled-access highway in low-density commercial and residential development, pizza places and tire shops, a Sears and a few motels. Of course, east of the highway, stands the ubiquitous Walmart girded by newer developments with national restaurant chains, nail salons, and insurance offices. Across the Little Red River lies the even more rural community of Judsonia, where I interviewed two drivers, a father and daughter. Judsonia is notable in Arkansas history, as a consultant from Northwest Arkansas told me, for a devastating tornado that destroyed every building in town in 1952. Though the town was rebuilt, all the buildings are derelict save for Hays Work Hunt Play,<sup>4</sup> an outdoor and work-clothing supply business on the edge of town.

Though only about two hundred miles to the east, White County seems far from the prosperity and conspicuous consumption of Northwest Arkansas. No Fortune 500 companies have elaborate headquarters here, and no world-class museums, hotels, and restaurants are being developed. According to the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, the largest employer in White County is, in fact, Walmart with its multiple stores throughout the county. In other words, as in so many rural communities throughout the United States, the surplus value of the local service-industrial labor is being drawn the two hundred miles west to Bentonville to build museums, hotels, and restaurants there. As I explained above, Eugene claimed, 'You just do anything you can to make a livin'.' We were joined in his shop by his son and three other drivers who had participated in the derby the night before. They claimed that they didn't put much thought into the decoration of their cars, though they did paint them all a consistent combination of black and yellow. 'People know us,' Eugene laughed, 'here comes the bumblebees; they gonna sting ya'.' They were much more interested in placing in the prize money. Though they vehemently denied being

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<sup>4</sup> Many in White County wore clothing with this local logo. The three verbs go along way summing up the local ethos.

‘professional,’ they did have several salvaged cars to build into derby cars and a practice derby arena in the field behind the shop. Eugene’s family was one of the groups that the Northwest Arkansas drivers and fans complained illicitly reinforced their cars and coordinated their tactics within the arena. Such ‘team driving’ elicits disapprobation from drivers and fans<sup>5</sup>, but it also reveals a greater emphasis on winning. ‘I ain’t in it to lose,’ Eugene claimed more than once. This consciousness seems to affect the meanings of demolition derby and of class signification in general.

### Reading Class Identities

Class identities are being critiqued within demolition derby, especially as a certain kind of contempt for authority is being performed. Drivers and fans are definitely aware that they are involved in a consummate working-class leisure activity. Ralph, the patriarch of the Northwest Arkansas family, explained their refusal to participate in the proposed reality television programming because the producers wanted to deploy regional working-class stereotypes. ‘We didn’t want to look like a bunch of rednecks,’ he explained. ‘We may be [redneck] a little or a lot depending on who you talk to, but we ain’t that bad,’ he continued, ‘but they [the producers] wanted us to be absolute hillbillies, and it wasn’t going to happen.’ At the White County derby, there was less worry about appearing working class, as the announcer began the derby encouraging ‘Make some noise if you’re a redneck from White County’ over the public address system. Though most of my consultants mentioned something about the class identities of demolition derby, not all of them read class signifiers in the same way. There was a distinct difference in whether class was read ‘up’ or ‘down’ depending on whether the driver was in Northwest Arkansas or White County. Drivers in Northwest Arkansas spoke much more of groups that they perceived being below themselves. For example, Kyle and Dale in Springdale together explained to me the difference between their use of the terms ‘redneck’ and ‘white trash.’ They claimed ‘redneck’ for themselves, but described other, lower individuals as ‘white trash.’ ‘Shit’s always happening to them,’ was Dale’s defining characteristic of ‘white trash,’ meaning their lives were characterized by the crises of precarity. He went on to explain the relative social positions of the two terms: ‘Rednecks are kinda stayin’ even or movin’ up. White trash [is] either stayin’ even or going down.’ In the same conversation, Kyle, who used also the term ‘Crazy White Boy’ to describe himself, admitted to using a limb of the oak tree in front of his house to pull the engine from a car. His wife, however, ‘went and bought me a cherry picker to set up in the garage. She said it was too white trash to use the tree in front.’ When I asked Dale if he would accept the term ‘white trash,’ he smiled and replied, ‘No, I’m above white trash.’ Less subject to precarity, Northwest Arkansas working-class subjects distinguished themselves by nominating the classes below. They expressed no consciousness of being judged by classes nominally above them.

