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## From the trailer to the ivory tower: The story of an unwilling resiliency poster child

Leia K. Cain, *University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Jonathan M. Coker, *University of South Florida*

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**From the trailer to the ivory tower: The story of an unwilling resiliency poster child**

**Leia K. Cain**

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

**Jonathan M. Coker**

*University of South Florida*

*In this piece, we share the story of Leia Cain, a white, queer, disabled woman from the rural U. S. Bible Belt who came from an impoverished background. We utilize Anzaldúa's autoethnographic framework of autohistoria-teoría to explore the implications of times when Leia was complimented for her resiliency, or similarly when the burden of being resilient was placed upon her, when she sought assistance from individuals in power who could have otherwise removed the barriers that necessitated her resiliency. We connect Leia's story to critical resilience literature that resists naturalizing adversity, and instead emphasizes the structural barriers of classism and sexism rather than placing the burden of resilience as an individual's weight to bear. Leia describes her effort to escape the stereotypes of being seen as white trash amidst the weight of these structural forces that impede her growth as a young academic. Her story contains implications for teachers and higher education faculty who may have the opportunity to work with impoverished women throughout educational spaces.*

**Keywords:** Resilience | autoethnography | critical resilience | White Trash

*"Congratulations, you're the youngest faculty member we've hired here!" One of my newest colleagues shares, bursting energetically into my office.*

*I snap into performing my newest role, fresh out of grad school and slightly caught off-guard but wanting to appear as a real faculty member. Whatever that means. "Thank you!" I nervously chuckle, feeling a bit uncomfortable on the receiving end of a somewhat strange compliment.*

*"I attended your job talk, and love that you do work about being a queer scholar with a disability. That's great! I do work on resilience. You're basically like a resilience poster child. We should chat." She pauses, staring at me, waiting for... what? An excited response? Me being thankful for being recognized?*

*Instead I feel like an outsider even as I get started in this new position. I am boiled down to these identities in need of resilience. I never chose the role of 'resilience poster child,' and it's not an identity that I particularly embrace.*

In this article we explore Leia's educational journey from white trash beginnings to tenure track professor at an R1 institution. Through an autoethnographic methodological lens, we reference her experiences to frame our argument that resilience literature often places the responsibility of being resilient onto marginalized individuals instead of addressing the systemic barriers creating the hardship. In alignment with our own social justice goals, we advocate for critical resilience approaches that focus on reducing adversity in the hopes of making the academy a more accessible and inclusive place. Leia's story, in particular, explores some of the difficulties that she experienced due to her background as a white woman from a lower

socioeconomic background, which we frame by exploring established literature surrounding ‘white trash’ women.

## Literature Review

Our approach to this topic is inspired by the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*’ encouragement of transdisciplinary scholarship. Therefore, it is imperative to situate Leia’s story within existing knowledge by first exploring the literature concerning resiliency, existing critiques of resiliency literature, and scholars who have examined white trash narratives within higher education. We also wish to note, however, that understanding our own positionality regarding these studies is of paramount importance. While there is much literature regarding resilience regarding marginalized populations, we are using Leia’s experiences as a white woman from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) social bracket. We explore our positionalities further in the methodology section of this article.

Richards and Dixon (2020) define resiliency as the “dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity” (p. 878). They continue to argue that fostering resilience skills is necessary to “prevent poor mental health outcomes that result from adverse responses to crisis as well as long-term stressors” (Richards & Dixon, 2020, p 878). Resilience has an interdisciplinary history, appearing initially in medicine, manufacturing, and mechanics before migrating to psychology in the 1950s (Alexander, 2013; Clarke et al., 1958). The original psychological conception of resilience was rooted in the U.S. American ideology of rugged individualism and patriarchal ideals of toughness; in fact, psychologists initially used the term ‘invulnerable’ to describe people that seemed unaffected by adversity, such as adults abused as children who did not become abusive parents themselves (Masten, 2001; Walsh, 2003; Wright et al., 2013). Developmental psychologists of the 1970s and 1980s researching this phenomenon then began using the term resilience (Garmezy, et al., 1984; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982). This use of the term marked a conceptual shift whereby resilience could be used to describe the ability to recover from adversity rather than being unaffected or invulnerable to adversity (Alexander, 2013). While the word resilience is ubiquitously recognized now, the concept of resilience continues to be greatly debated on whether it is a trait, a process, or an outcome (Southwick et al., 2014). To simplify the topic, broad discussions of resilience research typically describe the literature in terms of waves (Atallah et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2013).

Within our exploration of resiliency, we will be employing Atallah et al.’s (2013) three wave description of resilience research. Wave one, also called ‘bouncing back,’ focuses on individual traits and a system’s ability to accommodate adversity. In this conceptualization of resilience, resisting or recovering from adversity also entails regaining the status quo that was disrupted. Wave two, referred to as ‘bouncing forward,’ conceptualizes resilience as adaptation and growth. Atallah et al. (2013) describes the concept of bouncing forward as a more dynamic approach that moves beyond wave one’s concept of resilience as “unchanging strength” (p. 6), evidenced by an individual’s stable traits or unchanging systems. Instead, the authors argued that wave two researchers expanded the category of resilience to include those who experience both psychological damage as well as growth such as trauma survivors who developed ingenious coping systems to survive while still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the experience. Wave two included more community-based models and encouraged social justice and multicultural frameworks questioning the cultural and contextual factors of resilience, where responses to adversity is considered resilient in one context but maladaptive in another. Atallah

et al. (2013) further went on to describe wave three as “centering at the margins,” (p. 1), where researchers supported transdisciplinary approaches rather than the interdisciplinary approaches of waves two and one. Researchers who engage in transdisciplinary work across disciplines rather than the interdisciplinary concept of transferring knowledge between disciplines, as is common within biomedical models of resilience that seek to generalize from natural sciences into social science spaces. Alternatively, researchers within wave three commonly embrace more qualitative methods, intersectionality, and resilience research “that support[s] people in collectively overcoming rampant structural violence and holding accountable the power relations and institutions that affect them” (Atallah et al., 2019, p. 18).

### **Critiquing Resiliency**

Aligning our conception of resilience with Atallah et al.’s (2019) wave 3, we also highlight the literature of resilience that takes a critical stance by engaging with questions of power. Specifically, we are focused on resilience research that problematizes adversity. While no singular definition of resilience persists, adversity and adaptation are essential components as they are highlighted in a variety of definitions for the concept (Hart et al., 2016). Resilience research that treats adversity as an unchangeable constant runs the risk of naturalizing adversity in a way that is advantageous for nefarious uses of power. To this point, critics like Schwarz (2018) have indicated that “the concept of resilience may be at risk of reproducing power imbalances and discrimination within our society” (p. 529). For example, neoliberalism in the form of governments or corporations can responsabilize individuals to be resilient, while shirking their own responsibility. The result can lead to victim blaming those encountering the adversity, whether they are suffering from sexual assault or national security threats (Roth & Prior, 2014; Sugiura & Smith, 2020). In other words, resiliency becomes a false flag to shift blame onto individuals for how they respond to adversity, rather than questioning why the adversity is present in the first place.

