

## **“She’s Got a Big-Ass Machine Gun”: Rethinking Southern Heroic Narratives in Aaron and Latour’s *Southern Bastards***

Sara Williams

English

The University of North Carolina Asheville

One University Heights

Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Erica Abrams-Locklear

### **Abstract**

This project examines the role of heroism in *Southern Bastards*, a contemporary comic book series by Jason Aaron and Jason Latour, which intentionally departs from the long development and conventional portrayal of heroic figures in Southern literature. Drawing upon narratological studies as a basis for critical inquiry, this paper elucidates and reflects on the connections between narrative perspective and portrayals of the heroic. Heroics, and by extension honor and morality, are constructs dependent on the larger culture they inhabit, and narrative perspective in particular can manipulate who or what is seen as heroic. The fabricated sense of honor and chivalry demonstrated by romantic Southern literature has no place in *Southern Bastards*, which plays with multiple perspectives to show that such a fantasy is fundamentally incompatible with the realities of the South. *Southern Bastards* asks that we recalibrate our notions of the heroic to better address the complexities of race, gender, and class in the modern South.

### **1. Introduction**

In the comic book series *Southern Bastards* by Jason Aaron and Jason Latour, protagonist Earl Tubb returns to the fictional Craw County, Alabama, only to find that his hometown is not as he remembers it. Having left years before with no intention of ever coming back, Earl’s return is reluctant and only out of an obligation to help his aging uncle move into a nursing home. Earl, however, upon witnessing the deterioration of his hometown, finds himself compelled to stay and combat the corruption in Craw County just as his father, Sheriff Bertrand Tubb, did years before. Armed with his father’s iconic weapon, a large stick, Earl prepares to face Eulless Boss, the town’s celebrated football coach and a crime lord, in an attempt to save Craw County from Boss’ violence and authority. Earl, then, assumes the role of the hero, specifically the Southern hero.

Heroics, and by extension honor and morality, are subjective constructs dependent on the larger culture in which they exist. Broadly speaking, heroes and notions of heroism represent the highest ideals of a given society. The hero is, per a given society’s standards, the pinnacle of goodness and morality as well as the enforcer of those ideals or, in some cases, responsible for reintroducing those ideals to a society that has forgotten them. Additionally, heroic narratives tend to follow a generic pattern and there are broad categories for the heroic, such as the romantic hero or the tragic hero, but again these are generic categories that manifest in different ways across cultures. The hero, however, is often, though not always, static and not truly reflective of the malleable nature of society: such is the case with the U.S. South and its treatment of the heroic figure.

While heroics in general are meant to reflect idealized cultural values, these values should still have root in the society at large. Essentially, the heroic figure must be as mutable as the society it represents, capable of adapting to progress, change, and new contexts. The U.S. South has a discordant relationship with its heroic figure, which is fundamentally disjointed in comparison to its reality. The South and its literature engage in a high degree of fantasy—that is, an intense disconnect from the region’s past and history—to the point of attempting to manipulate or revise

that history. The U.S. South has a tumultuous past characterized by violence and oppression, paternalism and false notions of chivalry, all coexisting in a region that is not uniform in identity, geography withstanding. This diversity of identity creates multiple Souths, as the South experienced by white men is not the South experienced by black men and women, the Native American population, or even white women. It is these varied experiences that complicate and nuance the literature of the region.

The work of well-known Southern literary scholar Michael Kreyling is formative to the development of this project and its definition of Southern heroics. His monograph, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative*, provides an analysis of the development of the heroic figure throughout Southern literature, beginning with antebellum literature. Kreyling's work focuses on the white male hero, but he notes that "there is, understandably, nothing affirmative in the figure of the white male hero for the black writer or reader."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Kreyling seems aware of the cultural lag between the hero and history or contemporary society: he writes that "the hero in narrative is not the same as the hero in history. In narrative, the hero is not a personality so much as a set of aesthetic and cultural alternatives sensitized to historical changes but not determined by them."<sup>2</sup> Kreyling's remark that heroic figures are related to but not determined by historical changes encapsulates the central issue with the heroic figure in Southern narrative, namely that the heroic figure is seemingly always outdated in comparison to the society it represents; yet Southern literature has what appears to be an aversion to modernizing its heroic figures, opting instead to uphold the traditionally white male heroes that Kreyling examines. Scholars Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl note that even when non-white, non-male heroes are introduced in comic books, they are not given the same breadth of narrative application as their white male counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

*Southern Bastards* addresses this legacy of Southern heroics by providing multiple examples of the heroic figure and dismantling them in a modern context. Furthermore, *Southern Bastards* interrogates the ways that narrative perspective can influence who or what is considered heroic. The fabricated sense of honor and chivalry demonstrated by romantic Southern literature has no place in *Southern Bastards*; indeed, the series shows that such a fantasy is fundamentally incompatible with the realities of the South. Earl Tubb, the first character readers are narratively aligned with, rises up as a sort of romantic hero, only to fail miserably, because in the end, chivalric codes only work if everyone adheres to them, which is not and never has been the state of the South. The creative team behind *Southern Bastards*, Jason Aaron and Jason Latour, foreground the complications of heroics in a way that challenges the reader to interrogate their own heroic biases and the ways in which point of view and heroics can create, revise, or manipulate a narrative. More specifically, *Southern Bastards* is in conversation with the history of the Southern hero and ultimately upends heroic traditions in favor of developing a modern Southern hero capable of navigating the multiplicity of the South. The unexpected hero of *Southern Bastards* points to the fundamental incompatibility of outdated social constructs and reality; yet the series does not advocate for the removal of the heroic figure, but rather propels it into the next stage of its literary evolution, one that can better function in the modern South.