In White County, on the other hand, class was read ‘up,’ revealing a consciousness that they were being judged from above. Adjacent to the fair grounds and literally overlooking the demolition derby ‘pit,’ new two-story homes had recently been built, an entire development with ample lawns for what the promoter of the White County derby called ‘the suit and tie people.’ When I asked Eugene about these homes and the people who lived there, he called them ‘preppies’ and then added, ‘so-called...maybe we shouldn’t call them higher.’ His derby partner, a propane truck

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<sup>5</sup> A fan at one of the Springdale derbies wore a t-shirt that read: ‘Team Driving is for Pussies.’

driver, called them ‘university people’ [there is a small private university in town], and went on to say, ‘they like other things, like plays or a nice meal or something.’ They never talked about any one as occupying a class below their own status, which Eugene nominated as ‘always been sorta blue collar.’ They explained how the ‘preppies’ had been successful in getting the mud racing, held in the same arena, cancelled on a technicality, but they were proud that these ‘preppies’ couldn’t do anything about the demolition derby. A striking sensitivity to higher-class perceptions was another driver’s proud explanation that the Little Red River in Judsonia had some of the best fly-fishing in the state. When I asked him if he fly-fished, he said, ‘no, I cat fish, though.’ Fly-fishing is the style of angling most associated with a higher class,<sup>6</sup> while fishing for catfish is associated with a lower class. Though it was not his term, he knew that I was one of those ‘university people,’ and he was telling me not about his own fishing habits but about the fishing that he assumed I would be interested in. Identifying as working class, no one in White County ever mentioned any class below their own.

The reading of class, then, is subject to local ambiguities, which seem to be related to the relative precarity of the people doing the reading. The affluence and relative stability in Northwest Arkansas allow the demolition derby drivers and fans to read class ‘down.’ In this judgment, they seem to be calling on meanings of independence and ingenuity, a version of meritocracy that imagines the individual as the fundamental economic agent, a concept that demolition derby may organically critique within the communitarian approach to building and maintaining the cars. ‘White trash’ is reserved for people without stable employment, people who turn to the illicit economy of drug production and distribution, or petty theft and the poaching of wildlife. The term is used for people whose economic insecurity is displayed in their jury-rigged housing and public car repair. They don’t have garages in which to do their work or to store the detritus of their economy. This display of ‘junk’ seems to be the defining characteristic of ‘white trash’ style. When I showed the photos of Eugene’s White County yard, with its array of car bodies and parts, one Northwest Arkansas fan exclaimed, ‘Oh, now that’s white trash.’ Importantly, the drivers in White County often attended the Springdale derby, but none of the Northwest Arkansas drivers I interviewed had been to Searcy. When I asked Eugene and his friends what else they do in the area when they attend the Springdale derby, they admitted visiting ‘that big mall they got up there,’ but they spoke with more approbation about the bucolic camping around Beaver Lake. They also felt slighted by the Springdale officials’ accusing them of being ‘professionals’ and of team driving. In these comments it is easy to hear hints of class status distinctions emerging. Favored by federal investment since Reconstruction, Northwest Arkansas knows that it dominates the economy of Arkansas, and that tone of superiority infuses the symbolic meanings of demolition derby.

### **Demolishing Capitalist Geographies**

In his essay that I cite above, Don Mitchell (2005) calls for ‘a robust working-class geography that understands the relationship between space, place, and power in all its historical complexity’ (p. 95). Rather than constructing a working-class that is simply ‘fixed’ by the logic of capitalism, he searches for mobile processes in which working-class agency is involved in the shaping of a built environment and the meanings within it. The quotation from Mitchell’s essay above obviously resonates with my analysis of demolition derby. The arena in which the specifically prepared cars

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<sup>6</sup> And with people who use the word ‘angling.’