To counter the naturalization of adversity, researchers and practitioners must challenge problematic conceptions of resilience. Mahdiani and Ungar (2021) coined the term “dark side of resilience” to confront these problematic conceptions, explaining that the dark side of resilience emerges when there is a wrong degree of, wrong context for, or a wrong usage of resilience. Although all of these can be harmful, the wrong context argument is particularly salient when problematizing adversity, because it demonstrates how applying resilience to the wrong context runs the risk of blaming individuals for systemic problems like poverty or climate change (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). To avoid this wrong context problem, researchers need to guard against decontextualizing adversity by focusing on the “structural embeddedness of individuals within their contexts” (Schwarz, 2018, p. 536). In other words, larger systems must also be held accountable for their culpability in creating the need for individuals to be resilient, rather than constantly raising the bar on the amount of resilience needed. In fairness, resilience research does have a long history of investigating interactions between individuals and larger contexts throughout the various waves of resilience research, particularly among ecological approaches (Atallah et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2013). Despite this, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers alike still tend to focus on what individuals should do differently to increase resilience (Hart et al., 2016). As Hart et al. (2016) asserts, “For the majority of definitions, resilience is anchored within an individual perspective” (p. 2). This overemphasizing of individual responsibility in resilience results in what Howell and Voronka (2021) describe as a

“technology of looking inward rather than confronting austerity measures or other matters of social justice” (p. 5).

To salvage resilience from perpetuating an ideology that replaces structural accountability with personal responsibility, a social justice approach termed Boingboing Resilience, seeks to empower individuals while still addressing the structural inequalities that create adversity (Hart et al., 2016). Reconceptualizing resilience towards social justice goals necessitates methodological changes such as the use of psychopolitical validity. From a psychopolitical validity standpoint, resilience research and interventions must be evaluated in terms of how well they chart the role of power in determining psychological phenomena. This prevents reducing the encountering of structural barriers to intrapersonal variables alone, whereby individuals are caught in an endless loop of what they could have done better to avoid poverty, racism, sexism, etc. (Prilleltensky, 2003). Researchers have also questioned the use of resilience among practitioners, such as social workers (Garrett, 2016; Van Breda, 2019). Garrett (2016) criticizes resiliency as lacking the needed attention for structural change, while Van Breda (2019) posits a more middle-ground approach with resilience requiring both individual and structural forces to eliminate adversity. Kuhlicke (2013) provides a useful guidepost for considering resilience in relationship to forces of power when he writes, “it could also be fruitful to address the question: Who is benefiting from the ‘myth of resilience’ and to what end?” (p. 74)? With this question in mind, in this study we seek to explore the impact that the myth of resilience has on an individual from an impoverished rural background.

### **Barriers and Resilience for “White Trash” Women Seeking the Professoriate**

For the context of resilience in our study, we found it helpful to read self-described white trash women’s autoethnographic accounts of the classist and sexist barriers they encountered while working their way up the proverbial *cursus honorum* of the professoriate (see Longley, 2020; Selman-Killingbeck, 2005; Tiffe, 2014). Pruitt (2016) traces the genealogy of the term “white trash” to describe poor white people originally in the South. The term has since expanded to describe poor white people from any region and carries connotations of laziness and dirtiness (Pruitt, 2016). Given the negative connotations of white trash, Selman-Killingbeck (2005) described the taboo of white trash women academics discussing their pasts:

One does not expect to find white-trash women in the hallowed halls of a university, let alone teaching the classes offered there. While many of us are doing exactly that, it is only rarely that we reveal our pasts and even more rarely that we discuss the road taken and the survival strategies that shaped our personal and professional lives (p. 61).

In her narrative, Selman-Killingbeck explains that the categories of race, gender, and class intermingled and separated in ways that created both academic and professional barriers. She discussed having to contend with low expectations from others regarding her academic and professional abilities, condescending remarks from male professors, and shock at the notion of graduate school and academic career tracks. The result has been academic anxiety and feeling like an imposter, while surviving through overcompensating and resisting through humor when possible (Selman-Killingbeck, 2005). Longley (2020) penned an autoethnography about her experience growing up as white and poor in a family of surveyors, and not seeing college as an option. Reiterating the taboo of revealing low social class in the workplace that Selman-

Killingbeck (2005) described, Longley's experience of being a first-generation student from a poor working-class family while contending with patriarchal forces within the academy. Longley (2020) parallels her experience of hiding her status as white trash to being in the closet regarding her sexuality.

Applying this more critical conceptualization of resilience to the issue of classist and sexist barriers to professorial careers, Goward (2020) defined resilience as a concept "for rich people" (p. 170). According to Goward, this is because there is a hidden cost of resilience for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, because resilience invokes a tacit demand for an amount of hard work that can often lead to damaging an individual's physical and psychological health. Furthermore, higher education's expectation of resilience is typically placed on college students who are considered at risk in a way that shifts responsibility from the institution to the individual college student. She explains that this maneuver is an added burden on these students and ignores how the institution could be changed (Goward, 2020).

Tiffe (2014), referencing her experiences as a white trash woman in academia, advocates for creating networks of support with other working-class academics as a type of collective caretaking of one another. She outlined actions that faculty can take to remove systemic barriers for working-class students. These actions include increased flexibility with deadlines to accommodate students struggling with difficulties such as work schedules, lack of internet access, and childcare arrangements. Tiffe (2014) further asserts that professors who publish papers should find ways to acknowledge Ph.D. students or working-class colleagues who may not have the time to write due to work schedules, yet still may have contributed to the overall thinking of the work. Additionally, professors can communicate ideas in teaching or in writing that is accessible to wider audiences, such as publishing in open-access journals (Tiffe, 2014). While these recommendations are not meant to be all-encompassing, Tiffe's (2014) suggestions contribute to our understanding of how we can better represent students facing difficulties that are outside of those faced by typical college students.

Within this piece, we have chosen to orient ourselves toward a critical conception of resilience that aligns most closely with Atallah et al.'s (2013) third wave and other critical approaches to resilience literature. We believe that individuals are considered resilient based on how the individual connects their story toward larger narratives of socio-political struggles. This requires the individual to engage in a meaning-making process of their story whereby they reflect on the systemic barriers based on their social position with regard to class, ability, race, sexuality, gender, and other axes of oppression. We aim to do this through the sharing of Leia's autoethnographic account of her encounters with resiliency.

### **Autohistoria-teoría and Other Methodological Considerations**

Over the course of our relationship we, Leia and Jonathan, have joked many times about being resiliency poster children due to our shared backgrounds, queer identities, and the barriers over which we found ourselves stumbling into the academy. Our storytelling sessions often took on an Anzaldúan feeling as we reflected upon the amalgamation of public happenings and personal thoughts surrounding our shared experiences. For this study, we seek to situate Leia's life story within Anzaldúa's (2000) autohistoria-teoría framework, which can be described as "life-story and self-reflection... [as well as] cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth and other forms of theorizing" (Keating, 2009, p. 9). Further, Bhattacharya and Keating (2018) posit,

Writing from within spaces of oppression we have experienced ourselves or to which we have borne witness, we constantly interrogate how we situate and resist our ontoepistemological orientation... Thus, instead of directing the gaze toward an Other, we write from within the spaces of the Other(s) as we understand, experience, imagine, and enact them (p. 345).