## 2. Contextualizing *Southern Bastards*

*Southern Bastards* exists at the intersection of a medium largely dominated by white male characters and a literary genre that arguably continues to prioritize white, male stories, though continued efforts toward diversity have taken hold in the comics medium and Southern literature. As such, it's important to understand the broad developments of Southern literature and the South in comics before engaging in a critical analysis of *Southern Bastards*. First, calling the South a setting is far too static for what it really is. The South, as with any region that plays a significant role in the development of a narrative, is an *active* part of a story, a character unto itself. A better term for the South in fiction would be *place* rather than setting, as place implies a more dynamic nature than setting. As literary critic Casey Clabough contends, "[p]lace, then, it turns out, can move; it can be active."<sup>4</sup> Place informs the narrative in a way that setting does not; setting is a backdrop for the story to take place against, but place is an environment for the story to *be* in. Indeed, as Eudora Welty reflects in "Place in Fiction," "place is where [the writer] has his roots," where experience and perspective are cultivated.<sup>5</sup> Understanding place, then, is crucial to understanding the people in it. In an increasingly globalized society, it can be easy to forget the significance of local place in identity and community.

Generally speaking, the South has not made a frequent appearance as a setting—much less as a *place*—in the comic book medium. When the South is addressed, it is primarily misrepresented through stereotypes and problematic tropes, appearing more often in independent comics than those published by mainstream presses such as DC or Marvel. There are some notable appearances of the South in superhero comics, such as when John Walker, a hyper-violent Southerner, took up the mantle of Captain America after a disenchanting Steve Rogers abandoned the role.<sup>6</sup> Prominent Southern studies scholar Brannon Costello examines the implications of Walker's role as Captain America, noting that while Walker's hyper-violence is certainly reflective of the South's violence, what is most interesting about

Walker's time as Captain America is his sidekick: Lemar Hoskins, an *adult* African-American man who assumes the costume and moniker of Steve Rogers' original *teenage* sidekick, James "Bucky" Barnes. Not only does the nickname "Bucky" carry troubling racist connotations when applied to an African-American man,<sup>7</sup> but Walker and Hoskins' relationship also emulates the "white patron/black servant relationship known as racial paternalism" as Hoskins is often shown consoling or encouraging Walker, no matter what Walker has done.<sup>8</sup> Hoskins' heroics are secondary to Walker's and his role as a supporting figure is the common placement of black characters in both comics and Southern literature.

Southern literature and Southern comics developed in similar, although nonconcurrent, patterns from each tradition's early immersion in stereotypes to an increased self-awareness and ability to be self-critical. Early Southern fiction has its roots in Southwestern humorists such as George Washington Harris, whose Sut Lovingood character served to deride and mock people both in the South and Appalachia, and apologists like Thomas Nelson Page, whose 1884 story "Marse Chan. A Tale of Old Virginia" assumes the voice of an ex-slave to extol the life of his former master.<sup>9</sup> Early Southern comics, such *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp and *Pogo* by Walt Kelly, strongly resemble the traditions of Southwestern humor. Both Capp and Kelly were non-Southerners and their comics were rife with stereotypes and caricatures. Literary scholar Brian Cremins writes that *Pogo* utilizes imagery "derived from the minstrel tradition of the nineteenth century."<sup>10</sup> In Kelly's *Pogo*, blackness is associated with "essential humanity" in the character of Bumbazine, one of the few humans who makes a regular appearance in the strip and functions as an emotional or moral prop, much like Lemar Hoskins does for John Walker; Bumbazine, however, was later dropped from the strip for reasons debated among comic critics.<sup>11</sup> Thus, early Southern comics were characterized by stereotypes and offered readers little to no diversity. Early Southern literature, in comparison, was not totally homogenous. Charles W. Chesnutt's short story "The Goophered Grapevine,"<sup>12</sup> published in an 1887 issue of *The Atlantic*, utilizes a frame narrative to comment on the appropriation of black voices and the ways in which those voices are dismissed by a white audience.

In the Southern Renaissance,<sup>13</sup> a literary movement beginning in the 1920s and 30s, some white writers, including the Twelve Southerners who published the Agrarian Manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*,<sup>14</sup> continued previously established "Lost Cause" narratives that glorified the antebellum South and lamented the downfall of the Confederacy, which implied that it was heroic in its ideology. Literature in this era should not be perceived as a monolith, however, as titles such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in fact oppose "Lost Cause" ideology, utilizing the gothic imagery of a decaying house in its thematic goal. While the Southern Renaissance categorically refers to white authors, there was no shortage of critical African-American writers at the same time; these writers, however, were (and still are) often regulated to the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>15</sup> even when they wrote Southern fiction, such as writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Both the Southern Renaissance and Harlem Renaissance were concurrent with the Modernist<sup>16</sup> movement; at the same time, Southern Gothic motifs<sup>17</sup> reached their zenith during the Modernist movement. While the grotesque and gothic had appeared in Southern literature prior to the twentieth century, it became a distinct subgenre with the work of Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers. Their work provides fertile ground for the analysis of identity politics in both the literature and culture of the South.

A similar shift can be seen in the comic medium in the latter half of the twentieth century as Southern comics also embraced horror and the grotesque as mechanisms for grappling with the South's troubled history. *Swamp Thing*, created by Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson in 1971, and later written by Alan Moore, is a cornerstone of Southern gothic motifs translated into the comic medium. Moore's work on the series had a "more focused engagement with United States southern history" with "storylines that grapple with the region's legacy of slavery."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's *Preacher* series, published from 1995 to 2000 and set primarily in Texas, has addressed notions of the nostalgic South by making nostalgia a function of the grotesque.<sup>19</sup> Thus, horror comics and the use of the paranormal provide avenues for critical engagement with the darker aspects of the South that previous comic strips did not address.