are demolished is a site of spectacular struggle. The unfixed potential vectors of the derby arena conflict with the rational circumscription of roadway traffic in everyday life. The latter conforms to the logic of capitalism, as the rationale for Interstate 49 that bisects Northwest Arkansas explicitly reveals: ‘to create a comprehensive transportation grid that will enhance the movement of food, goods, energy and people to and from anywhere in mid-America and the rest of the world.’ The lanes of asphalt describe a logic on the landscape, making it a particular place such as Northwest Arkansas or White County. However, as Mitchell points out, the spatial logic of capitalism involves a central contradiction: ‘for capital to circulate, some value must be fixed in place, thereby increasing the risk that this capital may not be realized as value’ (p. 82). Attempts at such fixity can be seen in the development of the built environment in Northwest Arkansas. The flows of people and capital into Northwest Arkansas are visible in the sprawling retail spaces of Rogers and in the pastures groomed into lawns of new two-story houses around Springdale. Commenting on the visible changes in the geography, Nelson, who had grown up in Northwest Arkansas but left for the rural peace of Judsonia, claimed that Springdale and Rogers had ‘outgrown itself tremendously’ and had become ‘overpopulated.’ Dale, the Northwest Arkansas fan, described the visible investment in the area as ‘a stupid amount,’ while Ralph, the patriarch of the Northwest Arkansas family of drivers simply claimed, ‘this place is berserk.’ They are describing capitalist spatial formations that Mitchell calls ‘central to the very functioning of capitalism, not just incidental to it’ (p. 83). In NWA, Walmart, J.B. Hunt, and Tyson have fixed capital into place in the form of corporate infrastructure, leisure spectacles, and stable remuneration for labor—a Clintonian neoliberal dreamscape!<sup>7</sup>

The differences that I observed in the economies of Northwest Arkansas and White County, such as the latter’s relative precarity, reveal the movement of capital through geographies of boom and bust. Appropriately, the capitalist geographies of White County are vestiges of extraction processes. Beginning in 2002, national mining companies became interested in gas deposits in the Fayetteville Shale play slanting near the surface of the Arkoma Basin in Northern Arkansas. Southwestern, a Texas-based extraction company, applied new extraction technologies, such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, to its mineral claims in 2003. By 2007, companies such as Chesapeake Energy from Oklahoma City were promising to transform the geography of White County. A 2008 article in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* claims ‘By all accounts, White County is the Fayetteville Shale hot spot’ and that ‘much of that boom is visible in Searcy, where traffic is heavy, construction is everywhere, and business is brisk’ (Widner). According to a laudatory article published on the Searcy Chamber of Commerce website (2008), Aubrey McClendon, the Chesapeake founder and CEO at the time, told locals gathered at the opening of the company’s regional office in Searcy, ‘The people of this area are about to see an economic boom the likes of which they’ve never seen before.’ He went on to promise, ‘this will be an office that will be expanded three or four times down the road.’ He handed out a \$100,000 check to the president of Harding University in Searcy, to be used for ‘graduates [that will] take leadership positions in the gas industry.’ In addition, the Searcy campus of Arkansas State University was promised ‘a training facility for vocational workers in the gas industry’ complete with a ‘gas well simulator.’ Belinda LaForce, the mayor of Searcy at the time, echoed McClendon’s optimism, saying, ‘It’s going to be a long-term presence’ (Watkins, 2008). Three years later, Chesapeake

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<sup>7</sup> President William Jefferson Clinton practiced his neoliberal policies as governor of Arkansas before taking his hillbilly show to the White House.

sold all of its interests in the Fayetteville Shale to the Australian firm, BHP Billiton Petroleum, which by 2015 stopped production completely in Arkansas. In January of 2016, Southwestern, the company that discovered the gas in the Fayetteville Shale, laid off forty percent of its work force (Taylor, 2016). A look at the website of the Searcy campus of Arkansas State University reveals no vocational training for gas workers and, alas, no gas well simulator. ‘The long-term presence’ turned out to be eight years, during which time the promises of fixing value in the geography of White County diminished as the expensive process of hydraulic fracturing undermined the fictitious values predicted by McClendon and other wildcat fracking prospectors.