Bhattacharya and Keating (2018) further continue that delving into our consciousness allows us to “arrive at a place of clearing from where we can generate possibilities for liberation and justice, while inviting and inspiring others to do the same” (p. 346). An important aspect of sharing Leia’s story is her desire to inspire others to acknowledge the role that adversity plays for many others within scholarly spaces who have journeyed from poor, white trash backgrounds, and work to remove the barriers that are often put into place simply due to stereotypical understandings of these populations.

Further, we acknowledge the tension of our use of Anzaldúa’s work to theorize the story of Leia’s personal history as a white woman from a white trash background, we have made a concerted choice to use Anzaldúa’s framework to elevate the work of women-of-color. We acknowledge this tension, and the possibility that our use of autohistoria-teoría may appear to some as performative allyship. Our goal is not to be appropriative, but instead, to utilize and cite the work of women of color, as we agree with Picowar (2021) that doing so is imperative in order to confront white supremacy within scholarship and citation metrics. We also feel that this framework is useful in supporting Leia’s story because the cultural space of the U.S. Bible Belt, and her experience as a “white trash woman” within it, is an imperative contextual lens that cannot be separated from the story.

### **Producing Leia’s Narratives**

Autoethnography is a methodological practice that “explores an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions” (Custer, 2014, p. 1). Jones et al. (2013) argued that autoethnography “asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do” (p. 10). This method is productive for use within inter- and transdisciplinary research (Schmid, 2019), as the action of exploring our own lives and perspectives of those lived experiences easily lends itself to whichever disciplinary lens we choose to pursue.

Leia utilized Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2017) framework of writing as inquiry to produce her narratives. These scholars utilize this framework to assert that the act of writing, itself, is a productive way to explore the writer’s “particular view of reality and of the Self” (p. 1411). Therefore, Leia wrote extensively about her experiences in order to understand her own framing of these experiences and shared those stories with close confidants to seek feedback about which portions of her story to share within this article. She then shared her writing with Jonathan, who assisted her in filling in the gaps that he felt while reading her story as someone who did not yet know these details of her experiences.

## **Reflexive Considerations**

Though the story that we share is of Leia's personal life experiences, we worked as a collective team to analyze her story, situate it within the existing literature and, ultimately, inform our critique of how resiliency is often used inappropriately to shift the blame to individuals for lacking resilience at the detriment to enacting social change. We therefore found it imperative to share both of our identities and ontoepistemological considerations.

Leia is a queer, white, woman with an invisible-to-the-eye physical disability. The way that she approaches sharing her story is affected by each of these lenses, though she was not yet out regarding her queerness or disability status over the course of the autoethnographic narrative below. She came from an impoverished rural background in the U.S. South - a region commonly known as the Bible Belt, where she encountered various trauma throughout her life. Epistemologically, she identifies as a critical interpretivist (see Doolin, 1998; Pozzebbon et al., 2014; Prasad & Prasad, 2002), and personally feels that scholars who focus primarily on building more resilient populations instead of working to remove the barriers that necessitate resiliency ultimately reinforce injustice.

Jonathan is a critical poststructuralist educational psychologist (see Apple, 2013; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). He has had multiple, personal experiences with extreme stress and trauma as a result of growing up in the Bible Belt as a queer person of mixed ethnicity who is often raced as non-white, and experienced housing instability both as a child and as an adult. Despite this, he was able to earn an advanced degree, and further, encountered others who have co-opted his personal story into resilience narratives. Jonathan is therefore both personally and professionally invested in the socio-cultural ways in which resilience is situated.

Jonathan and Leia met as instructor and student in a doctoral qualitative methodology course, where Leia was professor and Jonathan was the student. They discovered their shared queer, disabled, Southern, low SES backgrounds through reflexivity exercises in class; but whereas Leia struggled with the label of poor White trash, Jonathan struggled with the subculture of Southern Christian gentleman masculinity (see Hernandez, 2014). Scholars of white trash often talk about subcultural splits like this to further divide the poor against one another into a noble class of people who handle their poverty with dignity in contrast to the lazy, unmotivated group (Isenberg, 2017).

Over the course of the semester, Leia provided reflective opportunities in class as a space for students to share their perspectives and feelings regarding course content. However, Jonathan experienced these as attempts to shame him and lower his status. This all came to a crescendo when Jonathan lost his temper in an assignment by pointing out the power structures implicit in the tasks. To his surprise, Leia agreed with his assessment, and their related conversations led to deeper discussions of structural inequalities in academia, as Leia is dedicated to demystifying academia as much as possible. In addition to their shared identities, Jonathan's experience of being raced differently in the South also sparked discussions of racial inequalities. While Leia and Jonathan cope with their individual marginalized identities differently, they realized that they had a shared goal of fighting classist, ableist, regionalist, racist, cissexist, and homophobic barriers.

Through these regular meetings, they eventually discussed their shared feelings about the various ways in which resilience can be weaponized to blame marginalized individuals for not working hard enough to overcome their hardships. Though they are no longer at the same university, when Leia decided to share her story, she reached out to Jonathan due to his expertise



in educational psychology and resilience literature, knowing that his psychological perspective was imperative for framing her experiences.

Finally, it bears mention that we engaged in a similar practice while exploring Jonathan's experiences as a gay middle school teacher in the Southern U.S. (see Coker & Cain, 2019), and for this piece, chose to focus on Leia's story of the encounters that necessitated her resilience. In both pieces, we desire to "blur the boundaries between academically privileged and marginalized ways of knowing and being" (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018, p. 346).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In preparing Leia's story for publication, we have utilized pseudonyms for her transgressors, and slightly altered some details in order to protect their anonymity. Further, we wish to acknowledge that many of the faculty and staff present within her story are no longer with the institutions in which she was enrolled at the time of these memories. We also embrace the idea that personal memories may be imperfect and flawed, coupled with an acknowledgment that we are only providing our own lenses to experience Leia's memories, with which others may disagree based on how they conceptualize their own memories of the experiences (Ellis, 2004; Lapadat, 2017). These beliefs align with our paradigmatic beliefs of the multiple nature of truth(s); we are presenting Leia's truth and acknowledge that the truths of others within her stories may vary. In considering these actions and beliefs, we feel that emotional and professional safety have been achieved for all present within the narratives.

In regard to the final narrative, provided within the conclusion of this article, Leia reached out to her current dean in order to obtain her permission for sharing the story, as anonymity is not possible given the ease of learning where Leia currently works.