In contemporary Southern literature, writers such as Jesmyn Ward and Jacqueline Woodson have risen to prominence for their enlightening and brutally honest depictions of being black women in the modern American South. More and more "own voices" stories—that is, stories with events or characters that are reflective of the author's lived experiences and identity—are permeating Southern literature, adding a much-needed dimension of diversity to the field. Similarly, as the South began to appear more in comic books or graphic novels rather than just comic strips, representations of the South and of Southerners shifted alongside the changing format. Titles such as Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*, published by Harry N. Abrams, and *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece, published by DC's Vertigo imprint, attempt to address racial identity and tensions in the South with greater nuance and sensitivity.<sup>20</sup> Both Baker and Johnson are men of color and, although they are not from the South, their creative voices add a critical perspective to the South in comics. The transition in format from comic strips to comic books and graphic novels, then, saw also a transition in content. Southern horror and fantasy comics alongside the work of Baker,

Johnson, and Pleece demonstrate a turn toward representing a grittier South and using the medium to address issues of racism and the Southern legacy.

While this is by no means an extensive account of the development of representations of the South in the comic medium nor a comprehensive history of Southern literature, it demonstrates the literary context that *Southern Bastards* enters into. Furthermore, it illuminates a similar trend in both the comic medium and Southern fiction of movement away from the stereotypical perspective to the critical perspective.

### 3. The “Southern Bastards” Behind *Southern Bastards*

For *Southern Bastards* writer Jason Aaron, “[it’s] important that *Southern Bastards* is done by two Southern bastards” and the series functions as his own “love letter / hate rant to the South.”<sup>21</sup> Aaron was raised in Jasper, Alabama and for a while his career focused on novel writing.<sup>22</sup> Comics always appealed to Aaron, and while working a variety of odd jobs, he wrote the first draft pitches for *The Other Side*—which later earned him an Eisner nomination—and *Scalped*, his first two comic series, both of which were published under DC’s Vertigo imprint.<sup>23</sup> Aaron quickly enjoyed both critical and commercial success, as comic critics and fans alike took to the unique flavor of his work. Aaron acknowledges that he has “more of a literary influence” to his comic work, due to his many attempts at novel writing, and his work has become notable for its “time shifts, parallel editing, and changing character perspectives.”<sup>24</sup> Perspective is not a commonly explored craft element in comics, as the art by nature maintains a third-person perspective on the story although the captions can be written in either third, first, or—rarely—second person point of view. Aaron manipulates perspective in his work by maintaining narrative proximity to one character at a time, allowing the reader to only be present when and where the character is present. Aaron’s acclaim landed him an exclusive deal with Marvel Comics in 2008, which allowed him to still work on his independent titles while also helming titles like *Wolverine*, the *Original Sin* crossover event, and *Thor*, perhaps his most popular Marvel title. In 2014, Aaron launched *Southern Bastards* alongside Jason Latour, a fellow Marvel Comics alum, with Image Comics.

Jason Latour was born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina and his comic education came mainly through his local comic book shop, Heroes Aren’t Hard to Find, and the shop’s yearly Heroes Con. Starting in his mid-twenties, it took Latour a decade of work to fully break into the comics scene. Like Aaron, he began with independent titles before working with Marvel Comics. In 2015, he won the Cartoonists Society’s Reuben Award for Comic Book Art. Latour cites David Mazzucchelli, Mark Miller, and Chuck Jones as some of his artistic inspirations. Jones’s work in particular, Latour says, “helped cultivate my absurdist side, my sense of humor.”<sup>25</sup> For Latour, art is an approach to writing and the environment is as much a character as the people on the page. He considers the implications of every aspect of composing a shot, as “the way somebody stands or... the quality of the line is as much part of the writing as what’s coming out of the character’s mouth.”<sup>26</sup> Latour is also known for his genre-mixing and enjoys tampering with genre expectations. For Latour, genre is “nothing but preconceived notions” and the “deconstruction and reconstruction” of those notions are hallmarks of his work.<sup>27</sup> When Jason Aaron and Jason Latour teamed up for *Southern Bastards* in 2014, the series brought together Aaron’s penchant for character study with Latour’s atmospheric art work and both creators’ interests in genre mixing. The series was praised as “a powerful and thoughtful comic book... that affords the South a depth and complexity rarely seen in pop culture outside of prose fiction.”<sup>28</sup> The same year the series began, *Southern Bastards* was an Eisner nominee in the Best Continuing Series category.

### 4. Narratology as a Lens for Comic Book Heroics

While comic book scholarship has generally focused on the broad application of comic books in academia, there are preexisting literary theories that can be applied to the study of comic books and some scholars have made case studies of these theories in their work with comic books and graphic novels. One of these theories is narratology, which examines “how [a] narrative functions in relation to a surrounding world of ideas.”<sup>29</sup> Narratology can be applied to any narrative form, regardless of medium, whether it be a literary text or a comic book. Scholars Kai Mikkonen and Karin Kukkonen have given careful attention to the application of narratology to comic books and graphic novels. The goal of narratology is to explore who speaks, who sees, and what is shown; in comics, per Mikkonen’s analysis, narratology’s function expands to include how comics depict who or what speaks, sees, or is shown.<sup>30</sup> Yet Mikkonen misses a key point: the theoretical framework he establishes does not consider what is *not* said, seen, or shown, especially in such a highly visual medium as comics. In essence, narratology concerns not what is represented in a

given text but *how* those things are represented or the structure used to present them; this ability to characterize, compare, or classify narratives helps to ground and support interpretive claims.<sup>31</sup>

Kukkonen emphasizes the multimodality of the comic book medium as it combines words, images, and layout in its narratives, presenting a unique mode of storytelling in narratological studies. Comic book art is broken down into sequential panels, or frames, and Kukkonen suggests that frame shifts are themselves focalizing acts.<sup>32</sup> The focalizer is the source of perspective in a narrative and the focalized is the subject of that perspective, though Kukkonen suggests that the focalizer is often ambiguous.<sup>33</sup> Aaron and Latour utilize shifting points-of-view in *Southern Bastards* and so focalization is pertinent for analyzing the text. Furthermore, this focalization informs the structure of the narrative and how certain narrative components are portrayed. The perspectives that Aaron and Latour do not include in the series are just as important as the ones they do, as these narrative vacuums raise questions about who is given narrative authority or the privilege of narrative. This can further give rise to how narrative perspective can influence heroic narratives as the narrative alignment of the reader determines what events and characters will be considered heroic. Narratology is a useful lens for analyzing *Southern Bastards* as the series itself is concerned with the construction of the heroic figure, heroic narrative, and the ways in which perspective can either reinforce or deconstruct that figure or narrative.