Governing the flow of capital through living geographies is an ontological predicate of sovereign legitimacy. If elected representatives are not minding the flow of capital by thoughtful legislation, then private industrial concerns become the de facto government. As Mitchell points out, ‘Money must move into—and out of—the hands of workers, even as it must be frozen in the built landscape of houses, churches, shopping centers, bars, restaurants, parks, and all the other things that make life, including working-class life, possible’ (p. 84). In White County, that flow of money through the geography follows patterns of extraction rather than circulation, creating a geography of detritus and dereliction. The holes into the Mississippian geology are now permanent features of the capitalist geography of White County. The value extracted from them, however, is more mobile and has moved on. Like that capital, many of the people who followed the boom have left for Oklahoma and North Dakota, to newly opened mining sites. Offices built to house the service companies, including the touted headquarters of Chesapeake, are vacant, and local land prices have plummeted. As Mitchell points out, ‘Under capitalism, the construction of a built environment—a city or town or neighborhood or factory—might undermine its own reason for being. In capitalism, deindustrialization and capital flight *make sense*’ (p. 83, original emphasis). It makes sense because extraction, mining, is the epitome of capitalist geographies as it converts local materials into fictitious forms of capital. McClendon’s promises to White County sought such transformations. ‘Underdevelopment and disinvestment may make all kinds of sense to a man ‘in mining,’ Mitchell explains, ‘but to the miners it can mean the destruction of a livelihood and of the places in which they live’ (p. 90). The Fayetteville Lateral pipeline, which was built for the mobility of energy and, therefore, value, dissects White County on its way to a distribution port in Lula, Mississippi. Like highways, that pipeline circumscribes space into a logic. The gas was pressed out of the Fayetteville Shale and siphoned to markets far away, and as the gas flowed out of White County, very rationally and predictably, the capital flowed into the fictitious coffers of McClendon, his shareholders and similar hucksters.<sup>8</sup>

I have already explained the physical differences between White County and Northwest Arkansas, where the capitalist geographies are dominated by the importation of value extracted from off-shore labor sources. Nelson, the White County driver, commented on the changes in the White County geography. ‘When the oil field come in and hit that area,’ he said, ‘it grew.’ However, ‘when the oil field started shutting down,’ it went back to what he called ‘normal.’ He followed his comments about the boom and bust of White County with an observation about his experience in various built environments. ‘I drive trucks,’ he said, ‘so I deal with everything,’ meaning every

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<sup>8</sup> McClendon, of course, used some of that capital to move the Seattle Supersonics to Oklahoma City, something he promised Seattle he would never do, and some other of that capital for the Chevy Tahoe that he drove without a seatbelt full-speed into a concrete embankment a day after a federal indictment for fixing land deals.

kind of built traffic environment. In other words, he traffics through various geographies, always circumscribed by the logic of capitalism, the rational flows of value. The precarity that resulted from the bust of gas extraction had actually changed his living. Instead of driving a dump truck locally, a job that allowed him to be more involved with his daughter Debbie's life, he had recently switched to a job that required long-haul excursions across the continent. 'You never know if you're going to have a job,' he said of driving the dump truck. He was at the Springdale derby in September to see Debbie drive in one last derby before the winter because he feared he might have to leave before the derby in a county neighboring their own. When he described demolition derby as 'my stress reliever,' he reveals the pressure of the rational geographies of capitalism and the grid of highways it produces. His performance within the demolition derby arena contradicts (literally 'speaks against') that logic. Sixteen year-old Debbie, whom I interviewed with her father after her first derby, had the letters 'WFO' painted on her trunk deck. When I asked her the meaning, she sheepishly looked at her father, who smiled and explained, 'Wide F'in' Open,' the attitude of irrational motion. Even as she was learning to conform to traffic order as a new commuter, she is learning to speak against it. Many drivers describe the potentiality of vectors within the arena as anti-rational, as 'commotion' and 'craziness.' As such, the space of the derby arena is an important transgression of the geographies of capitalism and therefore a potential area of agency for working-class subjects.