### **From the Trailer to the Ivory Tower: Leia's Story**

*I was born in rural North Carolina, in the same hospital room and delivered by the same doctor as my father had been 22 years earlier. My parents took me home to their trailer, which was heated and had power thanks to the very long extension cord that went outside of our front door, across the yard, and into my grandparents' house. From what I have been told, sometimes trucks would drive over the cord, causing our power to blink.*

*Upon my father's return from the Navy, my parents discovered that our small town offered very little in terms of jobs for young people. My father did not wish to carry on the family businesses of farming and land surveying, so my parents made the decision to move us to 'the big city.' This action was highly criticized within our family and local community; we were seen as traitors who were abandoning everything they had done for us.*

*Our move to Charlotte also included a move into a rental house that was easily twice the size of our family's trailer. We added another bedroom, and perhaps more excitingly, a second bathroom. I began second grade in a new school, which might as well have been a new world. My classmates easily homed in on my second-hand clothes, and chose to reject me immediately through mostly ignoring me, with the exception of when they discovered new reasons to tease me. I felt as though I had been immediately branded as an outcast. This was a new experience for me, as so many of us in my former school had been in equal levels of poverty.*

*During the summer between fourth and fifth grade, the final elementary school that I attended chose to approach students and their families and inquire about how we would feel*

*about wearing school uniforms. I, personally, was ecstatic; I saw this as an opportunity to bring me and my peers to similar levels of dress, and the school board itself touted that uniforms were a “great equalizer” and a step toward ending bullying. This magnet school was located in an urban district of Charlotte, bringing in a strange mix of upper-class and lower-class students, which therefore caused a great deal of division between the haves and the have-nots.*

*Surprisingly, the vote to shift the student body into uniforms passed with flying colors. I was excited to return to school that fall, but soon found myself ousted again due to my family’s inability to afford name brand navy blue shirts and khaki pants. Fifth-grade girls across the playground bragged about their Tommy Hilfiger clothes, while I ripped off my K-Mart tags.*

*Over the years we did what many low-income families do - we moved. We moved a lot. On average, every two years found me entering a new school, with us settling into a new rental home. I would not know stability until high school, where our moves continued, but I was finally able to remain in one school for a meaningful amount of time due to carefully chosen addresses and convenient memory slips that caused us to not alert the school that I had moved. My status as an outsider remained as we settled into a middle school in a smaller suburb where students had grown up together and had known each other for their entire lives. I was the new kid, and even worse, they seemed to be able to smell my white trash beginnings on me - a mix of moth balls, the distinct smell of clothes from Goodwill, and the crud pried out from under my fingernails after a long day shelling peas.*

*My freshman year began with our car getting rear-ended by a teenager who was driving while distracted, causing a chain of events that led to the hospital releasing me under strict concussion warnings.*

*The story of my accident spread quickly throughout the school, and I suddenly found myself speaking to other students who had not spared a thought of me before. One of my fellow marching band members, a sophomore by the name of Chris, approached me in the days after the accident to check on my well-being. We quickly learned that we had a lot in common, and soon found ourselves falling into the deep, life-consuming fires of young love. Chris became my safe haven through my parents’ divorce and the ultimate family fallout that followed. His home, and his family members, harbored the calm space where I could simply breathe and be the kid that I still was. Marching band became a way of life, and finally, thanks to introductions organized by Chris, a source of friends for me.*

*Over the next three years, Chris and I would lead an on-again, off-again relationship that could rival any teen drama. I remained close to his family, even in the off-again phases, as his parents were highly involved in marching band activities. His mother would fix my hair before competitions, and Chris would later instant message me to share, “Mom says you want me back, bad.” I would, in turn, playfully chastise his mom for sharing “my business.” Even though we were in a constant cycle of on-and-off, in my deepest heart, I simply knew that I would spend the rest of my life with him.*

*In September of my senior year, during an off-again phase, I drove past Chris while I was on the way to school and he was on the way to work, having graduated the year before. I clearly remember thinking to myself that I needed to get back in touch with him, as I had not seen him since his birthday in July. His face as we made eye contact and the flash of him recognizing me will be forever etched into my mind.*

*A few days later, while wrapping up marching band practice before our first competition of the season, the band director called everyone to the front of the practice field and shared the news that Chris had died the night before in a car accident while on his way home from work.*

*My next memory is waking up on the ground, surrounded by the concerned, tear-streaked faces of my fellow band members. I sat up, immediately pulling my cell phone out of my pocket and turning it on. Surely enough, I had missed multiple phone calls from Chris's mom that night and early morning, almost begging me to call her back.*

*I don't have many other memories of that year. I know that I finished out the marching band season, as I felt that it was what I felt that Chris would have wanted me to do. My other memories of that school year come later, when I found a way to escape the crushing weight of his ghost on every street corner.*

*As seniors, our guidance office invited us in to discuss our future. I was already on a first-name basis with the guidance counselor due to Chris's death earlier in the year; I had been repeatedly pulled out of class to attend various grief counseling groups.*

*As far as the future went, though, I was unsure of what I wanted to do, but knew that I wanted to get far away from my life where it currently stood. I needed to get away from the kids who had tormented me for years, and from the near-constant haunting of memories from my years with Chris. Even at the time of this writing, as seventeen years have passed, I still avoid visiting because I feel him there, lingering in random spaces around the town I once called home.*

*I walked into the guidance office and slowly slid into the chair across from her. The huge college notebook in front of her gleaned in the cruel sunlight streaming through the window, mocking my lack of knowledge and flashing sunspots into my eyes. She glanced away from her computer screen, making eye contact and seeming surprised. I wasn't sure why she was surprised, as she told the front desk worker to send me back, but I nervously said, "Hey, I'm, uh, here for the college stuff?"*

*She blinked a few times and tilted her head to one side. "I didn't know you were interested in college?" She looked away, picking at a speck of invisible dust that seemed to have suddenly settled onto her hot pink blazer, just next to the silver flower-shaped brooch that she often wore. Her teased, bleached blonde curls shifted over her shoulder, seemingly taking the speck with them and satisfying her discomfort-driven shift.*

*I sucked in a quick, deep breath, internalizing the overly potent stench of flowers that permeated the room thanks to her scented potpourri. "Oh!" I started to panic, "I just... I want to get out of here. I want to be a therapist, I think. The grief groups have really helped me after Chris's death, and so I was thinking that I would like to help people, too. My friends always call me the group's therapist. So, I guess I want to go to college and study psychology."*

*She squinted her eyes and her lips tightened as she shoved them to the side of her face, creating an angry red slash of disappointment. "Well... how about community college? That's a much better place for a student like you." I wasn't sure what she meant, but remained focused on my goal, saying, "I, uh, didn't think you could be a therapist with a community college degree?"*

*She backtracked; "Oh, well, you can't unless you go on to a four-year university later. But let's not worry about university now - let's get you into a community college. They will accept anybody."*

*I doubled down on my questions, frustrated by where the conversation was going. "Can I go to a four-year university first? Since that's what I need to do to be a therapist?"*

*"Well, I just think it would be better for you..."*

*"Wait. Why would it be better for me?"*

*My question was met with a tense silence. You could see the guidance counselor's face working through what it was that she wanted to say. She hesitated before once again starting,*

*“Students like you...” a pregnant pause, “It’s just, with your background, and your GPA, most universities won’t grant you admission. Have you even taken the SAT yet?”*

*I had not, but I was so crushed by what she said that I didn’t answer her question. I looked down at my hands, my fingernails biting crescents into my palms. Instead of answering, I simply said, “Okay, thank you, I’m sorry to waste your time,” before getting up and leaving - and avoiding eye contact to keep my tears from betraying me. Part of me hoped that she would stop me before I crossed the threshold back into the hallway, but she simply went back to typing away on her computer.*

*On my way back to class, I ran into my favorite English teacher and closest adult confidant and shared what she had told me. He suggested that I not let her get to me, and instead, show her what I’m capable of. I nodded, seeming to understand that it was up to me to find a way out of this town, and into a future where I could be someone else.*