## 5. *Southern Bastards*: A Case Study in Heroics

The first story arc of *Southern Bastards*, entitled “Here Was a Man,” is aligned with Earl Tubb’s point-of-view. Because of this, the reader is primed to expect certain heroic motifs to occur, primarily those of romantic heroism. In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Northrop Frye notes that “romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia.”<sup>34</sup> At first glance, Earl Tubb would not seem to be a nostalgic man. Estranged from his father for his decision to leave Craw County and join the Navy, Earl’s connection to Craw County is strained. Upon returning and facing the changes in his hometown, however, Earl grasps for the past and attempts to reassert the social structures familiar to him.

This past is embodied in the grave of Earl’s father, Sheriff Bertrand Tubb. A tree has grown from Sheriff Tubb’s grave, accredited to the stick he was buried with. In an interview with Orbital Comics, Aaron and Latour emphasized the stick’s role in establishing expectations for the narrative. The cover of the series’ first issue features Earl wielding the stick before an angry mob of Craw County’s citizens. Latour describes the image as “evocative of what the book is about”; for Aaron, the image is also a homage to the film *Walking Tall*<sup>35</sup> and meant to give the reader the impression that they know where the story is going.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Sheriff Bertrand’s stick is deeply rooted in extratextual connotations that consequently influence expectations of the story. Even without the intertextual context of *Walking Tall*, the stick still stands on its own as a symbol of power and authority, in part for its original association with the career of Sheriff Tubb. The stick is also connected with popular culture and history through autographs on the weapon, such as that of Paul “Bear” Bryant, arguably the most famous coach of Alabama University’s football team. As *Southern Bastards* shows, football is a cornerstone of cultural power in the South, which will be further explored in the analysis of Coach Eulless Boss. For now, it is sufficient to understand that the stick’s significance is derived from both textual (Sheriff Bertrand’s legacy) and extratextual (*Walking Tall*, Bear Bryant) sources, the combination of which lends the stick an almost mythic quality as Sheriff Buford Pusser and Bear Bryant have larger-than-life cultural presences and Sheriff Bertrand is a legendary figure within the narrative itself.

Thus, the reader is primed to assume that Earl Tubb will join the ranks of legendary figures when he picks up the stick. In fact, it would seem as though Earl’s rise as a hero was almost divinely ordained. In the pivotal ending of issue #2, the tree growing from Bertrand’s grave is struck by lightning, revealing the stick to Earl.<sup>37</sup> It’s an emotionally charged moment as the lightning strikes while Earl is screaming at his father’s grave, enumerating Bertrand’s failures as a father and declaring that he will not stay in Craw County. Earl reacts negatively to the lightning at first, refusing to acknowledge that it alone is a sign. When he sees the stick, however, untouched and intact in the ruined body of the tree, his astonishment causes him to pause and take up the stick. It is a moment reminiscent of King Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone, a signifier of a chosen or worthy hero. In a textless panel that takes up an entire page, Earl and his surroundings appear in muted blues and greys while the stick is accented with smoldering flames from the lightning. The connotations of a light in the dark cannot be missed as it signals a turning point in the narrative to the reader, as it implies that Earl is meant to become a light in the dark to Craw County. The art encapsulates Earl’s unspoken decision to stay and his heroic narrative begins in earnest.

As stated before, Earl engages in a form of romantic heroism due to the association of nostalgia with the romantic. In *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative*, Kreyling suggests that antebellum “Southern heroic narrative[s]... [aim] ultimately at the abolition of history and change.”<sup>38</sup> This abolition of history is not all-encompassing, but rather works

to preserve one fixed, privileged point of history, which in turn upholds certain—albeit outdated—cultural and social norms. Kreyling finds this trend continued in Civil War and postbellum fiction as

the model cavalier of a feudal, Western, Christian era, the southern hero fixes time and his culture upon the past. He is the model for an entire civilization that is plotted along classical lines and designed to hold those lines against tides of history.<sup>39</sup>

Heroics are a culturally-specific construct, and, broadly speaking, early Southern heroic narratives from antebellum literature through the Reconstruction demonstrate a proclivity for the nostalgic, however inaccurate it may be. This nostalgia is characterized by masculinity, whiteness, and a misremembering of cultural history wherein the antebellum South is seen in chivalrous, benevolent terms, such as in the work of Thomas Nelson Page.

Earl's heroism is reliant on the recognition of the heroic, that is to say the acknowledgement of his status as a hero, by the people of Craw County. Earl has no intention of taking Euless Boss on by himself; rather, he assumes that the presence of a hero (though he would never personally equate himself with the archetype) will rally the population of Craw County into making a stand with him. As Jason Aaron describes it, Earl knows the people of Craw County, or at least assumes he does, and thinks, "if... somebody just stands up to these bastards who are ruining Craw County that other people will stand up as well."<sup>40</sup> What Earl does not understand is the perspective that Craw County has of Euless Boss. Coach Boss, for all his violence and crime, is not universally hated in Craw County. In fact, Boss's ability to win football games makes him somewhat of a local hero, as football serves as a community bonding experience and creates prestige for Craw County. Thus, it becomes clear that Earl, though presented to the reader as the heroic figure of the narrative, is not perceived as a hero to Craw County.