Since early twentieth-century Marxian attempts at awakening a liberating class consciousness, academics have been contemplating the agency of subjects within economic superstructures. As I referenced above, Michel de Certeau questioned whether the 'ordinary man' cares much about academic theories of working-class subjectivity and agency. Following Nietzsche, he implies that the academic gaze creates as much truth as it claims to discover. Still, trying to understand cultural and psychical superstructures that emerge from and reproduce the economic and social levers of power that limit human experiences (working-class and otherwise) remains an underlying praxis of many humanities and social science disciplines. One limitation of Mitchell's essay on 'working-class geographies' is that it speaks *to* other academics about revealing the presence of working people within landscapes, to read the landscape as a space of struggle as Linkon and Russo do around Youngstown and as Mitchell himself does in his alternative geography of the California Central Valley, *The Lie of the Land*. Reading the landscape for signs of struggle helps to bring working people into the view of history, like the anonymous asparagus pickers with which Mitchell concludes his book (1996, p. 202). However, human agency functions at the level of experience in how much power one *feels* within the forces generating that experience. I'm not sure how pointing out geographies of struggle gets to the level of empowering agency.

Ben Rogaly's development of the concept of 'non-elite cosmopolitanism' might help us understand how the experience of demolition derby, as a cultural repertoire and spectacle, reveals *feelings* of power within landscapes of struggle. His focus on the oral histories of workers allows, as he puts it, 'not only an approach to labour geography that takes workers' moral geographies seriously, but one which is more aware of the changing lives and consciousness of the people involved' (2017). Highlighting examples of 'conviviality, or being at ease with difference,' Rogaly (2020) reveals how migrant stories become intertwined with the stories of locals as the various mobilities of capitalism evolve through time in Peterborough, England. My consultant Javier, the Mexican immigrant via California, was regarded among the other drivers in Northwest Arkansas with approbation because of his reputation as a skilled auto-body technician and an

exemplum of pure demolition derby ambition; he was one of the good ‘ol boys putting on a good show for the audience, which in Northwest Arkansas included a portion of Latinx families consistent with their now significant portion of the overall population. Javier was the first driver my consultant Dale sought out for me, perhaps because of his visibility. ‘We’re lookin’ for a Mexican guy with a limp,’ he said simply descriptively. Still marked by his alterity, Javier nonetheless intersected with other important meanings in the working-class culture of demolition derby, material integrity and showmanship. There were still confederate battle flags galore, but their presence revealed more about local obtuseness born of white privilege than about actual racist concepts of humanity. None of the saltires were aimed at Javier; rather, the stickers, car decorations, and actual banners were articulating a kind of carnival semiotics of ‘redneck-ness.’ As Rogaly concedes, examples of non-elite cosmopolitanism ‘do not exist separately from racisms or histories of colonialism but rather in relation to them’ (2020). The display of the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (which no one called it) can be read without associations with historical and contemporary racist ideologies because of the cultural myopia of privileged white semiosis. That semiosis, though, also includes the kind of ‘conviviality’ that Rogaly emphasizes as important to feelings of agency for working-class subjects, migrant and local.

The most important local meaning that Javier connected with is something I call material integrity. Just as important as its transgression against the logic of the traffic grid is demolition derby’s ethos of material integrity. This ability to convert the local material world to local uses, especially through communal work processes, intersects with nearly every axis of meaning foreclosing the identities of the drivers and fans I interviewed. Demolition derby is not a spectacle of destruction but a spectacle, as its name suggests, of demolition, of radical transformation of material from one form to another. The destruction of the utility of the automobiles nevertheless retains their value as masses of metal, as *moles*. Despite the geography of detritus and dereliction left in White County in the wake of the shale extraction bust, local material integrity made organic use of that detritus. When I talked to Eugene, the White County driver, and his colleagues at the Springdale demolition derby, they explained how they built the roll-cages for their cars from drilling pipes abandoned on the platforms around White County. Their use was transgressive not only in its creativity but also in its illicitness. Leon, Eugene’s friend, laughed that the acquaintance who supplied the pipes required that the identification bands be cut from each one to prevent anyone from tracing them back to him. When I visited Eugene’s home and shop in rural White County, he explained that the several demolished car bodies were being reserved for their scrap metal value. As Javier explained above, all the drivers, in both regions, spoke about using the capital from scrapped cars to fund the next round of derbies. Relating this transformation to class identities, Leon had remarked that the junk in Eugene’s yard might become ‘Rolls Royces or something.’ Likewise, the capitalist geography of extraction became the resources for Eugene’s material integrity. The foreclosures of his identity as ‘sorta blue collar’ required the meanings created by the repurposing of the geographical traces of capitalist order. Transforming the mining pipe to roll cages, he was making local meaning out of the material of extraction, a process over which he had no immediate control.