*I went home that night, booted up our computer, and started researching the SAT and college admissions guidelines. She was right - my GPA had suffered in high school. When my parents separated early in my high school career, they had stopped asking about my grades, instead focusing on larger issues such as custody, financial support, and balancing holidays. In my wildly emotional teenage brain, I felt as though my own life were unimportant to them. It was at this shift in time that I had given up on many aspects of school, skipping most homework assignments unless they seemed absolutely necessary to passing a class. I made sure to maintain at least a 2.5 in order to participate in extracurricular activities, as marching band, theatre, arts honors society, and literature magazine meetings kept me from having to go home too early. Sometimes, upon arriving home, the power would be out, or the phone would be turned off, and so I found it to be more advantageous if I arrived home after my mom, giving her time to deal with the problems.*

*Regardless of my low GPA, I was fortunate enough to have a handful of teachers who believed in me. They saw what I was capable of even when I was not turning in my homework. I had been invited to enroll, and had done so, in advanced courses such as honors trigonometry, AP English, AP European History, AP Art, and AP Physics. Later that year I failed my AP tests, likely due to undiagnosed ADHD coupled with an anxiety disorder that caused me to panic during high-stakes tests and forget the material, but my grades in these challenging courses were still high.*

*Though my SAT scores left something to be desired, I obtained excellent recommendations from those amazing teachers, wrote statements about my difficulties losing Chris earlier in the year and growing up constantly moving, and focused primarily on how badly I wanted to go to college, become a therapist, and one day make the world a better place.*

*I applied to five universities without assistance from my guidance counselor and was eventually admitted into all five. My 2.9 GPA did not bar me from anywhere that I wanted to go. I chose to attend my university because it was five hours away from home, along with the fact that the ‘College Announcements’ wall outside of my guidance counselor’s office showed that no other graduating seniors from my school had chosen to go there. I wanted a new start, where perhaps the white trash background from which I was desperately seeking to escape could not follow me. I added my name in pen, choosing not to go into the office to tell her and ask her to print a sticker with my name on it. She didn’t deserve my good news.*

*The sticker was added a few days later. She must have noticed.*

*However, college did not end up being the great salvation that I expected it to be. A few years later, while sitting in a seminar, an older professor, dressed impeccably in a button-up*

shirt, slacks, and tie, screamed at me in the middle of class because he felt that I had misunderstood panopticism. My classmates looked down, scared to speak up and be the next target. “Did you even do the reading?” he sneered, hoping to catch me in a lie. “I did,” I said, desperation creeping into my voice as I picked at the fraying edge of my jeans, feet pulled up into the seat as though I could shield myself, “and shared this example in another class, where the professor said that it was a good example...”

“They were misinformed,” he cut me off, adding, “and if you want to go to grad school then I would suggest that you not cross your professors like this. We know more than you. Who even are you? It’s not like you’re going to even get in anyway! I’ve seen your grades! I hope the rest of you aren’t in a study group with Miss Leia here.”

I bit my tongue, remembering my guidance counselor. People like me weren’t meant to attend college anyway - why would I ever go to graduate school? The admissions committee would smell the white trash on my application. I was clearly lucky just to have made it this far.

Eventually, though, I was accepted into my department’s master’s program, but told by another professor that I was only admitted due to having a few professors on my side who thought that my once-again-low GPA was not indicative of the kind of work I could truly do. Dr. Panopticon found me in the graduate student office one evening and leaned into the door frame, portraying a false sense of casualness, and blocking my access to the door. He sneered, and I could almost see flames in his eyes as he bit out, “You know that you were only accepted because of Ms. Alessia, right?” referencing a non-tenure track faculty member whom I had become close with.

I froze, a deer in headlights, and feebly squeaked out, “I am thankful that Ms. Alessia thought that I was capable of this program, and I hope to prove her right. I’m really sorry if my admission upset you. I’m sorry. Did you... uh... were you looking for someone?”

“No, I found what I was looking for.” He closed the door, and I was left alone, staring at the wall and wondering what I was doing with my life. I was no longer interested in becoming a therapist, but instead had fallen in love with research during my undergraduate program. All I knew at this point was that I wanted to learn more about research, and that, eventually, I wanted to enter a Ph.D. program and be a professor like Ms. Alessia, who I had been fortunate enough to meet during my undergraduate years. I wanted to one day help other students from marginalized backgrounds demystify academia, as she had been one of the few faculty members that I had met who was open about what working in higher education was like.

In another professor’s class that semester, who I had not met before joining the graduate cohort, I learned that I was gaining a reputation among the faculty who were close with Dr. Panopticon. During a late-evening class, this professor turned to me and said, “Dr. Panopticon shared that you struggled with theory in his class last year. I was hoping that you would try harder, since we let you into the graduate program, but I saw on Blackboard this afternoon that you still had not even downloaded the reading for the week.” I was floored, and, not knowing what to say, pulled out a printed copy of the article. I held it up to the class, dumbfounded but silent, and showed him the highlights and notes that I had added in the margins throughout the article. I finally choked on my words and told him that a classmate had printed it for me when she printed her own copy, though the classmate in question did not speak up. He let out a dark chuckle and told us to “let this be a lesson for everyone” that “part of being a student means performing the role of student so that professors know that you care.” I was terrified for years after this conversation that other faculty members were tracking my actions within virtual Learning Management Systems.

*Another evening, he put me on the spot; “Miss Leia - you won our undergraduate paper contest last year.”*

*“Yes! I did!” I beamed, proud to have won an academic award - something that I would not have imagined for myself before; an award that I had only applied for due to encouragement from Ms. Alessia. “It was about-”*

*“I know what it was about,” he interrupted. “You utilized symbolic interactionism. I didn’t think you should win.”*

*I blanched, not knowing how to respond, and unable to control my face, which was glowing with embarrassment. Dr. Symbolic Interactionism leaned back, placing his perfectly polished shoes on the table and extending his arms behind his head in mock relaxation. After a moment he smirked and flipped his tie over his shoulder before returning his hand to the back of his head and continuing on; “Since you know SI so well,” he continued, “explain it to the class.”*

*I struggled through my explanation, my brain repeating the words of Dr. Panopticon and my high school guidance counselor over and over again, in an almost sadistic chant, interrupting the flow of my thoughts, causing my tone and words to shift in and out of focus. My heart pounded in my ears, each beat screaming “you shouldn’t be here, you don’t belong here.”*

*Upon wrapping up my explanation, Dr. Symbolic Interactionism lashed out again with, “I didn’t think that your writing deserved to win, but that was an acceptable enough explanation. Please stay after class for a few minutes so I can correct your mistakes.” I nodded, staring at the table in front of me to avoid eye contact.*

*After class, once the room had emptied out from my peers, who made sympathetic eye contact with me as they left, Dr. Symbolic Interactionism began screaming, “How dare you bring up your award in my classroom, trying to show off like you know more than me!” I was shocked - after all, he had been the one to bring it up. He continued, “you should be glad that you even got into the program. You don’t belong here. You’re definitely not going to get into a doctoral program.” He then shoved the classroom door open, and I crumpled into my chair, no longer able to maintain my composure. My partner was waiting outside of the room to drive me home, and the professor spoke to him, saying, “You’re with Leia? Sorry for what you’re going to have to deal with tonight.”*