Earl's death, then, becomes a rejection of the romantic hero as an outdated form of heroics. In the climactic confrontation with Euless Boss at the end of the "Here Was a Man" story arc, Earl Tubb finds himself standing alone as the rest of Craw County watches the battle. Earl has just fought his way through a mob of Boss's henchmen, and his victory in that regard prompts the reader to assume that Earl will again emerge victorious in the fight with Boss. Indeed, given the nature of death in comic books,<sup>41</sup> readers do not expect that Earl Tubb's defeat will be permanent.<sup>42</sup> The permanent death of Earl disrupts the expected heroic narrative, both in terms of comic book heroics and romantic heroics. Romantic heroes, like the comic book heroes that follow them, live on in perpetuity, going through one adventure or quest after another, existing in a static state of never aging, dying, or changing in any significant ways.<sup>43</sup> Earl's death addresses these heroic precedents and the heroic biases of the reader. Earl's perspective of Craw County is not the same as Craw County's perspective of itself. The reader is made acutely aware of the ways in which Earl's perspective has skewed their own understanding of Craw County and the limiting nature of heroic assumptions. Earl's nostalgia, and by extension the white male nature of romantic heroism in the South, is shown as an unsustainable idea and fundamentally incapable of addressing problems of an evolving South.

Thus, the reader's understanding of Euless Boss as a character is actually an understanding of *Earl Tubb's perception of Euless Boss*. Because the first story arc, "Here Was a Man," stays closely aligned to Earl's perspective, the reader is not exposed to the context of Boss's actions or his backstory as a character. Earl's inability to view people as complex individuals is his hubris as it stunts his ability to empathize with others and ultimately becomes the root of his downfall. He wants Boss to answer for his actions but fails to realize that Boss is a complicated individual and not a mere villainous archetype. Earl's death, combined with the formatting that emphasizes his limited perspective through narrow panels, could be read as a caution against the limitations of singular narratives. Even when that narrative seems to be the morally righteous one, it can still fail to understand or encompass the divergent perspectives of the collective narrative. Narrative perspective, then, determines which characters are viewed as people and which are not. Within Earl's narration, Euless is not a person to Earl. He is a personification of evil and corruption, thus Earl's actions are acceptable. Narrative perspective is tied directly to the ability to dehumanize an individual and whether someone is dehumanized or not influences how violence and heroics are perceived in relation to that person.

In the second story arc, entitled "Gridiron," Euless Boss takes narrative control. The "Gridiron" story arc forces the reader to assume Euless Boss's perspective and to even sympathize with him at points. While Boss was a nearly mythological character in the "Here Was a Man" story arc, "Gridiron" humanizes and nuances Boss as a character. Boss's childhood and adolescence were rife with turmoil: raised by an abusive and neglectful father, as seen in *Southern Bastards* issue #6, Boss sought solace in football, only to find further rejection and abuse there.<sup>44</sup> Issue #5 reveals how, when Boss stayed late on the field to practice more in an effort to make the team during tryouts, he was sexually assaulted by other players in an attempt to scare him away from tryouts.<sup>45</sup> Boss was raised in violence, and so violence becomes his basis for understanding authority. Thus, his means of attaining and maintaining authority is steeped in violence, as demonstrated when he claims his spot as football coach by killing his father. His progression forward requires, both metaphorically and literally, that he kill his past. In exchange for his father's death, Mozel—a

long time enemy of Eules's father—uses his own criminal influence to coerce the principal into firing the previous coach and hiring Eules instead. Given that Boss is able to kill his personal past, it comes as no surprise to the reader, in retrospect, that Boss is capable of killing Earl Tubb, the embodiment of the nostalgic past. Indeed, one could even suggest that the narrative almost *demands* that Earl Tubb die at the hands of Eules Boss.

Perhaps the most devastating and significant death tied to Boss is that of Coach Big, a blind, older African-American man who was Boss's mentor and fellow coach for the football team. Big helped Eules to train for football tryouts when Boss was in high school and served in many ways as the only stable male figure in Boss's life. The narrative, however, never aligns with Big's point of view and so deprives the reader of Big's voice and perspective. When Big commits suicide at the end of the "Gridiron" arc, the note he leaves simply states "ain't worth the blood," a reference to Boss's continued mantra that football is "worth the blood," meaning that the sport is worth whatever it takes for Boss to participate, as evidenced by his willingness to commit patricide.<sup>46</sup> It is left to the reader to attempt to interpret Big's motivation and what meaning he applies to the phrase when used as a call-back to Boss. This places the reader at an uncomfortable narrative crossroads, however, as the reader is confronted by a black narrative that is entirely shaped by the white experience, namely that of Boss. Readers are exposed to Big solely through Boss's point of view, rendering him static and unknowable.

Big's suicide, then, is ultimately a commentary on silenced voices and potentially, on a larger scale, the violence done to black bodies for the advancement of white narratives.<sup>47</sup> The narrative makes it clear, however, that Big's death is a result of Eules Boss's corruption and the narrative does not hesitate in condemning Boss, no matter what ways Boss might reject guilt, as demonstrated by the reaction of Sheriff Hardy to Big's death and Boss's explanation of events. The narrative deficit of Big's point of view heightens the reader's understanding of the power of narrative perspective, as Boss later manipulates the explanation of Big's death to suit his personal needs. Aaron and Latour approach narrative perspective as well as voice with a high degree of intentionality: there is only one female speaking role in the "Here Was a Man" story arc—a waitress at Boss BBQ—which was a deliberate decision by the creative team about who holds an active place in a story; after all, the first story arc is focused on two old men fighting each other.<sup>48</sup> Because Earl's perspective dominates that arc, certain voices are pushed to the side, a fact that further emphasizes both Earl's own limited view of other people and the overall nature of narrative perspective to privilege certain voices over others.