Though he expressed exhaustion from the building and demolishing of the cars, Eugene claimed, ‘we’ll run again’ because, as he put it, ‘once it gets in your blood’ demolition derby is addictive.

It's 'in your blood' because it corresponds to the rheological<sup>9</sup> processes of the body, processes antithetical to mining. Mitchell points out the importance of the human body in the making of geographies. 'Waged bodies—working people—are a capitalist problem,' he writes, 'because they have wills, needs, desires, and biological limits and they often—willfully—stand against the needs of capital.' Capitalism extracts energy (from workers' bodies, from holes in the shale) but rheological processes transform energy from one form to another as material moves through an environment. Such a geography is fluid and not circumscribable, like the demolition derby arena and the communal processes of building the cars for competition. Material integrity requires a sensitivity and creativity to the plasticity not only of materials themselves but also of their potential uses. Material integrity almost literally fulfills Mitchell call for 'a much fuller, even more materialist, approach to working-class geographies.' Eugene's use of the material from the geography of capitalism and his conversion of it into a geography of working-class identity reveals the agency of working people within such 'determinant' 'geographies of power.' Rather than a mere historical actor within a mythical gigantomachia of capital and labor, Eugene and the other drivers and fans are making meanings that convert space to a living place continuously. Though he receives his wage partially from itinerate logging, another process that tends toward mere extraction, demolition derby is 'in [his] blood.' He is not a mere representative of a mass; rather, through his forging of material through rheological dynamics, he is a maker wielding his agency through material integrity. He is like the subject of David Budbill's poem 'Roy McInnes' a welder described as 'Shaper, moulder, alchemist,/intermediary, priest,/his hands communicate a vision,/they create with skill and grace/an act of intercession between reality and need' (1990, p.32). Material integrity, then, reveals itself as an important mode of what Mitchell calls 'working-class geographies' and provides a semiotic space for Rogaly's 'non-elite cosmopolitanism' to emerge and for Linkon and Russo's community memories to operate.

Demolition derby is not an innocent spectacle; it is involved in the making of living meanings. What gives the spectacle a kind of organic integrity is that it is not—in fact, willfully and militantly not—a top-down entertainment. It has always been, and will continue to be, a spectacle generated by non-professional competitors using salvaged and repurposed consumer material. It will always be a rheological process, consistent with the material experience of working-class people themselves, in which material is neither created nor destroyed but simply transformed from one purpose to another, from scrap metal to 'Rolls Royces or something.' Instead of imagining an ideal working-class subjectivity, I have tried to reveal what working-class people themselves are saying through the spectacle of demolition derby. The spectacle and all of its processes are organic symbolic representations, and in that way, they are communicative discourses. They are communicating Raymond Williams' definition of 'culture:' 'common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience' (p. 15). The demolition derby driver speaks of that experience in exhaust and twisted metal. Just as the arena is a place of mobility and contestation, meanings resist stability and nomological values. If the highways and traffic laws reproduce a mythical epistemic apodeictic, the demolition derby arena responds with an equally mythic problematic. What demolition derby seems to say about the definitions of working-class subjectivities can best be

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<sup>9</sup> Borrowing the term from physics, I am applying it here metaphorically to point out the elasticity and plasticity of semiotic meanings within cultural resources. Heraclitus' aphorism, 'everything flows,' applies to materials and to meanings. Demolition derby embodies this concept of flow and continuous transformation.

summed up by drivers Kyle's and Debbie's own words: 'It's home-made, man' and 'Wide f'in' open.'

### Author Bio

**Billy Williams** received his doctorate in Cultural Studies from Claremont Graduate University and his Masters in English Literature from the University of Arkansas. Like converting a '79 Ford Fairmont to a demolition derby car, he is trying to find a book in his dissertation on demolition derby and working-class identities. He teaches philosophy in Upstate New York where he lives with his wife and daughter.

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