*I dropped out of the program at the end of the first semester. It was the only thing that I had ever willingly quit in my life, and I felt like an abject failure. I emailed the program coordinator and asked for a meeting and spent the weekend leading up to the meeting with knots in my stomach. Would he try to convince me to stay? Could I even be convinced to stay? At the meeting, the program coordinator, a kind, older man with an understanding smile, I shared what these two men had said to me over the course of the years. He simply said, “That does sound difficult,” and explained the withdrawal process. I was heartbroken by his seeming lack of care over my situation, and perhaps more distraught over his lack of an attempt to convince me to stay. This conversation did nothing other than reinforce my belief that I did not belong, and that further, I was not wanted. Nothing to my knowledge was done to address the abuse of Drs. Panopticon and Symbolic Interactionism, though now as a faculty member I understand that situations are often handled behind closed doors. Over the years, I noted that both men continued to have successful careers.*

*I spent the next months reflecting upon my life to that point and moving across the state to be closer to my family. Similarly to my high school outcomes, my undergraduate GPA had been a wreck. I had tried so hard in college, and unlike high school did my homework, but my test anxiety grew exponentially over the years. Along with that hardship, I experienced many losses*

*across my personal life, and was sexually assaulted in my junior year. I was doing well enough academically, though, to be invited into graduate level research and statistics courses as an undergraduate, mirroring my ability to participate in AP courses as a high schooler regardless of my low GPA. Once again, I was fortunate enough to have a few professors who believed in me. They helped me plan my next steps, though Ms. Alessia was disappointed in me for leaving my program. By doing so, she shared, I had “let Dr. Panopticon win.”*

*The only thing that I knew for certain was that I still wanted to go to graduate school. The graduate level research methodology and statistics courses that I attended while enrolled as an undergraduate student had given me a taste of what graduate school could bring, and I was desperate for more engagement at that level. I knew, however, that I did not want to return to sociology due to my traumatic experiences with Drs. Panopticon and Symbolic Interactionism. Further, while I knew that I wanted to take time off to decide what path I should take, I also had no idea what to do with a bachelor's degree in sociology and found myself in a teacher licensure program at another university in order to teach for a few years while I decided what I wanted to do in the future.*

*In the final semester before my teaching internship, my graduate assistantship advisor said to me, “I’m surprised that you aren’t studying research - you love it so much, it really seems like a natural fit.” I will never forget this moment; my world stopped. I turned to her, wide-eyed, and said, “you can study research?!” She laughed, made a few advantageous introductions, and sent me information about various educational research-focused programs. Within two weeks I had dropped out of the teacher licensure program, this time feeling much more certain about my future, and joined an educational research program that required moving to another state to begin a new chapter in my life.*

*My new M.Ed. and subsequent Ph.D. program went much better in terms of my GPA. Most faculty within these programs did not utilize tests, instead prioritizing performance assessments that allowed me to demonstrate my knowledge without dealing with the anxiety that ripped through me while taking exams. However, early in my program, I encountered a professor who shared that she had voted against my admission in the program review, and even though I tried hard to impress her and did well in her class, she made her disdain for me apparent as often as possible through snide remarks in front of my classmates, sarcastic quips when I visited her in office hours, and disparaging comments in her written feedback on my assignments. Her class, one of the few that required formal exams, pushed me to finally seek help for my anxiety disorder and gain accommodations from the student disability support office.*

*Years later, another professor told me that I “was not scholarly enough for the program,” suggesting instead that other programs may be a better fit for the type of work that I was submitting in his class. I was too scared to ask what he meant, in case he, too, discovered that I wasn’t meant to be there... in case he smelled the white trash on me that I had worked so hard to eliminate in this new space that I had hoped would be a blank slate.*

*Yet another professor often told me that she wasn’t sure I would graduate, saying, “This isn’t how you handle a Ph.D. program. I know that finances are strained, but we should pretty much be pushing you out and forcing you to stop taking classes. Don’t you know that most people take a full seven years in their Ph.D. program?” My exorbitant student loan debt did not agree with her assertion that I should take more classes beyond the degree’s requirements.*

*A different, trusted professor, while trying to be helpful, shared that I needed to “work on hiding [my] Southern accent, as other academics at conferences would assume that [I was] stupid.” This caused me to panic before my first conference presentation; I hated the idea that*

*other scholars would see the white trash background from which I had tried so desperately to separate myself.*

*Later in my journey, I would spend time in this professor's office crying as she offered me tissues and hugs while I asked why the others hated me so much. "They don't," she assured me, "they just don't know how much they are hurting you. You should tell them - it could really open the door for a better relationship." I took her advice, emailing one of my more difficult professors and saying, "I'm really struggling with some of the conversations that we have had, and would love to talk to you about those feelings." The professor I emailed replied with one simple line; "It sounds like you should visit the counseling center." As a junior faculty member today, I understand that universities have varying policies outlining the level of support faculty are permitted to offer, and perhaps she was following university policy by turning me toward the counseling center, but at the time I felt a sharp sting of rejection from her email.*

*While working on my dissertation, I sought advice from another professor, and shared my frustrating experiences with other faculty who had treated me poorly. He declined to offer assistance, but did say that he sympathized with my plight, adding, "What you're saying is some really serious stuff. I mean, really serious. But, you know, I am very impressed that you came this far, and that you have a faculty position lined up for after graduation. Most of the people who have been through what you have been through wouldn't make it, but you did. That shows a lot of gumption, of resilience. The literature could learn from you!" He then let out a good-natured laugh, and in my heart, I just knew that I wasn't meant to be helped. Though I acknowledge that students are not often privy to conversations between faculty, I saw no indication that he ever intervened on my behalf, though his positional power dynamics were in his favor. Instead, he complimented my resilience.*

*Upon defending my dissertation, I noticed that joy was not my most immediate response as I cried into my partner's arms. Instead of celebrating the momentous occasion, I primarily felt relieved to no longer be a student in search of validation from faculty who were unwilling to provide it.*

## **Discussion**

Resilience can function as a mask placed on stories of hardship that simultaneously aggrandize individuals while also robbing them of their agency. Often, an individual with marginalized identities experiences praise for their resiliency related to their personal accomplishments and is then robbed of the opportunity to critique the institution in perpetuating the systemic inequality that necessitated their resilience. Interpreting stories of hardship as personal success stories also allows those in academic institutions to forego any reflections on their part in creating or perpetuating these inequalities. The hardship in the story becomes a plot device to show how wonderful our heroine is for overcoming the odds, leaving the origin of those odds unquestioned. Investigating why the hardships that Leia experienced existed in the first place forced us both to confront the ways in which academic institutions have yet to address inequities based on social class, sex, and region. When resilience is used in this way, the individual becomes a poster child for the fiction of meritocracy. We argue that institutional authority figures then use these stories from resiliency poster children to gaslight others experiencing hardship to succeed against the odds, rather than emboldening them to speak out against injustice. This decision then tasks the individual experiencing marginalization to bear the



weight of their success and failure while simultaneously dismissing the institution itself from making changes necessary for justice.