Even so, there are several minor perspective characters throughout *Southern Bastards* that help to round out the reader's perspective of Craw County. Esaw Goings is a gleefully violent enforcer for Eules Boss whose narrative perspective reads almost like stream-of-consciousness; the hackneyed quality of Esaw's perspective underscores his violent nature. Eugene "Materhead" Maples is another enforcer for Boss, but he has a much more structured narrative perspective than Esaw. Materhead's perspective comes in issue #12, part of the "Homecoming" story arc.<sup>49</sup> He shares narrative space with Tad, a young boy who was beaten into a coma by Esaw on Boss's orders as a message for Earl to stop interfering in Boss's affairs. Materhead's narration stands in stark contrast to Tad's: Tad's point of view is almost like a fever dream, full of vibrant colors and splashes of cartoon imagery, whereas Materhead's is rooted in reality with the standard muted earth tones as the rest of the story. Their narrative perspectives are heightened *visually* through art, a choice that emphasizes the natural narrative variation that occurs through point of view shifts. Furthermore, the placement of contrasting art side-by-side carries the reader through perspective shifts rapidly, heightening the fever-dream quality of Tad's narration in contrast to Materhead's grounded perspective.

Two narrative perspectives take up the heroic narrative after Earl's death, one of which is more central than the other. Deacon Boone is a vigilante who kills criminals according to their crimes and disposes of their bodies in a lake. For example, when Boone finds out that a man named Dale Arley raped a girl who was intellectually disabled, Boone tracks down Arley and shoots him in the groin before killing him and dumping his body in the lake.<sup>50</sup> Boone is also highly religious and he is seen snake-handling at evangelical services; furthermore, Boone's method of justice mirrors the "eye for an eye" ideology, a principle of retaliation presented in the Judeo-Christian book of Exodus. His active participation in religion coupled with his status as a deacon in the church allows an entry point for religious heroics to also be addressed in the narrative. Boone, however, is not the primary heroic figure in the narrative following Earl Tubb's death. That is Roberta Tubb, Earl's daughter and a biracial marine with "a big-ass machine gun."<sup>51</sup>

Diversity and the portrayal of diverse characters is significant to comic books because, according to scholars Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl in "'Aren't There Any Brown People in this World?': Race, Ethnicity, and Crime-Fighting," race and diversity "reveals much about...[the] larger cultural notions of what kind of person is considered heroic in American society."<sup>52</sup> The racial predominance of white male characters affords a very limited perspective on who is allowed to be heroic and limits the roles of diverse characters to sidekicks or other supporting roles. *Southern Bastards* plays with this expectation, as readers are introduced first to Earl Tubb with the assumption that he will fulfill the heroic role in the series.

A 2015 study by scholars Matthew Facciani, Peter Warren, and Jennifer Vendemia of popular comic book titles from 1991-2005 found that, at the time, 85% of characters sampled were male; 86% of characters were white; and 79% of protagonists and 75% of antagonists or villains were white males.<sup>53</sup> While the comics landscape has certainly changed since the 2015 study, with more titles fronted by women and people of color, the broad demographic landscape of mainstream comics (those produced by Marvel or DC) still remains predominantly white and predominantly male. Phillips and Strobl's observation about who is considered heroic can thus be nuanced to encompass not only who is considered heroic but who is *allowed* to be and in what context. Often, minority heroes, when they are not sidekicks, are still relegated to being heroes for "their people," reserving national or global heroic narratives for white heroes.<sup>54</sup> The character Roberta Tubb, however, resists categorization or limitation. Roberta "call me Bert" Tubb transgresses lines of race, gender, and sexuality in a region known for its strict parameters for each identifier.<sup>55</sup>

Bert is biracial. The precarious nature of her racial identity in the South is made immediately apparent, as neighbors call the cops to report her as a trespasser in her childhood home when she returns to see if Earl is there. Bert's very existence is disruptive of Southern heroics. Part of the role of romantic heroics in the South, as Kreyling describes it, is the preservation of "culture over time," in part assured by the hero coupling with a "mate... as close to the hero's type and kinship group as possible."<sup>56</sup> For as much as Earl tries to reassert the past in Craw County, he has also broken from the requirements of Southern heroism by marrying an African-American woman. Bert's existence is fundamentally incompatible with the romantic heroic narrative, and yet she perhaps embodies the South better than Earl, Boss, or anyone else in the series because her identity resists strict social categories.

In addition to her racial identity, Bert is significant in her gender and sexuality. Bert's sexuality is mildly ambiguous, as it is unclear whether Bert identifies herself as bisexual or lesbian. What is clear, however, is that Bert is romantically interested in women; when Earl finds her hanging out with a girl, he can't bring himself to complete the question of if she's gay, but Bert's response is a swift, "I. Don't. Know. That's the whole point!"<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, she codes herself with a masculine nickname, to which one of her fellow soldiers replies, "No offense, but you don't look much like a Bert."<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Bert's chosen nickname echoes her grandfather's name—Sheriff Bertrand Tubb—and her birth name (Roberta) is an homage to him. When Bert captures Materhead to interrogate him about what happened to Earl, she tells him,

Daddy used to tell me stories 'bout y'all's glory days. Back when my granddaddy was in charge. Sheriff Bert Tubb and his stick. Bustin' heads first-- askin' questions never. Neither proof nor the truth mattered to Bert. Not so long as he felt right in his guts. Daddy was like that too. Difference was, Daddy couldn't hide how much he hated himself for it. And still, he named me after 'Ol Bert. *Why do you think that is?*<sup>59</sup>

Later, Bert tells Materhead, "But in my guts I know I'm right," echoing the sentiment of her grandfather.<sup>60</sup> Not only does Bert code herself in masculine terms, but in doing so she also aligns herself with the foundational heroic figure in the narrative. This serves a two-fold purpose in the narrative. On one hand, it strengthens Bert's connection to the heroic legacy and serves as an explicit validation of her heroic role. On the other hand, Bert's masculine coding disrupts the prescribed gender norms in both Southern fiction and Southern history. Bert is able to appropriate and utilize male space and identity to her benefit, transgressing gendered boundaries in her expression of identity and proclivity to violence, typically a male form of power assertion. Bert occupies a liminal space between her feminine body and masculine coding in the same way that she occupies an intersectional space as her gender and racial identities both exist in the overlap of boundaries.