In this piece, we have provided a story of resilience that captures the “structural embeddedness of individuals within their contexts” (Schwarz, 2018, p. 536). By presenting one individual’s story in depth, we are utilizing autohistoria-teoría to explore the deeper implications and chain of events that necessitated Leia’s resilience. In this section, we present connections between Leia’s story and existing literature surrounding resiliency. We begin by detailing the adversity that necessitated resilience through a description of the structural barriers, then we show how her adversity was made into a personal responsibility rather than an indictment of a poor system, and finally we explain how her experiences are a reflection of the particular challenges and costs faced by academics with white trash beginnings.

### **Structural Barriers in the Form of Classism and Sexism**

In line with our goals of describing adversity in relation to power, we first explored Leia’s experiences of encountering structural barriers (Atallah et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2016). Leia experienced repeated acts of classism and sexism in educational environments. In elementary and middle school, acts of classism manifested through classmates socially excluding her due to indications of her low SES, made apparent through the quality of her clothes and lack of school permanence due to housing instability. In high school, she experienced classism through her guidance counselor discouraging her pursuit of a university education alongside managing a tragic loss without access to a therapist.

In both her undergraduate and master’s programs, Leia was bullied both during and outside of class by her professors. While it is difficult to attribute a cause for this, there are indications that classism and sexism were present. One professor used her GPA as an indication that she was unworthy of being a college student. This assumption signals a lack of class consciousness around GPAs, as the individual assumes K-12 educational systems are meritocracies in which GPAs demonstrate academic ability alone. Given Leia’s location in a conservative area where girls and women are discouraged from educational attainment, using high school GPA alone as a predictor of academic success can also be seen as a sexist practice. In her graduate program, the professor speaking over Leia to her male partner demonstrates that his behavior was rooted in sexism. In both instances, the authority figures sought to actively discourage Leia’s educational goals to the point of even advocating against her admission into a graduate program. As Leia points out later, Drs. Panopticism and Symbolic Interactionism enjoyed successful careers despite their academic bullying. This suggests that some academic systems may not only tolerate this behavior but even reward it. Later in her Ph.D. program, Leia continued to experience educational gatekeeping. Of particular note is the professor who insisted on a seven-year track to a Ph.D., despite knowing that Leia did not have the economic resources to achieve this. However, Leia also experienced those who sought to help her, such as her graduate assistantship supervisor who encouraged her educational pursuits, who serves as an example of a supportive actor within the structural university system.

### **The Burden of Resilience - An Individual’s Weight to Bear**

Consistent with our critique of resilience as overly focused on individual responsibility rather than systemic change, we next turn to the ways in which resilience was used to make Leia

responsible as an individual (Howell & Voronka, 2021). Throughout Leia's academic journey, she shared how she was complimented for her resiliency. At the beginning of this piece, she shared the tale of a colleague who described her as a "resiliency poster child." In this action, resiliency was functioning as a discourse that praised individuals, while simultaneously eliminating culpability for systems of support. Johnson and Down (2013) argued that "the discourse of resiliency has been used by proponents of a neo-conservative agenda to shift responsibility for human well-being away from social organizations to the individual" (p. 708). The colleague's compliment made use of this type of resiliency discourse because it communicated that Leia's story was evidence of a remarkable individual who triumphed against the odds, rather than a story about an individual who endured the costs of failed systems of support. Although this may be well-intentioned, it also pressured Leia into an awkward professional situation where she must refuse a compliment to regain her agency, if she wants to interpret her personal story as evidence of the need for larger systemic changes.

Leia's academic journey has also been marked by the indifference of those in power, and often, those in power have justified an offer of help through a comment on how resilient she is. For example, Leia shared that she approached various authority figures about her situation, such as her guidance counselor, a trusted English teacher, a program coordinator, and a tenured professor in her Ph.D. program. Each of these individuals simply placed the onus of being resilient on her instead of helping her. In one instance, a program professor declined to assist her, yet complimented her resiliency. Like the earlier example, the discourse of resiliency was being used here to praise an individual. The function of resiliency as a discourse in this instance was not to maintain a particular interpretation of her personal story. Instead, the function here was to deny help. Like the earlier example, Leia was put in a situation where she could either professionally discredit herself by claiming she was not resilient enough to do it without help or accept a compliment that also meant accepting that no help was available. Equating structural barriers to intrapersonal problems is what Prilleltensky (2003) describes as a type of psychopolitical reductionism, common among certain uses of resiliency. This can also be seen again in the denial of help of another professor who redirected Leia to a counselling center rather than addressing the problem which was occurring in their class. This vividly illustrates how academic problems can be turned into psychological concerns that then require resiliency. This aligns with the critiques of resiliency literature presented by Mahdiani and Ungar (2021), who argued that those incorrectly applying resiliency blame individuals for systemic problems, and ultimately perpetuate inequality. While we celebrate Leia's success in overcoming these systemic barriers and thus demonstrating resiliency, we feel a growing concern for others from similar backgrounds who may be stopped by these barriers and then attribute their failures to a lack of resiliency. If the trusted individuals who Leia approached had instead utilized what Schwarz (2018) refers to as corrective action to attend to the structural and systemic barriers encountered by individuals within their own contexts, perhaps more meaningful assistance could have been achieved.

Resiliency that faults the individual also has the potential to discourage action and create unhelpful rumination. For example, one supportive professor suggested that if Leia left her first master's program, then it was allowing Dr. Panopticon's abuse to win. The supportive professor thus framed the situation as a lack of resiliency on Leia's behalf, rather than seeking to address the issue with the party who had the power. Additionally, this discourages an action that may have led to positive change for Leia as well as the system, as it may have spurred some reflection on the part of faculty. Instead, Leia found herself in an unending cycle of wondering what she

could have done better to avoid these barriers. This further directly connects to Howell and Voronka's (2021) insistence that overemphasizing individual responsibility within conceptualizations of resilience results in a "technology of looking inward rather than confronting austerity measures or other matters of social justice" (p. 5).

While many scholars choose to focus on increasing resiliency within marginalized populations, we agree with Johnson and Down's (2013) argument that the onus of being resilient should not be placed upon the individual experiencing marginalization - but instead, should be addressed systematically, by those who are in positions of power with the ability to do so. Academics, scholars, faculty members, administrators, and all others who find themselves within these systems of power have a responsibility to work toward removing barriers if we are to seek a more just society. For this reason, we are wary of how resilience functions as a discourse, particularly when it is used to compliment an individual rather than to comment on the need for systemic change.

### **Escaping the "Smell" of White Trash**

In alignment with our goal of guarding against decontextualizing adversity, we turned to the ways in which Leia's status as white trash presented idiosyncratic challenges and costs. Leia refers to how she was constantly afraid that others in power would "smell the white trash" emanating from her, or hear her southern accent, and therefore judge her harshly. This feeling of needing to hide her background to be perceived as belonging within academic spaces closely aligns with stories from other Southern academics (Goward, 2020; Longley, 2020; Saldaña, 2014; Selman-Killingback, 2005). While being Southern, itself, does not necessitate resilience (as there are many parts of Southern culture that are worthy of celebrating, even though there are certainly problematic aspects of Southern culture as well), stereotypes surrounding the South and the people within it as lesser than often present themselves as barriers to being respected within academic spaces. In presenting this account, Leia does not seek to reclaim the label of 'white trash,' but instead, demonstrates how this label increases feelings of isolation within educational spaces.

Selman-Killingbeck (2005) described needing to contend with low expectations from others regarding her academic and professional abilities, condescending remarks from professors, and shock at the notion of graduate school and academic career tracks due to her identity as a white trash woman. For Selman-Killingbeck, as for Leia, this resulted in academic anxiety and feeling like an imposter. While Leia never felt that she had the ability to ask people like her guidance counselor what she meant when she said, "a student like you," the implication that she felt was certainly that it was due to her white trash background.

Similarly, Goward (2020) described the ways in which the expectation of resilience is typically placed on students who are considered "at risk" in a way that shifts responsibility from the institution to the individual student. This can also be seen in Leia's story of her interaction with the guidance counselor, who shared that community college was a better place for students like Leia. While it is also worth noting that the guidance counselor's deficit view of community college was problematic, we see this maneuver as confirming Goward's hypothesis that society places the burden of upward mobility for those in marginalized identity groups on the individuals themselves, instead of charging the institution of education with working to eliminate these barriers.

## Conclusion

*Five years later, I stepped into my now Dean's office, prepared for the next phase of my campus visit interview. "Come in, have a seat! Welcome to the University of Tennessee! Have you been here before?" I smiled brightly, sharing the same story that I had parroted many times throughout the day already; "Yes, actually! I was in marching band in high school, and we had our big regional championship here in my junior year. I've performed on your football field!" She was entertained, as others had been, and I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief that my introduction story had been interesting to everyone who had asked.*

*Toward the end of our conversation, the Dean sat down her coffee mug and looked across the room at me, a serious expression darkening her face. I braced myself, nervous about what could have caused her sudden shift, once again hearing the voices of those in the past who have clearly stated that I did not belong. I held my breath as she began, "Now, Leia, tell me why you are here. Why you and nobody else? Why are you the one who walked through my door?"*

*My heart immediately dropped, and my anxiety got louder, repeating the lines of so many others before her. I took a deep breath, and internally debated about how honest of an answer I should give. I decided that, if I were to be offered the job, I wanted it to be because of who I am and not because I performed as someone else - perhaps someone cooler, or more self-confident.*

*"Well..." I began, hesitant, before allowing the floodgates to burst open, "Honestly? I have worked hard, yes, but all of us who have gotten to this point. I could talk about that, but I would be remiss to not acknowledge how lucky and privileged I have been. I know that academic jobs are growing increasingly scarce, and there are so many brilliant people who have not been able to find a job who are just as smart, if not smarter, than me. I know that my whiteness has opened a lot of doors that women of color have not also been able to walk through. I know that my ability to pass as straight and hide my queerness has helped me in many spaces. But what I want to do... what's important to me... is that I want to help open those doors for others. Research is my favorite form of activism, and I want to be in a position that values the equity-based research that I'm working on so that I can try to help make a dent in all of the noise."*

*She held my gaze from across the room, and for a moment, I mentally kicked myself. She probably had not actually been asking for me to get on my soapbox - she probably wanted me to talk about my accomplishments - you know, normal interview stuff.*

*"I have goosebumps," she finally said, holding up her arm to show me. A relieved laugh burst from my lips, and between gasping for air, I shared, "Oh, good, because I was just sitting here wondering if that tangent was not helpful at all!" She joined my laughter, and said, "I am so glad that you shared all of that - I agree completely. We should write a book about how our privilege has gotten us so far!"*

*Three weeks later I received the job offer and began planning my future as an assistant professor.*

We have chosen to share this final vignette because it is imperative to acknowledge that Leia, though she has experienced many issues that have necessitated resilience, still benefits from a great deal of privilege that runs through everything she has done in life. We acknowledge

that her whiteness has meant that she did not encounter the barriers that people of color have also faced. Though she has an invisible physical disability, she still benefits from the assumptions of others that she appears able bodied. Though she is queer, she still benefits from passing privilege, as others do not assume that she is queer unless she is seen holding hands or otherwise engaging with her partner. Not all resilience poster children get these privileges, and not all resilience poster children end up in a privileged position after completing the hurdles of obtaining their degrees. Leia was not offered the job because she had successfully navigated resilience - she was offered the job despite the traumatic experiences that she had navigated resiliently.

Leia resents being representative of the (perhaps uniquely Americanized) false concept of a meritocracy. While she did work hard to be where she is, and while she was, indeed, resilient, she acknowledges that there are so many others within society who have worked equally as hard, and harder, who have not been successful. We want others to not have to be as resilient as she was - and we call upon scholars researching resiliency to acknowledge the burden that it places on the individual while oftentimes ignoring the larger macro issues that place those barriers. Leia's ideal resilient outcome would be that she is able to assist others in part of a collective solution to the need for resiliency.

While we do not seek to demonize resilience - after all, Leia may not be in the position she is were she not resilient - we do argue that critical scholars need to engage in removing the barriers that necessitate resilience. Further, we seek to disentangle the concept of resilience from individualism and tacit expectations that naturalize adversity. While we will never reach a utopian society in which resilience is not necessary for individuals, we argue that scholars who focus on placing the onus of being resilient on individuals obfuscate understanding of how institutionalized barriers can instead be dismantled.

Custer (2014) posited that autoethnographic work can be transformative, both for the researcher and for her, his, or their readers. We explored Leia's autoethnographic narratives in order to examine the obstacles to academic success that she faced as a white trash woman in hopes that doing so will transform the beliefs of our readers that the expectation of resiliency on those who experience marginalization is misplaced; Leia was indeed resilient, and even praised for being so, but the problematic gatekeepers (such as counselors and professors) that she encountered throughout her educational journey served as systemic impediments that could be addressed at structural levels. The individuals throughout the story who engaged in classist and sexist practices, such as faculty members who publicly humiliated her, caused Leia to feel increasingly isolated from her peers, causing her resilience to be her own individual weight to bear.

While we cannot make specific claims about what may or may not improve outcomes for students from similar backgrounds (though we encourage other researchers to further their exploration of this topic!), perhaps more 'white trash' lower-SES students would be successful within higher education spaces if there were structural supports specifically geared toward them. This may take the form of supportive student-centered resources on campus, increased events targeted toward describing success strategies for first generation and lower-SES students, or student organizations to assist these students with meeting others from similar backgrounds. Similar programs geared toward faculty and staff may also be appropriate; we call for training akin to Safe Zone (about LGBTQ+ populations), anti-racist practices, and professional development seminars related to undocumented students. These suggestions may address our aforementioned structural barriers reinforcing classism and sexism, while also addressing the

isolation that these students may experience by connecting them to resources and other students from similar backgrounds.

### Author Notes

Leia K. Cain, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Evaluation, Statistics, and Methodology at the University of Tennessee. As a methodologist, she conducts research that is two pronged; she studies LGBTQ+ populations within higher education settings and uses her own experiences in that work to also explore connections between researcher identity, modes of inquiry, and ethical decision-making.

Jonathan M. Coker is a Doctoral Candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Florida, where he also earned a graduate certificate in qualitative methodologies. He is interested in teacher working conditions, LGBTQ+ issues, and critical and post-structural approaches to inquiry.

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