For all the ways in which Bert's identity transgresses Southern norms, she is perhaps the best character through which to address the South and Southern identities. Traditionally, "the *disruptive* force of black and hybrid characters has always been apparent in southern texts."<sup>61</sup> What can be found in Bert, however, is a *coalescence* of the multiple Souths: the racialized South through her biracial identity; the gendered South in her chosen name; and the queer South in her sexuality. Thus, her identity and heroics are appropriately calibrated to the environment she is in. Bert is best suited to be a heroic figure in the South *because* her identity encapsulates the multiplicity of the South, allowing her to exist at an intersection representative of multiple populations. For *Southern Bastards*, the goal is not to remove the heroic figure but to bring that figure into modernity in a form more representative of the changing landscape of the South.

When Bert finally confronts Euless Boss on the football field after a game, she has every intention of killing him. Her plans are interrupted by Deacon Boone, who believes he has more of a right to kill Boss, claiming the Lord has guided him to do it.<sup>62</sup> Bert and Boone end up battling for heroic dominance, a moment that keeps in theme with Kreyling's assertion that "there can... be only one heroic center at a time... when several heroes compete, all but one



are false.”<sup>63</sup> Bert ultimately subdues Boone and chases Boss down as he attempts to escape. As Boss is hunched and bleeding before her, Bert hesitates as she catches sight of the stick discarded in the grass. Bert takes up the stick<sup>64</sup> and tells Boss she won’t kill him yet, not until everything he has built is burned down and she is “the bitch who’s holding the match.”<sup>65</sup> With that, she leaves him and goes to the Tubb family home. Issue #20 ends with a shot of Bert standing above Sheriff Tubb’s and Earl’s graves, the stick in her grip, and the text boxes tell the reader the last bits of her conversation with Boss: “He [Earl] stayed ‘cause it ain’t just you who’s got to change around here. And that’s why I’m staying too.”<sup>66</sup> The narrative situates Bert as a hero meant to address society at large, not just a single man. As the hero is understood as emblematic of a given culture’s values, Bert is a revolutionary heroic figure in that her presence is disruptive of the South’s social norms (per the expectations Kreyling sets forth for the romantic Southern hero), yet she has managed to take the heroic role for herself and intends to change the social order of Craw County. By appointing Bert to the heroic role, Aaron and Latour carve a space in their narrative for considerations of the legacy of the South and its heroic modes and how the heroic figure itself can be utilized to criticize that legacy rather than uphold it. Bert has reclaimed the heroic symbol, and the “Gut Check” story arc leaves the reader with a sense of confidence in Bert’s abilities.

## 6. Conclusion

*Southern Bastards* is, as described by Aaron and Latour, ultimately Bert’s story.<sup>67</sup> The narrative is structured to build toward her story with epilogues that tease her appearance at the end of the “Here Was a Man” and “Gridiron” story arcs before her full entrance into the narrative in the “Homecoming” arc. Bert’s emergence as the primary heroic figure of *Southern Bastards* puts the series in direct conversation with the history of heroic figures in Southern narratives. It is demonstrative of the changing landscape of comic book heroes and reflects upon the ways that Southern narratives have changed; as both a comic and a piece of Southern fiction, *Southern Bastards* continues the pattern of challenging normative ideals in literature. The series specifically uses narrative perspective as a means of challenging reader expectations, as the series begins with what appears to be a traditionally heroic set up; however, as Aaron and Latour demonstrate, just as heroics can create a certain narrative, perspective can challenge that narrative or even fundamentally alter it. Earl’s heroic narrative is complicated by Boss’s perspective, and Bert’s appearance upends the narrative of the romantic Southern hero. Rather than a mechanism for maintaining or reasserting the past, Bert is the means to subjugate that past, to dismantle the criminal institution Boss has constructed, and to, hopefully, triumph where her father failed. Bert’s blended racial, sexual, and gender identities enables her to embody the diversity of the South and therefore be a more representative hero than the traditional white male heroic figure of Southern literature. *Southern Bastards* seems to suggest that if the heroic figure to have a presence in the modern South, it cannot be one constrained by categorical delineations but must be one that merges borders and binaries to embrace the multiplicity of the South. The series does not attempt to erase the heroic figure but rather push it into an updated form that better represents the complex nature of the South. As much as the series criticizes the heroic figure, it still supports the presence of a heroic figure in its narrative, albeit in a refreshed form. The next step for the Southern hero is to move out of the past and into the present, with all of the social change that such a transition carries. And if *Southern Bastards* is any indication, Roberta “Bert” Tubb might just be the kind of woman for the job.<sup>68</sup>

## 7. Endnotes

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2. Ibid. 5.
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6. See *Captain America* #323-354

7. In its racial connotations, a “buck” refers to a stereotype of black men as dangerous and sexual. At one point, Hoskins is even required to play the role of “the black pimp,” or “buck,” for a mission in Georgia in order to gain the attention of a terrorist group called the Watchdogs. Walker has infiltrated the group, but the Watchdogs decide to lynch Hoskins after he is arrested. Walker, afraid of blowing his cover in the group, allows the Watchdogs to proceed in lynching Hoskins while Walker slips away to change into his Captain America suit. Hoskins survives the lynching due to his superhuman abilities and the timely return of Walker, but the incident is a glaring statement on the treatment of black bodies not only in superhero comics but in superhero comics *associated with the South*. For a fuller analysis of this event, see Costello’s “Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism: Race, Region, and Nation in *Captain America*.”

8. Costello, Brannon. “Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism: Race, Region, and Nation in *Captain America*.” *Comics and the U.S. South*, edited by Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, by Tim Caron et al., University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2012, pp. 62–88. (73-75). This power dynamic between Walker and Hoskins is heightened by giving Hoskins’ the name and outfit of a teenager, as it demasculates Hoskins. Rather than presenting Hoskins as Walker’s equal, Hoskins is given an outfit that codes him as inferior by invoking an age-based hierarchy.

9. Page’s story is demonstrative of white writers’ ability to appropriate black voices in a frame narrative to then advocate for the honor and nobility of white slave-owners.

10. Cremins, Brian. “Bumbazine, Blackness, and the Myth of the Redemptive South in Walt Kelly’s Pogo.” *Comics and the U.S. South*, edited by Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, by Tim Caron et al., University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2012, pp. 29–61.31.

11. Ibid. 30-36.

12. “Goophered Grapevine” is structurally similar to “Marse Chan” with its frame narrative. In “Goophered Grapevine,” a couple travels to the South from the North and meets an ex-slave named Julius, who tells them his story and how the grapevine was cursed. The couple do not believe him and opt to buy the land anyway, assuming that way they pay Julius will make up for the money he made from taking over the remnants of the grapevine. So while “Marse Chan” appropriates the black voice to bolster the white narrative, “Goophered Grapevine” addresses that appropriation by framing it with a white narrative.

13. The misspelling of “renaissance” was an intentional stylistic choice of the movement.

14. *I’ll Take My Stand* propagated the idea of an idyllic antebellum South wherein slave-owners were virtuous gentlemen with time to contemplate intellectual pursuits. The manifesto conveniently ignored the legacy and role of slavery in the South, opting instead to emphasize the superior, chivalric nature of agrarian life in the face of mounting industrialization in the North.

15. The Harlem Renaissance was an African-American artistic movement in the 1920s, based primarily in Harlem, New York, hence its name. The Harlem Renaissance saw a surge in art, music, and literature by African-Americans; these works often had white patrons sponsoring them and were consumed by both white and black audiences. The Harlem Renaissance was cut short by the Great Depression, as white patrons lacked the funds to continue sponsoring black work.

16. The Modernist movement refers to a period of art and literature in the interwar period between World War I and World War II. Following the conclusion of World War I and the disillusionment that resulted from the war, many writers embraced techniques such as the unreliable narrator, stream of consciousness, and non-chronological narratives. The philosophy of Modernism can perhaps be best described by the prominent poet W. B. Yeats when he wrote “The center cannot hold” in his 1919 poem “The Second Coming.”

17. Southern Gothic is characterized by twisted characters, oppressive settings, and macabre situations. The Southern Gothic was often used in response to ideas of a genial antebellum South by portraying the South as a place of decay and violence.

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19. Scholar Nicolas Labarre has written of the series’ treatment of Southern nostalgia, arguing that “[all] the characteristics commonly attributed to southern society— it’s sense of place, of family, of history, of *belonging*— are presented as potential sources of horror— to the heroes and to the reader” (253, emphasis original).

20. Thorough analyses of these comics and their implications can be found in “Drawing the Unspeakable: Kyle Baker’s Slave Narrative” by Conseula Francis and “‘Black and White and Read All Over’: Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*” by Tim Caron.

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34. Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1971. 186.
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37. Aaron, Jason, and Jason Latour. *Southern Bastards Vol. 1: Here Was a Man*. Image Comics, 2014. (2.18-22)
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39. Ibid. 55.
40. Thompson and Harman.
41. There used to be a popular saying among comic book fans that "nobody stays dead except Bucky Barnes, Uncle Ben, and Jason Todd." Bucky Barnes and Jason Todd have both since been revived as the Winter Soldier and Red Hood, respectively, and so death is rarely a permanent event in comic books. Even Superman has "died" and returned, and so readers expect that their heroes will never be permanently dead. The one exception is Uncle Ben, as his death is the instigating factor in Peter Parker's superhero career.
42. In the interview with Orbital Comics, Jason Aaron recounted how his own mother texted him following the release of issue #4 to ask how he was planning on bringing Earl back.
43. Even when comic books present storylines with heroes that are aged or have significant changes in their life, these stories are often considered non-canonical, exist in alternate timelines, or are later retconned or outright ignored by subsequent writers.
44. Aaron, Jason, and Jason Latour. *Southern Bastards Volume 2: Gridiron*. Image Comics, 2015. (6.1-4)
45. Ibid. (5.12-13, 22)
46. Ibid. (8.15, 20)
47. The character of Coach Big is deserving of deep and contemplative literary analysis that this paper lacks the space to properly address. Big's characterization leans into the "Magical Negro" trope, a highly problematic role as it consists of African-American characters who are portrayed as having some sort of wisdom or special power that helps white characters in the plot. These characters often also have some sort of disability that connects to their power or wisdom. Coach Boss is blind, yet is a skilled football coach and teaches Boss how to play. This is a significant trope that should be critically analyzed through Big's character and with consideration for narrative perspective. Given that the reader only knows Big through Boss's perspective, it's worth asking if Big's portrayal is

meant as Boss's conceptualization of Big rather than a narrative opinion of the creators, as Aaron and Latour are very intentional in what they represent and how they represent it. Regardless, Big's character deserves critical attention and authorial intent cannot always erase the problematizing elements of a narrative choice.

48. Thompson and Harman.
49. Aaron, Jason, and Jason Latour. *Southern Bastards Volume 3: Homecoming*. Image Comics, 2016. (12.9-18)
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63. Kreyling 5.
64. One could choose to read the stick as both a symbol of power and a phallic symbol, reinforcing the connection between masculinity and heroics in Southern literature. When Bert takes the weapon, she further breaches the borders of gender, as she has given herself a masculine-coded name and now holds a phallic weapon. She demonstrates not only the ability to navigate masculine space but to assert her presence in that space.
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66. Ibid. (20.24)
67. Thompson and Harman.
68. At the time of this paper, *Southern Bastards* is an ongoing series with twenty issues published thus far.

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